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# Public Journalism: Moving the Youth Agenda Forward

*Research Paper:*

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to reignite the debate about public journalism as a panacea for citizen disengagement from public life and the diminishing relevance of traditional news media. It argues that public journalism is both an attitude and a set of professional practices requiring incorporation into newsroom routines in order for community engagement to occur. The paper revisits the Public Journalism, Public Participation and Australian Public Policy Project conducted in 1998. It does this to complete the project's examination of how public journalism practice might be reflected in the routines of New South Wales regional newspapers, specifically to enhance the access of young, rural people to the mainstream media and to facilitate community dialogue on youth related issues.

Australian civic and political life is in crisis. So we heard from the ‘Not Happy, John!’ and similar non-aligned campaigns during the lead-up to the 2004 Australian federal election. For *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Margo Kingston, the major cause of this crisis is the control that political parties, big business and the mass media have over the political process and the challenges that ordinary people face in reclaiming their public space.

Another veteran journalist, Gideon Haigh describes the crisis this way:

*The majority of people who are disaffected and apathetic and principally protective of their own interests and comforts, simply don't care. This is something I think for which the media have been queasily fearful for some time. That our readers today actually don't give a damn what we write, say or think (The Media Report, 2 September 2004).*

If these sentiments are an accurate reflection of the state of Australian participatory democracy and the value that the community attributes to the news media, then strong motivating factors for a change in journalistic practice exist. Disappointingly, similar sentiments have been voiced, and linked with flagging newspaper circulation, for over ten years. Journalism scholars and practitioners have argued that public journalism could be a recourse to arrest this trend.

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## Public journalism defined

While the concept of public journalism has been a feature of media scholarly discourse for some time, it seems not to be well understood by practitioners in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, public journalism is an offshoot of the social responsibility model of journalism. It prioritises the news media's role in the democratic process as its most important function and promotes news not as a commodity with commercial value linked to advertising, but as something with intrinsic social value. It works on the basis that the entire citizenry is its audience. Further, it seeks to position media organisations as catalysts of public debate in such a way as to empower the public to effectively solve community problems (Romano 1999). The challenge laid down by public journalism is

*to round up a whole community's agenda and questions and put out a newspaper with just the answers citizens are looking for (Charity 1995:19).*

Public journalism refines the traditional (Western) notion of newsworthiness. Its practice is based on two dominant news values: the extent to which news coverage can build social capital (that is, build public spirit and a sense of relationship) and the extent to which it might move the public toward meaningful judgement and action (ibid). Newspaper coverage of the 2004 federal election campaign is useful in illustrating this point.

On 31 August 2004, *The [Toowoomba] Chronicle* published a vox populi feature asking passing residents: What do you think of the election and the six-week campaign period? None of the responses were engaging: “I'm not really that interested at all”, “I haven't had time to really think about it because I've got sick kids” and “I've got no idea. One vote is not going to change that much”.<sup>2</sup> Without further elaboration of the issues at which these responses hint, community apathy

could only be concluded. However, the publicly minded journalist or editor would see these responses as an opportunity. Quality coverage could be based on identifying what people's interests and concerns are (rather than what they are not), documenting community discussion and prioritisation of these concerns, presenting factual information on the options for addressing the prioritised issues, communicating the decisions taken by the community and following-up on the implementation of these decisions.

Inherent in the above illustration is another of the defining characteristics of public journalism, that citizens rather than journalists, editors or elite sources define the news agenda. Public journalism practitioners achieve this through a technique Charity calls 'public listening'. While the term might suggest passivity, it actually describes an active process whereby news organisations assist communities to define the news. Instead of editorial executives categorising issues and making judgements about the relative importance of information, essentially in isolation of community opinion, the connectivity of journalists to their communities gives ordinary citizens the opportunity to do this framing. The objective is to facilitate this community involvement not only at the point an issue is defined, but also at every point of debate until an issue is resolved so that a type of informed community consent is given to coverage.

The idea of public listening has not been completely lost on Australian news organisations. To return to the example of reporting on the 2004 federal election campaign, editor of *The [Adelaide] Advertiser* Melvin Mansell was keen to enhance his newspaper's election coverage as follows

*We've chosen the five key electorates here...and we're actually having people working in the community, working in fruit shops and a supermarket, at the local garage, and talking to the voters as they come in to do their daily business...I think what we're trying to do here is get a feel from people in the street actually what they want or indeed go to their level of interest, as well as your normal election coverage, we're attacking those key issues very hard* (Radio National Media Report broadcast, 2 September 2004).

While a refreshing initiative, *The Advertiser's* exercise in citizen-centred news gathering will constitute little more than a gimmick unless this approach has a life beyond the six weeks of the election campaign and reporters follow through on the addressing of those community interests canvassed. In this sense, the technique of public listening may be better described by another term often used by public journalism proponents - perpetual community dialogue.

The above quote from the editor of *The Advertiser* hints further at the false perception that public journalism lacks the hard edge of traditional practice. Somehow, the watchdog role the news media coverts has become so detached from the grassroots interests of communities, and inseparably linked with political and corporate power, that this interpretation is possible. To the contrary, public journalism endows news organisations with the moral authority to ensure those in powerful positions act to resolve those problems on which the community itself has publicly debated and developed a consensus (ibid, Charity). Simply spotlighting an injustice is not enough. As Meyer argues the principles of investigative and public journalism are symbiotic, investigative journalism relying as it does on

public deliberation and action to be effective and public journalism relying on the publication of investigative material.

It would be amiss to conclude this discussion about the nature of public journalism without commenting on its other synergies with new media. The event of open source on-line newspapers would seem to offer much for the proliferation of public journalism principles. One such newspaper is the South Korean *Oh-My-News*. The slogan for *Oh-My-News* is 'every citizen is a reporter'.<sup>3</sup> The newspaper has no paid reporters or writers; instead, it relies entirely on public contributions. However, as discussed by Choi (1995), to describe this newspaper as 'by the people, for the people' seems to ignore its apparent heavy editorial censoring. Characterised by having no editorial input, the phenomenon of blogging would seem to offer public journalism the personal angles and range of voices that give its practice authenticity. Unfortunately, blogs do not attribute the same critical importance to accuracy and balance attributed by public journalism (Wired Magazine).

There can be little doubt that the technology that makes online newspapers and blogging a reality lends support to the technique of perpetual community dialogue. It is by nature interactive, it institutionalises an ability to reply, large volumes of reference material can be linked helping to support community learning and it remains (usually) in the public sphere (ibid). It is a useful format for enhancing the core participatory elements of public journalism. Nonetheless, as the example of *Oh-My-News* shows it is no more a substitute for public journalism practice than any other news format if editorial approaches prevent the public from dictating the news agenda and the discussion of issues is without the ambition of solving real problems. Similarly, the exchange of viewpoints facilitated through blogging cannot, on their own, facilitate the type of long-term community engagement at the heart of public journalism practice. This finding is pertinent to the discussion that will follow on the Public Journalism, Public Participation and Australian Public Policy Project and the implementation of its final phase focus on young, rural people.

One of the intentions of the above Project was to discover how communities in large metropolitan locations and small regional towns might interface differently with the elements of public journalism (Hippocrates 1998). It was with this objective in mind that a final phase was added to focus on several town centres in rural New South Wales. United States based researchers have found that, subject to the management culture of particular news organisations, small town newspapers do have a predisposition toward public journalism principles. As Loomis (2000) concluded in his case study of two small town dailies in North Carolina, size does matter with the relative smallness of towns providing professional advantages in developing strong community networks.

Before advocating a process for taking forward the rural youth phase of the Public Journalism, Public Participation and Australian Public Policy Project (hereafter referred to as Project Y), it was thought necessary to (i) determine the extent to which each of the newspapers involved in the project might already be adopting public journalism principles and (ii) to identify early opportunities for implementing the project. A content analysis of the five daily rural newspapers involved, all published by Rural Press Ltd (*Maitland Mercury, Northern Daily Leader, Central Western Daily, Daily Liberal, Western Advocate*), was thus conducted to collate baseline information. The boxed criteria, derived from the Pew Center's *Toolbox for Getting*

*Readers and Viewers involved in Civic Journalism* and other literature, was applied to one week of daily newspaper publication from 13 to 19 September 2004. (It is noted that the survey sample was large enough only to provide indicative rather than conclusive data.)

ANALYSIS CRITERIA (QUALITATIVE)

1. Opportunities for community interaction through the newspaper, for example via the on-line edition of the newspaper.
2. Opportunities for the public to interact with editors on the appropriateness and quality of coverage, backed by information presented in the newspaper.
3. Reporting of complex community issues over time and to a depth that provides structural explanations.
4. Usage of reporting or presentational techniques that help readers to see their roles as active participants in civic life, for example neighbourhood mapping of community issues.
5. Publication of public commitments and efforts to resolve community problems.
6. Partnerships between the newspaper and community institutions, or public service organisations, used to solicit responses to community issues.
7. Ordinary citizens used as community 'experts' in stories.

All five of the newspapers analysed published stories containing information on community forums and local council consultative exercises. The *Central Western Daily* ran a story on the Orange City Council's efforts to seek community involvement in decision-making on the handling of the city's garbage. This call for community engagement was supported by the day's editorial, which strongly encouraged the public to complete the council survey. The same newspaper covered the launch of an Aboriginal health care service and two forums being organised to consult with the Aboriginal community on the appropriate operation of the new service. The *Western Advocate* ran a story on the local organisation of a federal election forum where the organiser was seeking public input into the pre-selection of forum questions. Issue based community events were also publicised, for example the launch of Child Protection Week and the Reclaim the Night Festival in the *Northern Daily Leader*. However, these events seemed not to stimulate any community debate within the newspapers.

All of the newspapers published some sort of community opinion column or page, varyingly consistent with public journalism principles. The *Central Western Daily* and *Western Advocate* publish a daily 'Opinion and Feedback' page where the one to two sentence responses of six (apparently randomly chosen) citizens, on a specific question, are printed. During the survey period, questions were sometimes linked to stories and other times less obviously so, for example "What do you think about moves to have Bathurst's central business district an alcohol free zone?" and "What's so great about Bathurst?".

In contrast, the *Daily Liberal* runs on Saturdays a half page section called 'Point Taken'. This section, promoted as "a journo free zone" consists of five community panelists who, on a six-week rotation, prepare their own column "on a local story making the headlines". The issue (which on 18 September 2004 was water conservation) is broadly posed, allowing each guest columnist to adopt his or her own angle, but is also introduced with information on related government policy providing the reader with valuable context. Panellists also offer their view on what was the newspaper's story of the week, thereby providing direct feedback to editors on story selection. The *Daily Liberal* was the only newspaper in the group of five to poll its readership on an issue and the only newspaper to actively use the Internet to receive reader input.

The *Maitland Mercury* and *Northern Daily Leader* solicited reader opinion as an adjunct to particular stories. This included the *Northern Daily Leader's* page one story on the Australia Labour Party's education policy and the tag printed beside it asking readers to have their say.

Offering a particular opportunity for Project Y is the *Central Western Daily's* full-page Friday feature 'Youth Matters'. On 17 September 2004, Youth Matters contained journalist prepared stories on progress with a youth café project (through which community ideas on location were being sought) and a live music event being organised by a local youth group. Two short articles by the Orange Youth Council and a column by a local student on her recent trip to Greece were also included.

Overall, coverage in all the analysed newspapers was highly events orientated with opportunities for in-depth reporting of issues consistently missed. Issues appearing to be of importance to communities, for example vocational training and employment, primary health care, school class sizes, adult literacy, alcoholism, depression and suicide were generally dealt with superficially. The exceptions were in the newspapers with magazine style features in their weekend editions or topic specific feature pages, for example the *Daily Liberal's* health page, which on 17 September 2004 included a feature on suicide in rural and Aboriginal men. The 'Newspapers in Education' feature of the *Northern Daily Leader* displayed potential in providing readers with information on decision-making processes, publishing as it did on 15 September 2004 an article on the machinery of federal government.

None of the newspapers used graphic presentation, to any significant extent, to improve the accessibility of information to readers. An exception was a page three story by the *Maitland Mercury* on public housing shortages. The story summarised illustrative facts and figures on the state of low cost accommodation in Maitland in a highlighted text box. All the newspapers published a high percentage of accessible human-interest stories that, in many cases, emphasised the value of voluntarism to the community.

Community efforts to solve local problems did receive coverage, focused largely on fund raising and zoning issues. Breaking with this theme trend, the *Daily Liberal* published a story on the Dubbo Centre Care/ Narramine Shire Council SEED (Indigenous Youth) Program. Within this story the council general manager was quoted as saying

*The diversity of different activities being undertaken is one of the reasons why the Narramine Shire community continues to experience very minimal youth issues in comparison with other small rural towns.*

A commitment to supporting community problem solving would have seen the newspaper reporting on this issue in greater depth, exploring with the public its suitability as a model for replication in other communities. Interesting to note with respect to this quote is the synonymy the source sees between youth issues and youth problems.

Surprisingly, despite other evidence of community connectedness, all the newspapers relied almost exclusively on elite sources in their news (other than human interest) stories. In the *Northern Daily Leader's* story on Tamworth's Youth Insearch Program, no young people were quoted. Similarly, in the *Country Leader* (a weekly newspaper distributed with the *Northern Daily Leader*) a page one story about the success of the Young People's River Health Conference contained no interviews with the young people who participated! This would seem to suggest a level of disinterest in giving a voice to all sectors of the community.

The above content analysis of five regional New South Wales dailies broadly supports Loomis' finding that small town newspapers tend to utilise some public journalism techniques simply because of the level of access they have to their communities. The high level of community engagement practiced by each of the surveyed newspapers is evident in the significant number of stories published on variously organised public forums, the editorial support given to public participation and the space allowed for the voicing of public opinion (to varying levels of sophistication). It can thus be concluded that there is an emphasis in reporting on building social capital.

However, in many ways coverage falls short of true public journalism practice. Critically missing is the public agenda setting, the longevity and depth of debate and strength of commitment to problem solving which together characterise public journalism. While all five newspapers solicit community opinion, there appears to be little linking of this opinion to story selection, framing and presentation. Little effort is devoted to providing explanatory background information on issues, despite all the newspapers having on-line versions capable of providing links to such information. The strong focus on events based reporting limits the coverage of community discussion and follow-up on community action. Direct public feedback on newspaper performance is limited to letters to the editor rather than being discussed in the news pages. The Orange City Council highlighted this in the *Central Western Daily* in a story criticising of its coverage. All of the above limitations will be addressed in the final section of this paper.

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## Project Y

In order to initiate Project Y, focus groups were conducted with young people in those New South Wales towns covered by the five daily newspapers analysed above. The objective of these focus groups was to identify those issues of greatest importance to young people in order to set the broad agenda for newspaper coverage during the project. The decision to focus this final project phase on youth was made

by the editorial staff of each of the involved newspapers based on research, presented by the academic investigators, on the major issues affecting New South Wales rural communities. This preliminary research showed that a range of community problems disproportionately involved, or impacted upon, young people.

The original focus groups for the project were convened in 1999 at community centres and high schools in each of the participating regional towns. The ages of participating young people ranged from thirteen to eighteen years. The majority of participants lived in the relevant town centre, although a few were from outlying smaller centres or properties. Most had white Australian ethnic backgrounds, although some of the groups included young people with Aboriginal and Asian ethnicity. The largest of the groups had fifteen participants.

A simple procedure was followed for each of the focus groups, varying a little according to group size. Basic information on each of the participants was gathered through an ice-breaking exercise. Then, up to ten questions were asked; the first set for individual response and the last set for group discussion. To conclude, participants were asked to provide written feedback on the session and indicate if they wished to continue to be involved in the project.

The editors of the participating newspapers developed the focus group questions with the assistance of the project's academic team. The first questions were aimed at ascertaining young people's perceptions of living in a rural centre, the next at determining particular concerns and the last at establishing views on the appropriate next step for the project.

The focus groups were successful in confirming the suitability of the selected regional centres for a youth focused public journalism project and in identifying issues where the project newspapers could assist in facilitating quality community debate and problem solving. In respect of perceptions, the youth who participated in the groups generally believed that small town living offered a range of benefits (as well as limitations) for young people and that they represented the future of their respective communities. However, they also perceived civic leaders as poor decision-makers and role models. Their general perception of the news media was that it sensationalised coverage of young people, portraying them inaccurately as either "super-star[s] or vandal[s]". Repeated concerns were the treatment of young people by police, the mistrust of youth by older people, drug abuse of various kinds (although they were unsure whether they could trust media generated information about this as a social problem), the racism of older people (becoming evident amongst the young) and the need for facilities expressly for youth. Participants indicated a strong interest in continuing to be involved with the project and in helping to resolve those community problems they had identified. Confidence was expressed about an ability to influence change within existing community structures and processes, with suggestions offered by participants about their possible greater contribution in the local media, in Junior Council and in generally explaining their point of view to older people.

Lessons are to be learned also from the first phases of the broader Public Journalism, Public Participation and Australian Public Policy Project. The formative evaluation of these phases highlights the somewhat delicate balance between advocacy and public journalism. As Hippocrates reported in 1998

*Some of the suggested stories did not get a run and this created some tension at times between the senior editors at the newspaper and the community group leaders...Their [the community group leaders'] perception of public journalism involved a clear focus on local players getting access to the news, getting their voices represented in news stories in a meaningful way. [However], editors always reserve the right to edit for balance, fairness, accuracy, priority, position and length.*

Instead, the newspaper (Brisbane's *Courier Mail*) chose to disproportionately angle stories at the State and national levels, which in turn meant significant amounts of news space was occupied by high profile figures and experts (of all leanings). This approach suggests a reversion, on the part of the *Courier-Mail*, to a traditional news interpretation of prominence at variance with public journalism. However, it additionally conveys an aversion by the newspaper to be seen as promoting a specific cause by covering a local situation in just the way Australians for Reconciliation wanted the situation covered. On this point, public journalism principles could be seen as upheld by the newspaper given the centrality of balance to the public journalism concept. The lesson learned here is the level of sophistication with which 'balance' needs to be understood in the public journalism context and the need for all project stakeholders to have this level of understanding in order for trust to be built and partnerships maintained.

Dealing with the issues of balance and depth in public journalism projects has previously been identified as a risky business in the American literature. While advocates of public journalism, Merrill et al share their take on the risks by quoting sociologist Michael Schudson

*Civic [public] journalism will be making a mistake if it opts for a kind of sloppy populism: Anything the experts do must be tainted. Anything that happens at the grassroots receives the benefit of the doubt. That, I think, is the wrong impulse (2001:168).*

They add that Schudson's comments are particularly relevant "to the growing number of journalists who enthrone public opinion simply because it is public" (ibid).

One political candidate for the 1996 United States elections raised similar concerns in respect of the acclaimed *Charlotte Observer* Your Voice Your Vote Project. The somewhat reasonable criticism expressed was that the newspaper's dogmatic adherence to community agenda-setting had limited discussion of issues critically important to the community but which, for a variety of reasons, had not surfaced through newspaper polls, interviews or focus groups (ibid). Indeed, it would appear that the problem-solving approach of public journalism could be compromised without some injection of vision from legitimate leaders.

## Strategies for more of Project Y

The concrete suggestions that follow, for implementing further work on Project Y, are made within the context of the goal and aim of the original Public Journalism, Public Participation and Australian Public Policy Project. The goal is social improvement. As discussed at length, public journalism is about facilitating the meaningful participation of community members in public life in order to improve the quality

of that life. The aim is to demonstrate the value of the mass media, in particular newspapers, in supporting vibrant communities and thus in ensuring not only the existence of successful communities but also newspapers as a medium for conveying important information. What this means is that proposed coverage needs not only to be of social import but it needs to be attractive to young readers. Fortunately, young people in each of the project locations (albeit in 1999) indicated a strong interest in using existing community structures, including the news media, to break down the older/younger person divide.

What attracts young readers is a full representation of the youth voice. This has been demonstrated in the United States and simply makes sense. In the Australian context, it is shown through the popularity of new media websites such as VibeWire. Contrasting itself from the 'standard old fogey media', VibeWire represents

*the things that [youth] care about, the issues that they deem important, and doing these things in a youth voice, in their own voice from a youth perspective, and participating in a conversation with their peers* (Tom Dawkins, National Co-ordinator of VibeWire on The Media Report 23 September 2004).

Presenting a major challenge to Project Y then is the finding of the participating newspaper content analysis (above) that ordinary people, quite apart from young people, are rarely used as sources. To be successful, the project will need to set a new benchmark in youth participation in the traditional media.

A range of other considerations will need thinking through in preparation for a future project, among them newsroom organization. As argued by Johnson, the traditional beat structure of many newspaper newsrooms is not well suited to a style of journalism seeking to focus on real people and issues rather than institutions. The American newspaper *State*, based in Columbia South Carolina, provides a model of workplace restructure suitable for modifying by regional New South Wales newspapers. The principal change the *State* made to its structure was to divide the newsroom into brainstorming groups that cut across traditional departmental lines. These brainstorming groups became 'circles' of clustered beat journalists based around broad themes of coverage (ibid). One of the recorded impacts of this structure was that staff-reporters, those arguably closest to the community, began making some decisions previously made by upper management. Transferring the basic elements of this model to Project Y's participating newspapers, by establishing 'youth circles', should facilitate the necessary minimum focus of staff on youth issues. Of course, decisions will also have to be made about what existing staff time is cut and what might be 'sacrificed' to allocate copy space to the project.

In order to ensure the all-important youth voice, Youth Panels<sup>4</sup> could be established as the newspapers' primary and constant point of interface with young people in the relevant communities. This idea expands on the concept of a community panel, as previously developed by the *Daily Liberal*, by ensuring the panel has a role in story selection and presentation. It may also minimise some of the difficulties experienced during the first phase of the Public Journalism, Public Participation and Australian Public Policy Project where stories needed to be generated by *Courier-Mail* reporters in advance of scheduled community forums in order for production demands to be met. This reality left journalists to make educated guesses about the community's agenda (Romano 1999). The learning exchange, of production routine constraints

and youth issues, made possible through this mechanism is central to the project's goal and aim.

Another early consideration will be the specific focus of the project. As discussed earlier, the focus groups undertaken in 1999 in each of the proposed project locations were successful in identifying those issues of concern to local youth. The facilitators concluded that those concerns felt most strongly by young people were (i) their portrayal in the media and (ii) the mistrust and prejudicial treatment of them by older people and, in particular, community authority figures (Sykes). In remaining true to the viewpoints expressed by the young people who participated in the focus groups, the project theme should be the restoring of positive relations between young people and civic leaders particularly in policing, local government administration and the media.

A sound place to begin a fresh project would be to test this agenda in each of the newspapers through a first article or articles informing readers about the project. Details should include the project's aim, background, the outcomes of the focus groups, the proposed role of the Youth Panel, the planned changes in reporting and copy presentation and the hope that the community will get involved. This involvement could be kick-started by inviting readers to comment on the project concept, preferably via the Internet so that comments can be later referenced. These first pieces could also introduce a logo for the project providing a visual queue for readers and connectivity between stories.

Coverage could consist of a standard feature and tie-in stories from other parts of the newspaper, using the project logo. A full-page weekly feature, like the *Central Western Daily's* Youth Matters page, quarantined for the voice of youth could provide a regular core of coverage. The page could include a column by the Youth Panel on emerging community issues relevant to the project theme or on project processes, a questions and answers section where young people ask the questions and community leaders respond to them and a first person story by a young person on their experiences with the police, media, council representatives or other authority figures in the community. The writing of this page could be supported by a web-based forum where, throughout the life of the project, young people could offer their questions, story ideas, comment and feed-back to the Youth Panel, in effect appropriating the increasingly popular blogging format as one of the project's tools. The Youth Panel would then participate as a partner in newspaper editorial meetings.

Critical to young people staying engaged with the participating newspapers will be their ability to write and present the Youth Matters page in their own style. The following comment from Rachel, posted on VibeWire, illustrates why.

*It seems to me one of the issues with mainstream media representation, and why young people go off and make their own alternative media, is that a young voice is not considered publishable - unless it sounds like an adult voice. I run into this problem sometimes with my own writing. I write a short story and think, I really dig this, but no one's going to publish this. And I think, why? I've read stories about being in high school, about teenage friendships, etc. But they were all clearly written by a fully adult writer, reminiscing about earlier years...it strikes me that there's a few certain acceptable styles of writing for the mainstream print media - this kind of jokey, casual style for columns and boring journalistic for women's magazines. If*

*you write differently to that, then well...go online...□my point is, young writers with young writers subjects, styles, intensity, etc. is not what mainstream media publishes* (posted 13 November 2003 on [www.vibewire.net/forums](http://www.vibewire.net/forums)).

A strong sense of authenticity will therefore be needed to keep young people involved.

Other tie-in coverage should be linkable to the Youth Matters page, either by the page stimulating story ideas or by other coverage generating discussion amongst young people. Tie-in stories could consist of a variety of traditional news, human interest, investigative, background and opinion pieces. Some specific suggestions are:

- Use of the Northern Daily Leader's regular series on Newspapers in Education to present explanatory background material on the process for allocating council resources toward the needs of various community sectors and/or the process for determining policing strategies. (As an alternative, newspapers could provide sign-posted links to such information.) Additional visual techniques could also be considered for improving the knowledge base of all readers, for example the 'Did you know?' fact boxes used to good effect by the Courier-Mail in its phase one project coverage. Basic facts about the level of drug, including alcohol, abuse present in the community could thus be provided meeting an information need of young people identified during the focus groups;
- Priority being given in hard news stories to any changes in police operations or council proposals potentially affecting young people. These stories should be teamed with specific information on how the community, and particularly its young, could participate in associated discussion. Follow-up stories on this participation should also be written;
- A series of human-interest stories profiling civic leaders angled to show their personal and professional motivations and the challenges of their jobs. This type of story could purposefully be used as a vehicle for conveying perspectives different from those of young people, without compromising the youth voice, thereby ensuring a degree of journalistic balance;
- Periodic lead articles by experts used to inject further (previously unaddressed) dimensions to the issues being generated from the Youth Matters page, for example the particular challenges faced by Indigenous youth or young people from non-English speaking backgrounds. This should avoid any drift toward 'sloppy populism' and provide depth to coverage;
- In-depth features and investigative reports used, at least initially, to inform readers of local situations where either strong or poor community partnerships, involving young people, have had a significant impact on the welfare of the community. For example, column space could be allocated to revisiting the *Daily Liberal's* story on the Dubbo Centre Care/ Narramine Shire Council SEED (Indigenous Youth) Program, but this time detailing what has made the program so successful and allowing each of the major participants to communicate their roles and experience. Such a story should be shared across the publishing group.

Further into the life of a future project, coverage should move from a primary experience sharing frame to a participatory action or problem-solving one capable of drawing parties closer together. As the relationship between the media and young

people is proposed as a focus for the project, an evaluative feature or features on any improvement in this relationship should replace the earlier best practice features. Through these stories journalists, young people and experts could work together to publicly review the effectiveness of project activities and perhaps publish joint commitments to continue with the most positive changes. Similar exercises could be initiated with other groups of civic leaders through publicising in the newspaper and with the assistance of bodies like the Police Youth Citizens Club or Junior Council. Using the *Maitland Mercury* and *Northern Daily Leader's* 'Have your say' tool, workable ideas for forging relationships could also be sought from the wider reading community and published as part of 'You told us' stories. With community commitments hopefully having been made, the participating newspapers should plan future 'What has happened' progress stories to support an ongoing momentum for initiatives. Adopting such an approach would see the participating newspapers in a major facilitating role, but one where a degree of detachment is possible because community players are responsible and accountable for the remedial action pledged.

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## Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the intended significance of Project Y in the continuum of the Public Journalism, Public Participation and Australian Public Policy Project's phases was to demonstrate how Australian regional communities interface with public journalism. One of the original project investigators expected that exposure of this practice to a range of different metropolitan and semi-rural communities would increase the possibility of it ultimately being embraced as an industry technique – somewhere. It is clear from this study, that New South Wales regional newspapers have an established connectedness with their respective communities and see themselves very much as part of their communities, at an institutional level. This lays an important, though imperfect, foundation for public journalism activity. It also appears that despite the ostracism young people feel from the mainstream media, a small window of opportunity and goodwill remains sufficient to make the interface hoped for at the conception of Project Y possible. With acknowledgement from all parties that young people are the lifeblood of small-town communities, strong motivation exists to embrace a mechanism that, if implemented with commitment, will help to cement the active contribution of young people to town life.

## Endnotes

- 1 Romano (2000) found that even after participating in the first major public journalism project in Australia, some journalists from the *Courier-Mail* were not clear on the basic principles of this style of journalism.
- 2 As reported on ABC TV's *Media Watch* program, broadcast on 27 September 2004.
- 3 Discussed in an interview with Assistant Professor Dan Hunter of the University of Pennsylvania on Radio National's *The Law Report*.
- 4 These panels could initially be put together by the youth organisations that participated in the 1999 focus groups. A rotational system could later be considered through community nominations.

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