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Community Journalism
In The Field: Health And Hazards In The News

This article examines the current debate about community (or public, or civic) journalism which re-defines the role of journalists, their relationships with their communities, and promotes new ways of thinking about news. It examines the objectives of community journalism and compares them with traditional journalistic practice and with earlier calls for journalists to apply social science methods in examining and reporting on community public opinion. It describes a study in community journalism currently being completed by final year journalism students reporting on health and environmental hazards in rural communities.

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Reactions by practitioners and educators against the mainstream journalism paradigm in western democratic societies are well documented (Bennett et al, 1985). Throughout the last three decades journalism’s experiments with alternative approaches include: the literary journalism of the 1960s and 1970s; precision journalism of the late 1970s; developmental journalism emerging in the 1960s; and, the latest, civic or public or community journalism of the late 1980s. This article reports on ideas about community journalism used to inform a study currently being completed by final-year journalism students.

American journalism, we are told, is in turmoil. Respected American broadcaster Marvin Kalb (1998: 4) writes that “the journalism of the last twentieth century needs the courage displayed in the late eighteenth century, or else it could bend to overwhelming’ corporate and government pressures and thereby change the nature of American democracy”. Tom Brokaw, the journalist-presenter of America’s NBC Network news admits that the “most powerful instruments of local news, the local television stations, have all but abandoned serious political and government...
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coverage” (Brokaw, 1998:6). He is also highly critical of the nature of the national press coverage by networks of social and political issues, especially during presidential election years.

The American press' poor performance during the 1988 presidential election is one cause of the current critical commentary about American journalism. As Gitlin (1990: 19) notes, not only did the American press present the all-familiar presidential horse-race coverage during the 1988 presidential year, but it also presented an insider's view; a view he characterises as an irrelevant tour “backstage, behind the horse-race, into the paddock, the stables, the clubhouse, and the bookie joints”.

Comments on single events are now expanded to generalisations. Kalb and Norris (1996:1) note that the American press of the 1990s is charged with irresponsibility and its journalists accused of deep cynicism. As they proclaim in an editorial in the Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics: “You name the problem, the press is viewed the culprit. It is coarse. It is elitist. It is not connected to the people. It does not act responsibly. It is not accountable. It follows its own agenda. Off with its head!”

Kalb and Norris' comments are by no means isolated and the reasons for the turmoil between journalists and their communities are many, varied and complex. In broadcasting, increased channel diversity and corporate profit demands are evident and, in print, where circulation for some newspapers and news magazines is declining, the scene is similar. But there is also a fundamental philosophical change occurring in American journalism mainly resulting from the widespread belief that journalists have become disconnected from the communities they serve (eg: Gunaratne, 1998; Charity, 1995; Merritt, 1995; Rosen & Merritt, 1994).

The main contention is that the American press' poor performance causes disinterest by most people in public life; a disinterest fuelled by the lack of adequate knowledge. What is wrong with, or at least perceived to be wrong with, American journalism does not necessarily apply elsewhere, although parallels are often drawn (eg: Four Corners, 1997).

In response to these challenges and questions, a group of senior American journalists in the late 1980s began experimenting with a new form of their craft, an experiment which continues in controversy. Echoing the progressive and reformist zeal of their journalistic forefathers, they reasoned that the social, political and cultural problems which had attracted them in their younger days to journalism were not being solved. They believed they were part of the problem. As a main advocate, Arthur Charity (1995: 1) writes:

“In inner cities continued to decay, deficits to grow, schools to flounder; city hall and statehouse policies were as unfocused...
as ever. It was their business as journalists to push along the 'national debate' on such issues, but by the 1990s any person could see there was no national debate in the honourable, perhaps idealistic marketplace of ideas; rather, elections and administrations came and went, with mediocre half-measures winning out more often than sound full measures, and almost always with little or no public involvement."

Thus, against the backdrop of decreasing public participation in community and national life, and growing cynicism about the press, community journalism was born. Definitions of community, civic, communitarian or public journalism are unclear and there are no agreed upon precise definitions of each (see, for example, Gunaratne, 1988). I use the term community journalism as a summary of the main thrust of the movement.

Charity offers three metaphors to capture the essential idea of community journalism and its radical departure from the traditional view — the journalist as expert facilitator; the journalist as civic capitalist, and the journalist as a full-time involved citizen (Charity, 1995:11).

First, community journalists are said to be experts in public life and thus, for example, a police rounds reporter sits not only with the police but also with the government, the victims, the criminals, and the community in an attempt to create dialogue between all stakeholders. Secondly, community journalists are civic capitalists and grass roots promoters of democracy, forever searching, examining and re-examining ways to strengthen community goodwill, cooperation, and insights into the positions of other social groups. For example, the continuing, often violent, abortion debate should not be constantly portrayed as pro-choice versus pro-life but approached by attempts to create community dialogue. Thirdly, traditional journalists talk of readers or viewers but community journalists talk of citizens. Community journalists are fellow citizens who know they enjoy a privileged position as paid, full-time professional citizens, while their fellow citizens are forced by time, money, access and circumstance to be part-time participants.

Gunaratne (1988) views "public" journalism as based on an attempt to re-define traditional news by de-emphasising objectivity and detachment, the promotion of news as a dialogue or conversation with the community, and the re-positioning of journalists into the community as active facilitators of serious talk involving the community.

Glasser and Craft (1996: 153) summarise the position as: "a departure, in principle, if not always in practice, from certain time-honored norms concerning the separation between the press..."
and its readers, viewers or listeners. It thus represents an earnest effort to examine, though not necessarily reject, many of journalism’s questionable premises and unquestioned assumptions.

The main reactions against community journalism centre on these “time-honoured” assumptions and premises — objectivity, and detachment from news sources and the community, and news as information. By re-defining the role of the journalist (active citizen within, and attached to, the community) and by proposing new ways of thinking about news (bottom-up community defined dialogue versus top-down journalistic defined information), community journalism provokes sharp reaction (Hoyt, 1995).

First, community journalism’s presented philosophical underpinnings cause disquiet. For example, Christians et al. (1993) propose a “communitarian journalism” which aims to shape community norms so much so that shared values are promoted at the expense of individual values. This “dialogical inquiry between press and public”, as Tinder (1980: 189) writes, prompts strong reaction. Barney (1996: 145), for example, worries that a journalism which yields autonomy and independence to a community may become part of the majority power structure of that community. That is, loyalty becomes the price of acceptance and admission to the community, with a subsequent, inevitable reliance on information and values that reinforce the status quo. Put another way, control of the news agenda rests with the dominant community power structure.

Many journalists are not prepared to abandon the traditional idea of objectivity, which requires them to disengage from all aspects of public life (Glasser and Craft, 1996:154; Hoyt, 1995). Yet, what is presented as community journalism often bears little resemblance to the what was intended by some of the founders. For example, many editors complain that community journalism in practice becomes simply a marketing tool to increase ratings or circulation, or a fad or gimmick designed to boost the news bulletin or newspaper community profile. Thus, Channel Ten news in Sydney regularly features the “community” by including taped viewers’ comments on the issues of the day (and the weather is reported from the “community” using mobile satellite broadcasts). This is an all-too-familiar scene in America, as Hoyt’s (1995) analysis in the Columbia Journalism Review demonstrates. Such gross distortions of “community” are fundamentally at odds with Merritt’s (1995) attempts to create a dialogue about social issues between his community and his journalists at the Wichita Eagle in Kansas.

Community journalism also requires a shift from a
journalism of information to a journalism of conversation or dialogue (Carey, 1995), which many senior journalists and editors find unacceptable. Yet such distinctions need not be placed at extremes if the focus is shifted to the news and public agendas.

First, “objectivity”, and the organisational constraints on journalists, have long been the focus of research (eg: Durham, 1998; Gans, 1979) such that “objectivity” and “impartiality” are constantly being re-defined in practice. Detachment is not disinterest and need not imply that journalists do not care for the community, as promoters of community journalism and opponents agree (Merritt & McMasters, 1996). Secondly, as Zelizer (1993) argues, journalists routinely generate “shared meanings” about journalism and how to interpret events.

Examination of these processes is common to journalism and community journalism, although Glasser and Craft (1996: 156-7) find it curious that community journalism promotes conversation and deliberation on virtually every topic but journalism itself! They argue there is a need for community journalism to open itself to public scrutiny.

A critique of community journalism focused on who sets the public agenda for conversation or dialogue offers a useful departure point. As Glasser and Craft (1996) note, community journalism is ambivalent about its agenda-setting role.

Community journalism’s most noted editor, Buzz Merritt at the Wichita Eagle, denies an agenda-setting role. In sharp contrast, Charity (1995), in Doing Public Journalism, urges community journalists to hear the public agenda. But Glasser and Craft (1996: 157) argue:

“Newspapers do have opinions, important ones, but they are usually disguised as ‘news judgement,’ which means, inexplicably, they do not belong out in the open and on the editorial page. In other words, editorial pages have been for too long a lost opportunity to identify, explain, and defend a newspaper’s policies and priorities, especially policies and priorities affecting newspaper coverage. Readers need to know — and newspapers ought to comply, proudly and prominently — why today’s news is worthy of their attention.”

Thus, it is argued here, community journalism needs to promote serious discussion of how the news agenda is created and re-created within the community, in addition to focusing on objectivity, detachment and news values. The agenda-setting tradition holds that thematic or personalised bias (Rucinski, 1992) differentially affects the salience of issues and, more recently, that
audiences may also learn differentially the attributes of an issue (McCombs, et al., 1997). Thus, for example, news highlights unemployed people, or the environmental disaster as an event, or the woman with breast cancer, rather than examining the political, cultural and power relations underlying these "stories". These findings, of course, run counter to community journalism's objectives.

Community journalism, with its goal of promoting conversation and dialogue with communities, advocates the use of social science techniques such as opinion polling, deliberative polling, focus groups and, sometimes, in-depth interviewing. These techniques are not new to journalism or journalism education.

Philip Meyer (1979) advocated, nearly twenty years ago, the extension of traditional reporting skills to embrace social science techniques. While his "precision journalism" became as common as "investigative reporting" in the language of American journalism education, the influence on actual practice is less clear. Many journalism educators disagree with Meyer's heavy emphasis on social science as science, and, by implication, precision journalism as a new objective journalism. Indeed, Meyer's (1992) revised text includes a passionate plea for science as the precision in precision journalism. But his approach often neglects examination of the consequences of using social science methods or the underlying values embedded in precision journalism practice (see, for example, Blood, 1988).

Most precision journalism, at least in Australia, is passive or reactive with news organisations forming commercial links with polling and market research companies. The standards of disclosure set by Meyer (1979; 1992) and Shaw et al. (1997) have not always been followed (e.g., Blood, 1988; Ward and Verrall, 1988) and guidelines promoted by the Australian Press Council are largely ignored (Blood, 1992).

In contrast, a recent Sydney Morning Herald's front page investigative story on child deaths (Bernoth & Murphy, 1998) signals a new trend. This story used previously unpublished statistical data to report on a major social issue about government care of children at risk, reflecting considerable community concern over allegations of abuse of children while in government care. This type of "precision" journalism accords with community journalism's objectives; a view documented long ago by Weaver and McCombs (1980: 491). In an essay tracing the historical links between social science and journalism, they noted a changing role...
for journalists: "... from rather passive transmitters of descriptions of specific events in the 'objective' era to more active truth seekers in the 'interpretive, investigative, public affairs,' and 'precision journalism' periods."

As Hoyt (1995) observes, community journalists of the 1990s use a variety of research techniques, including a citizen panel regularly advising a Kansas newspaper, citizen examinations of crime in their communities, and America's National Public Radio's 1994 election project, which included six major cities in partnerships with broadcast news and involved 50 smaller communities. The national, non-commercial broadcaster used polling data, extended citizen forums, and small-group discussions and interviews to put the citizens' agenda at the forefront of political coverage. The experiment was repeated in 1996. John Dinges, editorial director for the broadcaster, told the Columbia Journalism Review (Hoyt, 1995: 30):

"We've never seen this as departing from traditional journalistic principles ... I see it in terms of framing the coverage - aligning the journalistic priorities with the citizens' priorities. It's not talk radio. When people talk to each other as citizens and form an opinion that's a different opinion from one that is not based on dialogue ... You definitely have to explore the inconsistencies, talk about the factual underpinnings, whether these are accurate or not. This is journalism: you don't just transmit things."

Fishkin (1995), a strong advocate of community journalism, promotes the use of deliberative polling; a departure from traditional press polling techniques and precision journalism as Meyer (1979) defines it. Traditional polling is useful, Fishkin (1995: 162) argues, but the results are not always the result of informed deliberations. Deliberative polling involves selecting a random sample from a community, and arranging a face-to-face meetings of those selected. At these meetings, community issues are discussed, usually involving small-groups. Briefing papers are read and discussed and the opinions of others are often canvassed, including community leaders, politicians, lobby groups, industry, etc. The opportunity clearly exists for participants to define the community agenda in their terms. At the end of these processes, a face-to-face poll is conducted on the issues.

The public opinion model proposed by Fishkin (1995) allows citizens' preferences and opinions to count equally in a process designed to represent the community. But the process, involving a significant number of people, allows competing arguments to be given careful consideration in small-group, face-to-face interactions. The process attempts to prevent one group's views being imposed on other groups; that is, it attempts to promote dialogue even when diametrically opposed opinions are
at stake (Also see, Cunningham, 1996).

As Fishkin (1995: 4) argues: "The public can best speak for itself when it can gather together in some way to hear the arguments on the various sides of an issue and then, after face-to-face discussion, come to a collective decision." For example, in cooperation with Britain's Channel 4, Fishkin conducted a televised deliberative poll in May 1994, and assisted with similar deliberative polls for the American non-commercial Public Broadcasting Service during the 1996 presidential election year.

In summary, the methods proposed for community journalism's objectives must involve a reflexive process where opinions are canvassed, discussed and re-defined by community action. Community dialogue with journalists is paramount, in contrast to the "top-down" approach often used in precision and traditional journalism. At issue is the sharp contrast between community journalism's call for journalists to hear the public agenda, and journalism's power to shape (through issue framing and routine daily practice) the community agenda. These issues inform our community journalism project now underway.

It is not my aim to discuss the "results" of the community journalism project because the project is incomplete and results belong first to the community. Rather, the aim is to focus on the initial approach, the constraints and the problems we met. A detailed critical analysis of the project is for the future. Our starting question was: what is the NSW central west's community agenda concerning health and environmental issues during a period of claims and counter-claims by experts, and at a time when medical and health services are under constant government cost pressures?

This question emerged from an analysis of focus groups conducted for another project (Blood and Lee, 1997) where the initial question invited people to discuss what they thought were the main problems facing the region. Of particular interest was the way people discussed openly their confusion about health and medical stories in newspaper and television reports. Claims and counter claims about the effects of such hazards as electric or magnetic fields emitted by mobile telephone transmission towers, pesticide residues, the depletion of the ozone layer, and passive smoking were on peoples' minds. Cancer, and claims and counter-claims about the causes or risk factors associated with cancer, also were raised by group participants.

Regional news frames most health and environmental hazards news in terms of events and announcements: a government report; a ministerial news release; a proposal for a
new mobile telephone transmission tower; or the closure of medical facilities or hospital beds. Rarely, if ever, does the regional press provide context, or delve beyond one expert's opinion or the claims or assertions of lobby groups. Consistent with normal journalistic practice, the community's awareness, knowledge, understandings (and confusion) or beliefs are not assessed or thought important. The project seeks to address this imbalance in news coverage and involves these factors and decisions.

Reflexivity, consistent with community journalism's objectives, guides the choice of methods. (See, for example, Tulloch and Lupton, 1997: 7). Brown (1997: 152) notes that: "People recognise their problems in light of other surrounding factors, and turn their individual troubles into social problems. Their social constructionist worldview shapes an understanding of personal subjectivity that is at the same time larger than personal subjectivity."

By studying how illness is socially constructed, we examine how social forces shape our understanding of and actions toward health, illness and healing. Thus, we sought first to validate (using survey research and in-depth interviewing) the belief that several health and environmental hazards were on peoples' minds.

The project, conducted as a final-year journalism class exercise, attempts to demonstrate to students the value and limitations of community journalism's objectives, and the weaknesses of some precision journalism methods. Students participate in fieldwork and write news stories based on the data collected, and other traditional sources. Selected student stories will be presented to regional media with suggestions for involving the community, and health workers, in community dialogue.

Differences between the community's understandings and concerns are contrasted with so called expert opinion: that is, the opinions of doctors, health workers and scientists. These differences between "lay" understandings and "expert" understandings are clearly important, although they must be treated carefully. Kitzinger and Reilly (1997: 347) note:

"Which lay voice gains a hearing, which risks the media select for attention and how they are presented, are far from democratic. Cultural givens and the staffing and organization of media outlets combined with the 'it could be you/it could be me' criteria of newsworthiness ensure that the media will be predisposed to give more attention to some risks rather than others. Before anyone can be 'heard', a particular risk also has to be recognized and promoted to the point where the threat seems worth considering at all."

As a consequence, we (lecturer and students) initially
positioned ourselves between community, “experts”, and regional media. We deliberately chose not to invite local or regional news media to participate because we wanted the freedom to explore the health agenda in community terms. Subsequent work will involve the community, journalists, and their editors and publishers with the goal of completing a deliberative poll and town meetings, along the lines suggested by Fishkin (1995).

To ensure reliability and validity of measures in our survey, we replicated studies on health and perceptions of breast cancer risk factors completed by Harvard University’s Center for Risk Analysis (Graham, Clements and Glass, 1996). This enabled adequate pre-testing of the questionnaire before students started the semester, and allowed preparation time for scheduling the in-depth interviews.

The survey comprised five sections: measures of the most important health problem facing the NSW central west, and what people were talking about; measures of whether people thought a list of health and environmental hazards actually existed (as distinct from whether they thought they were important); a series of questions on breast cancer risk factors and whether people thought they existed; sources of information people go to about these issues; and demographics.

About 400 people in the region were interviewed. Households were selected using a random-digit dialling procedure, with respondents within each household selected randomly. Participants in the in-depth interviews were selected across three age groups: 20 year-old; 30 to 50 year old, and more than 60 years-old, and across gender. 18 interviews of about an hour each are being completed.

Specifically, perceptions and understandings of breast cancer risk factors were included because of media prominence given to the disease and its treatment, and the conflicting information given to women in media news reports. Other hazards covered by local and regional news media included: electric and magnetic fields emitted from large power lines; lead found in the paint in older houses; electric and magnetic fields emitted from mobile telephone towers, and from the telephones themselves; pesticide residues that remain on fruit and vegetables; unclean air-conditioning units in office buildings and shopping centres; side effects of children’s immunisation vaccines; passive smoking; fluoride in town water supplies. The in-depth interviews cover a similar list of items covered in the survey but allow considerable flexibility to probe and elaborate responses.
The project’s logistics, involving 93 students supervised by four honours students, is ambitious. To date, we make these observations:

- The semester time constraint reinforces the need for preparation before students begin the class. This means students are not involved in question formation or pre-testing for the survey. For survey research, the questionnaire and sampling design must be complete.

- Training for survey interviewing can enhance lectures and tutorials on journalism research. Highlighting biases that emerge from the interviewer, respondent, and interviewer-respondent interaction, reinforces a critical awareness of the limitations of polling. A report to the class from students after interviewing is essential.

- Training for in-depth, longer interviews can be problematic and should not be confined to the semester in which the project is completed. Analysing these interviews (and transcription) requires considerable lecturer and tutor input.

- Using any introduction in an interview that includes student identification will increase non-response rates. Use university researcher instead.

- Most students will gain hands-on experience with the limitations and constraints of survey research and in-depth interviewing; questions and issues they will, hopefully, take into professional practice.

- If you start the project with local, regional or metropolitan media as a partner, you may need considerable time in which to explain, elaborate and negotiate a satisfactory position for community journalism’s objectives. Beware of media using what you are attempting as a marketing ploy.

- Ensure that students understand the project is a research process. By process, we constantly adjust our initial research questions and positions in line with the community’s opinions and positions. For example, initial responses to our open-ended questions about what health issues people thought important immediately alerted us to concerns about other types of cancer, heart disease and asthma; issues initially not thought that important. Our focus on breast cancer risk factors should have been complemented by questions about these concerns.

Students do learn invaluable insights, beyond the project’s objectives, into how other groups in society view the topics of the project, and their involvement. For example, our initial data reveal considerable unrest, particularly among the elderly, about what they perceive as the downgrading of health services in the area.
and they wanted to know what students thought.

Students' relationship with me, and the subject requirement of completing five interviews, their perceptions of the project and its usefulness, emerged as issues of discussion and, sometimes, contention. Their limited training and the quick turnaround of interviews were also issues in class, as was the verification procedure. Interviews were verified (re-contacting sample households) by honours research students. These issues were discussed in the context of students' future use and reliance of survey or polling data as journalists.

Finally, in retrospect, more attention should be focused on involving students in the longer-term objectives of the project, particularly in terms of how their contribution fits with the goals of community journalism, research conducted in a reflexive framework, and journalism as communication.

Will any of what we are doing make a difference, especially now as we begin talking to regional news media? Buzz Merritt (1995: 124) in the final line of Public Journalism and Public Life asks himself a similar question and writes: “But talk to me in ten years”. We will not need that long.

REFERENCES:


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