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Book review: Community Journalism - A Resource Guide for Journalists, Editors, Publishers and Educators

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HURST, John & PROVIS, Michael (eds) (2000)
Community Journalism - A Resource Guide for Journalists, Editors, Publishers and Educators, Country Press Australia, 264pp. ISBN 0 9578018 07 (pbk)

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What differentiates community (country) journalism from its city counterpart? Not much, after a close reading of "Community Journalism", a compilation of notes by journalism trainers and educators published by the Country Press Association (Victoria). Apart from the news sources, news topics and market demographics, news as framed in the country paper is apparently not much different from a metropolitan daily. Thus, the notion that regardless of the audience or media type, professional journalism is built on accurate, ethical and fair reporting.

The first two of 27 chapters - "The Role of the Community Reporter" and "The Country Reporter's Rounds" attempt to define the parameters of reporting in regional Australia, where the journalist is inclined to identify with local lifestyle and grassroots values, and thus, is as much affected by local concerns as the community. Much in the civic (public) journalism genre, the chapters focus on the community-service function of the reporter where the concept of "objective" reporting, while is recognised as central to journalism, is contextualised to the realities of living in a small country town. Thus, the observation in the Introduction: "Those who enter enthusiastically into the spirit of community cause and activity will not only find the great journalistic opportunities and vocational satisfaction these can afford, but also experience the fruits of feeling at one with 'the locals' who regard 'being country' as an incomparable way of life." (p.xv).

The Foreword says the "multi-purpose book" sets out the fundamentals of journalism practice common in regional and rural Australia .. structured (and) designed to be completed by non-graduate cadets in no more than two years. Graduate cadets, depending on the university subjects already studied, should be able to complete a reduced course in one year. The book, therefore, is not only a textbook for recruits, but a valuable resource for editors and supervisors of cadet journalists and for journalism educators in Australian universities."

It also claims that "throughout its pages can be found clear definitions of the fundamental role of a community newspaper and of the journalists employed therewith ... its content provides basic information, establishes operational concepts of journalistic service". Fundamental to community development is journalists advocating

and acting as social change agents, which sets country journalists apart from their colleagues in the metropolitan daily. How country journalists can effectively serve the community, or play an 'advocacy' role, apart from reporting the stories accurately and fairly, is not operationalised.

The remaining 25 short chapters are structured much like a distance education module written for journalism undergradutes, complete with practical reporting exercises. The chapters stand out in its focus on the "how to" of reporting in the regional press — unfortunately at the expense of the "why's" and philosophy of community journalism practice and methods.

The chapters include: The nature of news; journalism ethics and law; newswriting and interviewing techniques; news structure; English grammar; news sources and attribution; confidentiality of sources; how to report emergencies, public gatherings, local government, local sports, the Courts and obituary writing, basic subediting; typography; writing headlines and how to use photographs in journalism.

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