

Report of the Public Journalism Educators Subcommittee Meeting
8/5/04

*Members of the Public Journalism Education Subcommittee present:
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The first meeting of the Public Journalism Education Subcommittee took place at 8:30 a.m. in the Carleton Room at the Sheraton Centre Toronto, Thursday, August 5, 2004. The focus of discussion was:

Movement terms and identifiers
Key challenges for journalism educators interested in public/participatory strategies
Research agenda and proposals for AEJMC panels in 2005-06.

This report will summarize each area of discussion.

What do we call ourselves?

Throughout its 16-year history, we have alternately referred to ourselves as “civic,” “public,” “participatory,” and “community” journalists. As we begin a discussion on *teaching* the practices this movement has evoked, what terms do we use?

While we didn’t come to any definitive conclusions about one term that works best, Venise and Andrea agreed that they have changed how they refer to their own classes. Both began by calling them courses in “civic journalism;” however, both have recently changed to “public journalism” because students are less confused by “public” than they are by “civic.” In addition, “public journalism” seems to evoke a sense that what we do is about, by, and for the public as a whole.

We did discuss for some time the different perspectives on and reaction to the terms among practitioners as well. While the public, and likely students, seem attracted to the connotations of “community journalism,” that term has changed in meaning over time, and practitioners resist it. One reason for this is that traditional journalists often think that if you go to the people, you are not hard-hitting enough. In fact, as Carol and Jack agreed, “community journalists” in some of our experiences are regarded as second-class citizens in the newsroom.

From this discussion, we determined that one of our primary missions as a subcommittee is to talk about what it is to *practice* public journalism.

Mission #1: We need to educate people (colleagues, students, practitioners) about the importance of *sourcing*, which is perhaps the most important issue in the practice of public journalism. Whose voices need to be heard? When? Why? And how? As educators, we need to address how we go about sourcing. Whom do we include? In addition, who does the sourcing? How has the concept of “expert” shifted? Have we altered what we expect in terms of whose voice ought to be articulating the happenings?

Challenges

We didn't fully answer the challenges posed by questions of identity, but we did discuss some fruitful areas for further investigation and discussion.

As educators do we have the power to change the institution (academic or professional)? Probably not. We need instead to work *within* the institution to address key issues. In some ways, advocating participatory practices is a different way of answering the “so what” and “who cares” questions? There are institutional barriers—at newspapers, at educational institutions—and one of our key challenges is to figure out what they are and how we address them.

Advocating public journalism also raises a cultural issue—the expert model is still attractive. We value authority, though we also look for ways to contradict it. Many academics and practitioners ask why we should talk to uninformed people? How does that advance us? But community members crave those voices—why is that? The tension between the two perspectives illustrates that disconnect exists.

Mission #2: as a subcommittee, it is our job to initiate discussion about the disconnect—to acknowledge evidence of it, give it a name, and posit solutions to it. One suggestion we discussed was that in our journalism classes we can emphasize why it's necessary to talk to multiple people/sources. People don't connect all the dots and that's the job of the reporter. It isn't an issue of who is in charge. It's a matter of connecting all the dots and we need to look at how we teach journalism—it's a matter of teaching students how to think critically. Of course critical thinking is not a new concept or goal for the academy. It's the how-to that stymies teachers.

Proposed Panels/Research Agendas

In order to initiate discussion, the subcommittee agreed that we need to set a research agenda and propose panels that focus on the issues we have raised (and more we didn't have time to pursue in our first meeting).

Mission #3: Broaden the conversation and make it participatory. As academics, the logical first step in terms of broadening the discussion is to advocate for the importance of these issues among other educators and students. Thus, we propose beginning with AEJMC, the Civic Journalism Interest Group, websites and journals and offering panels and articles on public journalism and participatory practices. The following are just a few proposed panels and projects we developed:

Possible AEJMC panels for 2005

Giving Voice to the Voiceless: How to Engage Disenfranchised Communities (bring in people who are making it happen and find out how they're doing it) Venise talked about a magazine project she is going to be working on.

Tools-into-practice: How blogging, interactive websites, and other uses of technology move a community toward a more democratic process. (This panel proposes to look at connections rather than points of origin. How do multiple voices connect to create democratic change?)

Public Journalism: Who does it? Who reads it? And who is really being empowered? (This panel proposes to take a closer look at power and the changing definition of “audience.”)

Best Practices in the Public Journalism “Classroom” (This panel will be comprised of teachers who have incorporated participatory journalism into existing courses and teachers who have developed new courses in public journalism and will highlight strategies and outcomes)

The Student Media and Community Journalism: How do students incorporate public journalism practices in campus newspapers and newscasts? (This panel invites advisors of student media to discuss the challenges and successes their campus media have experienced trying to encourage public journalism).

Training the trainers: How do we teach public journalism and prepare ourselves to do so? (This could be a pre-conference workshop led by a variety of people who practice participatory journalism in media outlets as well as in the classroom. It will be designed to examine what tools and training teachers need to launch a participatory journalism project)

Publication Opportunities/Research

In conjunction with the panels, we felt it would be useful to suggest publication opportunities.

“Best Practices” booklet to be distributed at corresponding panel presentation. This would be an easy and relatively inexpensive means by which the conversation could be expanded and ideas shared. The booklet could be compiled by Andrea throughout the coming academic year.

Each of the aforementioned panels could be accompanied by brief articles in CJIG newsletter or on PJNet that raise provocative questions.

We would like to see an issue of a journal dedicated to public journalism issues and would advocate for several articles to reflect on teaching issues.