

RUNNING HEAD: Urban News Project

**The Duluth Community News Project: Examining the impact of community-based reporting on student perceptions of journalism and community<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study analyzes a community-based reporting project at a Midwestern university in a city of 90,000. Qualitative pre- and post-test analysis of students' perceptions of the community and of the journalism they were practicing found the project challenged their preconceived notions about the community they visited and of the best way to practice journalism. Students said the project took them out of their comfort zones and challenged their preconceived notions about the community they visited. The findings suggest that the experience teaches students as much about people and community as it does about journalism.

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on student perceptions of journalism and community**

It's long been a practice in journalism education to send students "out" and into the community to cover meetings, attend press conferences and report on events, but a growing number of programs are utilizing a community-based reporting approach to teaching journalism (Reader, 2007). The goal of this approach is to engage journalism students in real-life settings, practicing journalism that involves interacting with the public and trying to discover news by paying attention to the issues observed in the everyday life of a community (Kuhr, n.d.). By and large, these efforts are seen as successes. Educators who have taken on real-world situations say they challenge students to experience a "world beyond their own" (Shaffer, 2007, p. 6), while contributing to the public agenda by providing a new source for information (Thomas, 2007, p. 10).

Experiential learning can provide students with lessons they say will stay with them long after the class is complete and be far more powerful than the traditional in-class approach (Simon & Sapp, 2006). But not all aspects of these reporting projects are praised. After asking journalism students to go out into a largely poor, minority community in urban Syracuse, N.Y., two professors overseeing an award-winning project reflected on its success and its failures: "So how did it go? By a margin of about 2-to-1, our students hated it" (Davis & Hatcher, 2006, p. 64). They attributed the lack of enthusiasm to several factors: *fear* of doing journalism in an uncomfortable setting; *addiction* to phones, e-mail and the Web for information gathering; and *laziness* described in contrast to persistence.

This study is specifically designed to revisit these questions and these findings by looking at one community news project and the impact it had on students' perceptions of both journalism and the community they wrote about. This study analyzed students' reflections on the project, the articles they wrote and other data during a six-month period in the fall of 2007. The goal is to help understand how doing applied journalism in urban communities can be effective.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: In what ways did students' views of the community change over the course of the semester?

RQ2: How did students' views on journalism change through the course of the project?

This urban news project was modeled after an approach used for years at both West Virginia University's journalism program and at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies' Summer Fellows Program (Poynter Institute, n.d.). At Poynter, journalism students learn how to practice community journalism by covering geographically defined segments of urban St. Petersburg, Fla. They walk through the community, observing and talking with ordinary people and discovering what's news based on what they experience. The result is a kind of journalism many believe is more intimate and personal. They learn how to do journalism in which they can expect to be held accountable for the work that they do because they will see the people they write about the next day and the next week. They are, in other words, doing journalism that encourages them to see themselves as stakeholders in the place they are writing about – a position that is both rewarding and challenging for a journalist.

Learning how to practice journalism using this approach encourages journalists to think almost like sociologists doing fieldwork and discovering “third places” – a concept that teaches journalists how find locations in communities when they can observe and interact with the public (Kuhr, n.d.) This approach to learning also parallels ideas from civic engagement in which students get out into communities and not just study problems but become actively involved in solving them (Campus Compact, n.d.).

Encouraging journalists to seek out community sources for news is also an approach that attempts to address some of the critiques of media coverage of urban communities. Media scholars such as Martin Gilens (1999) and Don Heider (2000) have noted that urban communities rarely appear in media unless it’s in relation to a problem. Murders, crime, drugs are usually how larger metropolitan areas know their urban communities. The result is that the larger community’s view of that neighborhood is skewed toward negative images, often associated with racial stereotypes. But the effect also has a negative impact on a neighborhood’s view of itself. While affluent suburban communities often enjoy their own community newspapers, this is rarely the case in urban neighborhoods, in part because there is rarely a large enough advertising base to attract a for-profit media venture. However, across the nation, more and more urban communities, partnering with universities and non-profit organizations, are experimenting with other forms of media including non-profit newspapers.

The need for urban community journalism is great. These media outlets can give a community a more positive view of itself. They also can serve as the voice of that community, giving it a stronger sense of unity and the ability to gain the attention of policymakers. As scholars of community journalism have long noted (Lauterer, 2000),

the role of journalists in this niche of journalism may be profoundly different from those of larger media. Urban community newspapers have the potential to teach journalism students how to practice a kind of intimate journalism that may involve stepping out of their comfort zones. Urban journalism requires students to see a community not as the source for news stories (which always leads to “news” defined by problems) and instead encourages them to see these communities as their audience. This simple adjustment can have profound impact on what gets to count as news.

### **Method**

The focus of this study was a project that involved two classes at a roughly 10,000-student state university that spent the Fall semester of 2007 conceiving of and producing a community news Web site that told the stories of an urban neighborhood in a mid-sized city in the U.S. Midwest. This neighborhood has a reputation among the student body as being a place to avoid; it is seen as being a largely poor, minority community that does not appear in local media unless it is to report on some of the problems associated with the community such as crime, drugs or poverty. Teams of one editor and three to four reporters were assigned to cover specific blocks of this neighborhood. The project involved an editing class of seven students and a reporting class of 25 students. It was expected that the editors and reporters would work together on the creation of a Web site and the production of articles, pictures and multimedia stories about this community throughout the course of the semester.

With an *N* of 30 it was decided a qualitative, textual analysis of data was the most valuable approach (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). A number of methods were used to assess

the students' perceptions of the community and of the journalism they were practicing.

Data from the following sources were analyzed:

- Memos and writing exercises: From the first day of class to the final day of class (and beyond in some cases), students were asked to write and reflect on their perceptions and experiences. In some cases, these writing exercises were public writing on a class discussion Web site, which could be read by other students in the class. In other cases, the students were asked to write unsigned notes on surveys that were then collected with the understanding that the results would not be shared with classmates. This also included an anonymous open-ended survey students completed when the instructor was not present at the end of the semester. Students also wrote a more detailed essay at the end of the semester reflecting on the experiencing.

- Story-planning documents: Students were expected to file memos, notes and outlines for the articles they were working on that include the ideas they were considering, the work they had done on those ideas and the progress they had made in reporting on these stories. These documents included the comments from editors on news articles, updates from reporters on the status of articles, peer critiques of finished stories and other reactions to the reporting process.

- News articles: The articles themselves provide a wealth of data about the evolution of individual reporters over the semester and about the class as a whole. They were analyzed for the news topics, the sources used, and the methods reporters employed.

- Field notes: Students communicated regularly with the professor in meetings and through e-mail and online instant messaging about the class and the stories they were working on. The instructor, who should be seen as a participant-observer in this project,

kept memos about these conversations, making sure information did not violate any aspects of the students' confidentiality. The instructor also wrote routine memos about all aspects of the project and reflections on that process throughout the course of the semester and after.

A number of steps were taken to ensure that the privacy of the students was protected. Students were asked to sign consent forms that explained the nature of the research and that their participation in the study was not a requirement of the course and that they would not be penalized if they decided not to participate. The study received institutional review board approval and the study design adhered to all university responsible conduct in research protocols.

Data were analyzed looking for findings both of specific experiences during the period and also to look for changes over time. Analysis was done both at the group and at the individual level. As Yin notes (1994), the greatest advantage of case study research is that it allows a variety of data to be analyzed, increasing the likelihood of results being "convincing and accurate" (p. 92). Analysis took place both during and after data collection. Memos were written routinely speculating on emerging themes; transcripts and documents were also analyzed once data collection was complete using a variety of techniques including the creation of charts and visual maps and by way of textual analysis (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Results were produced in a narrative format (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) with a goal toward producing work that would be of interest and value to scholars, practitioners and the public.

There are a couple factors that must be addressed as threats to the internal validity of this project. The students were all members of two classes taught by the same instructor.

The students were aware of the professor's view on this project and his view on the role of media in a community. It's conceivable that students' writings about this project and this kind of work were written in anticipation of the kinds of answers the professor wanted to hear. A number of steps were taken to dampen this effect. Students were told that the professor had no expectation as to having a right or wrong answer about the experience. It was perfectly acceptable, they were told, that they could go through this entire process and have their view of this community and/or of journalism be lower. They were also encouraged not to write about their experience in anticipation of what they thought the professor wanted to hear from them.

### **Results**

The urban journalism project took place during a four-month period from September to December in 2007. During this time period, an advanced editing class of seven editors worked with a reporting class of 23 reporters on the creation of a Web site that would eventually produce four series of articles telling stories about an urban community in a Midwest city with a population of about 90,000. Each editor worked with a group of three to four reporters; each team was assigned a smaller geographic segment of the community that was the focus of the project. Each set of articles was loosely focused around a particular theme, but reporting teams were given great freedom in using these themes as starting points in their reporting.

#### *Pretest perceptions of journalism and community*

In the first week of classes, students were told what they would be doing for the semester and asked to write about their experience with journalism, to record their reflections on the community they were covering and to write about how they felt about

the work they would be asked to do. There was large variation in the course regarding both students' previous experience and their plans for journalism. Some students were just getting started while others had experience both at the campus newspaper and in internships and part-time jobs at newspapers and television stations. About 25 percent of the class wrote that they were fairly certain that journalism was a career they were intent on pursuing; while the majority were still just testing things out and hoped the class would give them a stronger sense of what journalism had to offer.

A few common themes emerged about the process itself. By far, the primary concerns of many students focused on approaching community members for interviews. "I'm not shy, but going out and being involved in the community in such a way is somewhat daunting," wrote one student. Even so, there were no students who objected to this approach and most coupled this concern with an equal amount of excitement<sup>2</sup> at the prospect of what one student called a chance to be surprised and discover "the unexpected." One student who already had some experience wondered how it would be possible to find "sources" for stories by just walking through the community. Several students voiced concerns about the amount of time the class would demand in their already-busy schedules.

Students were also asked to write about their perceptions of the community itself. In general, the reaction was one of being wary and cautious. For a large proportion of the class, the neighborhood was not one they had been to and their perception was based primarily on what they had heard through word of mouth. They wrote about problems

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<sup>2</sup> Three students dropped the class the day after being told what the project entailed, though this is not uncommon in the first week of any semester.

they had heard with drugs and crime and even some shootings. Comments from two students represented some common themes.

“I’m hoping nobody gets shot during the project. I’m sure there are plenty of nice people and good stories to gather from the area, I’m just a little worried about getting finding them.” [sic]

“The stereotype that keeps popping up in my head — which I feel bad for thinking — is that the majority of these people are African American. The idea of the place makes me nervous and uncomfortable because I am a sheltered middle-class woman and don’t know how to relate to that type of culture.”

The reactions to the community appeared connected to the backgrounds of the students.<sup>3</sup> Some students grew up in the city, and for them, the knowledge of this particular neighborhood came from interpersonal communication. One student wrote that his grandmother had lived in this area until she had died the previous year, even though her family had tried for years to get her to move because of growing concerns about crime. Another student who lived in a neighboring, more-rural community wrote that he was hesitant to visit the area because of what he had heard from family, friends and in the media about all the problems in the community.

For the most part, students who had direct experience with the neighborhood were less apprehensive about it. One student even wrote that he had been initially nervous about visiting the neighborhood until he realized that he lived there. Another student who came from a larger city said her experiences in such settings had taught her to be cautious, suggesting this experience made her more nervous about the project.

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<sup>3</sup> There was not one student of color in the class, which is not uncommon on a campus where only 8 percent of the student body are minorities.

*Post-test reactions to project*

Three different types of assessment were used to explore student perceptions of the project: An end-of-the-semester reflection paper that revisited the same questions asked in the first weeks of the semester; an anonymous, open-ended evaluation; and an anonymous quantitative course evaluation form.

*Reflection papers.* In the reflection papers, students as a rule spoke in great detail about how their views of the community had been profoundly affected by the semester-long project. By and large, this was reflected in the students' recounting of their encounters with specific people they had met and interviewed during the semester. Almost without exception, reflection papers talked of the people they had met and the stories those people had shared with them. Out of 27 final responses, only two had negative perceptions about the community and the experience and even these were tempered by positive experiences. A few excerpts from reflection papers are emblematic of other responses.

"I was doing it. I was becoming a journalist. Going out. Making contacts. Finding stories. Even better, I was finding people that mattered. Stories that mattered. And I was learning about some people living in the [neighborhood] that wanted what everyone else wanted. They wanted love and respect. And they wanted to see their kids grow up and get jobs and have good lives for themselves.

Even so, this student's view of the community was not completely transformed. In the writings it was clear that students were now paying greater attention to media reporting on this community and, perhaps as a result, were more aware of the crimes and problems associated with the area: "I'm still not prepared to wander around it alone in the dark."

Another student wrote that their preconceived notions were somewhat reinforced by the experience:

"I was hoping that my perceptions of the area would change for the better but they actually became a little worse. I never knew that [this city] had this kind of area. But then again, I never really took the time to look. However, I also learned that there are a lot of interesting and nice people in the [neighborhood] and that it is true that everybody has a story."

Another student had a similar response:

"I said in my beat mapping that I felt comfortable in the area, but I don't think that was ever true. I always felt like an outsider. Several times I walked down [street] and got an ugly stare from a sketchy character leaving one of the bars."

As a group, students fears and concerns about safety did not vanish. Nor did their fear of confronting people they didn't know – a fear that was on the mind of many at the start of the semester and remained for some at the end: "This class has put me in some of the worst, most terrifying situations. Having to just go out and start talking to people can be horrifying, and it was." Another student wrote of sitting in her car, afraid to go to the house of the person she hoped to interview: "I cried for two hours before my first interview of the year because I was almost too scared to do it. My stomach still drops every time I have to talk to someone with paper and pencil at hand, but I've definitely gotten better. "

The students' most common responses about journalism overlapped with their responses about the people they met – namely that they all had stories to tell and that the issues that were of concern in their lives were the same ones as the students and people

they knew felt. They spoke in great detail about some of the individuals they met and the stories they shared with them. However, a few students wrote of a frustration with this approach to reporting, writing that it was often difficult to find people willing to talk and to find what one student called “credible” sources. This same student wrote that he also wondered if this would have changed if he had put more effort into the class and more time in the beat area.

There were no students who said that the project discouraged them from doing journalism, and several who said that it made them more excited about journalism. However, one student wondered if the modern journalism landscape was a place where he could employ the techniques used in the class, and even blamed the media for some of the images that existed about the community.

"You can call it poverty but I think a label like that somehow validates that condition of life in some deep way, and I think journalists often do the same by reporting on the effects (street crime, drug abuse, homelessness) and not the causes (unequal levels of education, fear and isolation, unhindered materialism). "

### **Discussion**

Inspired by innovative approaches like those used at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, journalism programs around the nation are experimenting with community-based reporting projects that encourage students to practice a style of journalism that pushes students outside of their comfort zones. Students are taught to discover news by exploring their community and observing and talking with ordinary citizens. While these projects are largely praised and encouraged, they are not without challenges for both students and instructors (Reader, 2007; Davis & Hatcher, 2006). This study analyzes one such

community-based reporting project at a Midwestern university in a city of 90,000.

Qualitative pre- and post-test analysis of students' perceptions of the community and of the journalism they were practicing found the project challenged their preconceived notions about the community they visited and of the best way to practice journalism.

With such a rich data set, analysis at present is preliminary, but the findings so far are encouraging, especially with respect to student reactions to the community itself. These results suggest that the urban journalism project had a very strong and, in the majority of cases, positive impact on students' views of both the community they visited and on a community-based approach to journalism. In pretest writings, students candidly noted some apprehension about visiting the neighborhood they would be asked to visit, and about doing reporting that required visiting with ordinary citizens as a way of discovering the stories of the community. Students' pretest writings described a community centering around problems such as drugs, crime and poverty. Students, in general, were not naïve about these perceptions, with many suspecting these stereotypes were ones that were influenced by interpersonal communication and by media coverage of this community. They expressed an openness to the possibility that these impressions of the community would change as a result of the semester.

Post-test writings about the project show that awareness of some of the social issues connected with this urban neighborhood may have, in some ways, increased for many students. Perhaps because they were more focused on the community, many students also became more diligent consumers of local media and, as such, became more aware of the news reports of this area that were related to the problems of the community. At the same time, students' own personal experiences with the community recounted the specific

encounters with the people they had met during the semester, which were almost without exception, positive and even transformative. Students reported having learned that the people in this community were much more like them than they had anticipated – with the same hopes and dreams as anyone else.

Many of the students embraced the community-based reporting approach as expressed in the stories they recalled during the semester that emerged from encounters with the everyday people who shared their stories with them. While students' concerns and anxieties about interviewing and walking their beat areas had not abated, students also wrote that they had learned that they could step outside of their comfort zones and succeed in discovering untold stories when they employed this approach. This reaction was not uniform. Some students expressed a frustration with this approach to reporting and confessed that they ended up writing stories based on places (a new business opening, for example) instead of new people because of the challenge of finding people willing to talk.

In summary, the findings suggest that community-based reporting can be a powerful tool in both teaching journalism and in exploring perceptions of community and of difference. For instructors, the challenges outlined by Davis and Hatcher (2006) cannot be ignored. This type of course may ask students to confront issues and situations they have never before faced, and any instructor making these kinds of demands will want to think hard about the kind of skills students will need to be successful. It is one thing to encourage students to step outside of their comfort zone; it is something else entirely to push them out of an airplane with a parachute and expect them to figure out how to use it as they are hurtling toward the ground.

Students — and journalists for that matter — need to be taught the skills of observing and interviewing. Further, the classroom needs to be a comfortable environment to discuss how to write sensitively about issues such as race and difference. As one student, who was not a journalism major, but, in fact, a student looking for an elective course later noted: “I was intimidated by the work we were given, but I really learned a lot from that class. Not like my typical business class where I walk away thinking, ‘I’ll maybe use the information I learned in this class...’ I truly feel like I learned valuable life tools in your class.”

#### *Limitations and future research*

As noted, analysis of the data in this project is ongoing. At present, findings are based on group-level observations and pre- and post-test student writings, but continuing work will focus on a closer analysis of the articles written and the experiences of individual students based on their writing throughout the semester. Anecdotally, it seems that the project fits the cliché that: The more students put into the project, the more they got out of it. In other words, it would appear that those students who spent the most time in the community, exploring and talking with people, also experienced the strongest and most positive impact from the project.

While it was not the focus of this study, it’s worth noting the reactions that came from this project, even months after its completion. Several students reported afterward that the work they had produced for this project was getting high praise. Several students said that in interviews for jobs and internships, they were praised for the community-driven stories they produced. Several students were asked to reproduce those stories – or ones of a similar nature – for the publications they went to work for. The university itself

also gave the project much recognition, including showcasing it on the university Web site for several weeks. The university's civic engagement program has also highlighted the project and asked the professor and his students to present the project at an upcoming civic engagement seminar.

However, while the project to date has been of great value to students and a source of pride for the university, a question that needs to be answered is whether it filled a community need. Most of the evidence suggests that though students were writing about this community, it seems there is a long way to go before students are writing "for" the community. One possibility, without getting out too far in front of the research, is the creation of an urban news organization that is something akin to a teaching hospital. The news organization would be owned and run by the community. Students would come to this news organization toward the end of their journalism education (or perhaps throughout) to learn how to report, write and edit stories as part of an urban community. They would learn to do journalism, but also learn how to be a part of a community and to produce journalism from this reference point. The project could also serve as a research model where ideas regarding the study and approach of urban community journalism could be tested and refined. And, finally, this project would be dedicated to finding ways to help urban community newspapers find ways to thrive and realize their potential. The project would be done in collaboration with – and not in competition with – an existing community journalism venture.

Potentially, an urban news project could turn two problems into solutions. First, journalism students need an experience in which they learn to do real journalism in a community where their work has an impact. Second, urban communities such as the one

identified in this project require their own voice with which to define themselves and strengthen their identity and sense of community. Urban community newspapers do admirable work toward this mission, but these are often small, one-person operations that could thrive with more support. An urban news project would potentially bridge these two needs.

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### **Appendix A: Hillsider Reflection**

*Note: One of the ways to explore the relationship between the UMD journalism program and local community media was to have a journalism student work for several weeks with Naomi Yaeger-Bischoff at *The Hillsider*, a free community newspaper in Duluth. The student was asked to write a brief reflection on that experience.*

By Dayna Landgrebe

Over the summer I had the opportunity to work as a copy editor for the Hillsider, a free community newspaper published once a month. I spent my evenings reading stories about seniors as tutors for kids, local gardens started from scratch and the growing epidemic of homelessness in our seemingly fresh, clean Duluth. After reading countless stories just like these, it occurred to me that this isn't the type of news stories you'd typically read in the New York Times nor the Star Tribune. Not even in the Duluth News Tribune. These stories were small, insignificant to most, and homegrown from the side streets and back alleyways. With this project in mind I asked myself, 'Is this something the community needs?' My conclusion was obvious right away. Yes. Yes, of course.

When I first met Naomi Yaeger-Bischoff, the editor-in-chief and one of the many hearts and souls of the Hillsider, I thought, 'This woman seriously needs to clone herself a few times'. I listened over hot coffee as she described what the paper did. With an aim to show the economically disadvantaged in a positive light throughout the diverse turns of the Hillside, the East Hillside and Lincoln Park, the Hillsider has endless material to write about and an even more expansive ground to cover.

So again, I considered the need of a news medium like the Hillsider. It's free and widely distributed amongst the Hillside. The stories covered in this publication may not be considered "news" to many other news organizations but, I believe, are imperative to the breadth and growth of a community. They are the types of stories that bring you back again. To your roots, to your hometown or maybe to your front door step. I feel that the niche that the Hillsider fills is one that can't be covered by a daily publication or even a campus paper. The stories go beyond the cleanliness of Duluth to the actual events that happen with primarily lower-income and minority populations. I believe that the seeds have been sown to create a much-needed medium for this type of news; likewise, I think that the results of a project like Duluth Community News could supplement and even enrich a news source like the Hillsider.

The Hillsider could be that urban media source used to reach even more people; giving them the stories that aren't always hard news but fill the need of significant soft news. The resources of an up-to date, cutting edge journalism class could bring that audience and range of stories to a publication like this.

Likewise, I believe the student's stories from the DNC are the type of news to help do this. Some cover important local events that are happening, like the legislative elections for 7B or the Red Plan, but others are looking beyond the ordinary. The lonely man who is always on his doorstep or a little known bookstore. These observations are the ragged pieces of our jigsaw city. This is not just any city with ordinary news and ordinary people, this is our city... our Duluth.