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# Are Community Newspapers Really Different?

Cafarella has written what amounts to a wake-up call for many journalism educators (in this issue, page 6). Her paper will have varying degrees of relevance for different educators and different institutions. In some instances, she may well be reflecting the viewpoints of particular educators in particular situations but these same educators, because of institutional pressures and the very pressures of time and limited resources that Cafarella discusses in a suburban newspaper setting, are unable to implement their heart's desire. For example, they may want to do all the things Cafarella cited, but to meet the academic requirements of their institution as opposed to the training needs of their students they must achieve a balance between the practical and the theoretical, between their own teaching and research performance, and they must be able to cope with the marking load they generate by creating endless practical assignments.

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Shorthand bobs up in Cafarella's paper as a hurdle the graduate cadet must clear before being elevated to the status of graded journalist after the one-year cadetship, and I am reminded that arguments about the inclusion of shorthand in tertiary journalism courses has been debated at national and institutional levels for the past quarter of a century. In fact, shorthand is a kind of shorthand for this practice versus theory debate.

There is little doubt that for every statement Cafarella has made that may reflect poorly in any way on the efforts of journalism educators, explicitly or implicitly, there is some evidence somewhere, but just how much solid evidence there is for the criticisms to be validated and accepted as general truths is arguable. For instance, I am sure some journalism educators are ignorant and even arrogant, at times, about suburban newspapers. Some of us tend to become immersed in the so-called quality dailies, such as the Melbourne Age, Australian and Sydney Morning Herald, and rarely spend time scanning the pages of community papers such as the Parramatta Advertiser, the Progress Press (Melbourne), the Plains Producer (Balaklava, South Australia), or the Pioneer News, (Mackay, Queensland).

Some journalism educators, I suspect, ignore the fact that there are different sets of news values for different types of newspapers,  
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because they are serving different types of communities of readership in different social settings with different values generated by their socio-economic circumstances and general demographics. The issues are: are suburban papers really different? And, if they are, what does this mean for the way journalism educators should teach journalism? In attempting to answer these questions, I want to broaden the term "suburban" and replace it with "community". I will use "community" to cover both suburban and provincial non-daily newspapers because, as I will set out to demonstrate, they have many common values. In fact, some "suburban" newspapers, such as the award-winning Redland Times, Brisbane, and the Hawkesbury Gazette, Sydney, straddle the boundaries between country and city and belong to their state's Country Press Association. Where I may feel suburban and provincial non-dailies should be differentiated, I will make that distinction.

What qualifies me to respond to these issues? I have worked in both suburban and provincial newspapers (both daily and non-daily), as well as on the Canberra Times, which some regard as a metropolitan daily and some as a big provincial newspaper (its circulation is smaller than that of the Newcastle Herald and the Gold Coast Bulletin, both classified as provincial dailies). I have also been a journalism educator for a total of 19 years in the past 26. In addition, since 1977 I have carved out a field of research on provincial newspaper history, principally in New South Wales and Queensland, but extending nationally in the past five years. I am the curator of a collection of newspapers that ranges from the international and national dailies to the weeklies and monthlies emerging from suburban and provincial communities. The small titles include the Gnowangerup Star in Western Australia, the Koondrook and Barham Bridge, New South Wales, the South-West News in the Centenary suburbs of Brisbane, and the monthly Queenscliffe Herald, Victoria.

Cafarella is not alone in her belief that, indeed, community-based newspapers are different. At the Journalism Education Association's (JEA) annual conference at Mooloolaba, Queensland, in December 2000, a book *Community Journalism* was launched by Country Press Australia. This book, above all else, "recognises the significant difference between the practice of journalism in self-contained communities, large and small, and that absorbing the efforts of journalists with national and global assignments on an every-day basis".<sup>1</sup> Clearly, this book is aimed principally at the country-based journalist, but many of the principles it espouses as presented by the 10 authors of the 27 chapters are generally applicable to city-based journalists employed on suburban newspapers. It is, in effect, a handbook for cadets and it includes chapters on such everyday matters for community journalists as reporting local government, writing the obituary, and reporting public gatherings, such as organised conferences, press conferences, protest rallies and even sermons

My own experience as a journalist and editor on community-based publications is that the major factors affecting the style of publication you produce are the community's demographics and values, the newspaper's staff size and, of course, time. You weigh up every potential story according to how relevant, important or interesting you expect it to be for the local readership (and you do not try to compete for national and international coverage with capital-city dailies). That readership is affected by the type of industry and/or farming that is pursued locally, the balance of the various age groups in the community, the institutions (such as schools, universities, TAFE colleges, and branch offices of governmental organisations) and community groups, and the relationship that the paper has developed over the years. Many community newspapers are steeped in history and have survived because of the closeness of the relationship they have built with their communities, reflecting accurately the community's values and being unafraid to raise the community's concerns.

The award-winning Victorian country newspaper editor, Ella Ebery, an active octogenarian, sees a country paper as being "the heart of the community and love it or hate it it does keep a community together".<sup>2</sup> Jock Haire, when he was editor of the now-defunct Jeparit Leader, Victoria, said: "The paper is something that keeps this little town together."<sup>3</sup> This belief in the cohesive power of the local paper is based on more than anecdotal evidence. Bradley Greenberg found in an American study that in small communities, such as those served by weekly newspapers, that the community press, as a social function, facilitates individual and group assimilation into the community structure. It accomplishes this in part by distributing prestige which is not available from the larger urban environment throughout the local community in the form of stories, pictures and announcements about local persons and events. Further, the community press serves the welfare and progress of the local area.<sup>4</sup>

In the suburbs of Australian capital cities, suburban newspapers probably cannot make the same claim to their role in community cohesion, but if they touch the pulse of the local community and fight its battles against big government, big bureaucracy and big industry, they will carve out an important niche for themselves in the community psyche.

A community newspaper editor rarely enjoys the luxury of a metropolitan daily editor who can allow journalists to specialise on a particular round or to work on special projects. If you have two to four or even a dozen journalists you are always counting heads. Who is on annual leave, who is having a rostered day off, who is "working off" overtime? If there are only two or three of you, you don't spend much time counting, because you are so busy doing everything else. Even if you have 10 journalists, often you are left with only one general news reporter and one or two subs. Sometimes the editor is the lone sub

for much of the day and s/he generally takes up the slack after hours if s/he is off the time book.

Metropolitan and regional daily editors may have managerial, budgetary and marketing roles, but the editor of a community newspaper plays very much a hands-on role, and those hands may deal with reporting, subbing and a whole range of other duties during the one day. It can be readily perceived that the cadet journalist beginning duties on such a newspaper has to learn swiftly to cope with a vast range of types of stories and pressures. Not only must the cadet become well enough read to cope with the range of issues s/he will cover, but also s/he must quickly adapt to producing a high volume of clearly written copy in the newspaper's style under deadline pressure. [In the midst of all this, the Leader Newspapers group cadets, for whom Cafarella has training responsibility, must cope with three hours of shorthand instruction on Tuesday mornings and a three-hour training session on Tuesday afternoon and any resultant homework, set or voluntary.]

It is enormously difficult to train a person to perform these functions in a university setting where the only incentives are marks, grades, passes or failures and not the ultimate incentive of "perform or lose your job". The student always has the excuse that "I have other courses, too," or "I have a medical certificate to explain my absence" or he or she may resort to absence for a few weeks and then produces some vaguely plausible reason related to medical or family circumstances. This is where publications such as the University of Queensland's monthly suburban newspaper, The Queensland Independent, and journalism internships attempt to fill the gap by providing solid practical experience as a context for the student's theoretical and other studies.

At different times and in different tertiary institutions at Toowoomba and at Charles Sturt University (Bathurst), for instance I have made special efforts to give students a feel for reporting at a grassroots level. I have rostered students in pairs to produce the weekly school news column of the local paper, taken groups of five or six to outlying towns to gather information to write, layout and sub the town's show supplement for the local regional daily newspaper, taken groups to the selection of a jury at the district court sittings, taken groups to the local council meeting and arranged for students to cover sporting fixtures for the local paper.

In Brisbane, many University of Queensland journalism students grasp the opportunity to spend a week working on suburban newspapers at one of the five Quest offices. The practical reporting experience and the experience of having copy subbed by an editor or sub unworried about the niceties of the lecturer/student relationship create a useful learning curve in any of the situations mentioned immediately above. The reporting experience is highly beneficial for two reasons: (1) the students gather information through real-

life interviews, rather than the “mock” process which Cafarella found irksome when she was already a cadet; and (2) they generally write in the midst of the buzz of the newspaper’s news room with the clock ticking toward the office deadline.

When you work on a community newspaper you soon absorb the message that the everyday life of the community is of interest to your readers. The annual events that shape the community’s traditions are newsworthy and readers expect to find them mentioned in the newspaper so that they can note them on their social calendar and plan to attend them. They want to know about changes to these events, whether in the form of a different style of program or a different person at the helm of the organisation running them. They want to know who is getting married this week, who has died and, yes, they want to read obituaries on the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. In other words, a different set of news values operates for the Dandenong Journal than for the Herald Sun and for the Blue Mountains Gazette than for the Daily Telegraph. In many instances, the community newspaper is communicating the good news that nothing terrible has happened in the past week whereas the metropolitan daily has communicated all the bad news about corruption among people in high places, the falling Australian dollar, a company in collapse or a sporting team that has taken bribes. The importance of comprehending the news values of a community newspaper, and of not belittling them, must be communicated to journalism students if for no other reason than that many of them will begin their careers and some of them spend many years of those careers on community newspapers. Any lecture on news values during a university journalism course should give due mention to the justifiable difference between news values among different news publications and any practical newswriting projects should also take these differences into account and present opportunities to write for a fictitious or real community newspaper audience.

If Cafarella has written a wake-up call for journalism educators, she has also signalled to suburban and provincial newspapers throughout Australia that they must invest more time in training. Who meets the training needs of cadets after they have been graded? Apart from the occasional course, little is done on a continuing basis. The pressures that operate to meet the demands of the bottom line often put training at the bottom of the list of priorities.

## NOTES

- 1 Hurst, John & Provis, Michael, eds., *Community Journalism: A resource for journalists, editors, publishers and editors*, Melbourne: Country Press Australia, 2000, pp.ix-x.

## Conclusion

- 2 Australian Newspaper History Group Newsletter, No. 12, item 15.
- 3 Ford, Carolyn, "Tiny Leader presses on with the times", Australian, 30 December 1986, p.3.
- 4 Greenberg, Bradley S, "Community press as perceived by its editors and readers", Journalism Quarterly, 41:3 (1964), pp.437-440.

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