

Citizens' Journalism: It's their news, not yours!

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Understanding readers' news values

Critiquing news media and holding them accountable and responsible

Part One: A keystone story

It was a cool Saturday morning with a bit of an overcast. Driving along Washington State Route 104 east toward the longest floating bridge in the world — over tidal water — we joined a slow moving line of traffic. The speed limit here is 60; we were barely crawling.

Ah, the bridge must be open for submarine traffic. The Navy's Bangor Submarine Base is about 12 miles south of the bridge in the safe haven of Hood Canal, a fjord that separates Washington's Kitsap and Olympic peninsulas.

We continue to wonder why the Navy would locate such a base with such restricted access to open water; the bridge floats across the mouth of the canal north of the base: one way in, one way out, and the submarines require a surface opening to avoid the huge cables anchoring the bridge.

But the delay was not caused by the usual bridge interruption. Finally we, along with all the other vehicles in line on this two-lane highway, were directed to the side and into a cone-lined chute. Around us were uniformed officers, with police dogs and large agency SUVs nearby, motioning us forward and to open our window. An individual bedecked in assault gear, his right hand resting lightly on a holstered pistol, examined us carefully and without asking any question, waved us through. We "looked" OK.

We were the "Victims" of a Border Patrol roadblock and checkpoint. A training exercise, it turns out, though the "exercise" was far from "victimless." Off to one side of our line were several civilian vehicles with occupants that "looked like" part of the Peninsula's Spanish-American population, possibly Mexican immigrants who in growing numbers are finding a home on our somewhat isolated northwest Washington Olympic Peninsula.

The Border Patrol has earned the wrath — and to a certain degree, praise — for its growing presence on this Peninsula which has one formal seaport of entry at Port Angeles, and two airports claiming "international" status where small planes, usually private, come into the U.S.,

mostly for lunch and conversation at airport cafes, though some continue on to other destinations after clearing customs.

However, the formal points-of-entry aren't the problem areas. Ten years ago a Customs Service agent at Port Angeles apprehended a man who ran from his rental car at that port of entry when bomb-making materials were found in his car trunk. It was later determined he was heading for Los Angeles and a planned attack on LAX.

But he was caught before the act. And the officer commended for his capture later became a Republican commissioner in Clallam County where Port Angeles is the "capital."

Hundreds of miles of open coastline are the transparent borders for anyone intent on invading Washington State. The Coast Guard finds those invaders are mostly drug smugglers hauling BC Bud (a potent form of marijuana) or cocaine from the mid-Americas.

Federal agencies have yet to find any terrorists . . . with that one exception in 1999. And at that time the Border Patrol had a token staff at Port Angeles backed by a much larger squad of Customs Service agents.

This introduction sets the stage for our discussion about Journalism Literacy, or Citizens' Journalism. The titles aren't fully descriptive, but the content for our course related to these subjects is the real focus: Community Journalism credibility, accountability . . . and "Who Cares?"

In the past two years, the Border Patrol, usually found at and around the major highway border crossings along the northern rim of Washington State, has expanded both its force and its mission. Agents now are found dozens of miles south of that border, cruising in their green-and-white-marked SUVs and sedans, alone and in packs, searching for illegal aliens or invasive terrorists. These numbers of patrol officers have captured a few drug smugglers, and scores of illegal aliens, none of whom are bent on creating mayhem or destroying our democratic society. They have also interrupted citizens' journeys on highways and byways where only an occasional opening of a floating bridge delayed past trips to shopping malls and big cities east of Puget Sound.

Part Two: The news media's role

The Port Townsend and Jefferson County Leader created a series of enterprise stories detailing the growing presence of the Border Patrol in its area. And showing a measure of editorial leadership, it organized a community forum in collaboration with other citizens' interest groups to explain and inform its community about the Border Patrol's expansive growth and aggressive presence. The forum panel included high echelon Border Patrol officers, local law enforcement leaders (Washington State Patrol, Jefferson County Sheriff, Port Townsend Police Chief) and a representative of the regional American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Moderator was Leader Publisher Scott Wilson.

Those attending had their own conceptions about this new role for the Border Patrol. And some brought misconceptions. While some opposed an increased presence of the Border Patrol on the Olympic Peninsula, many support, even strongly support, the patrol's efforts in its expanded mission.

And the forum took place while President George W. Bush, whose administration gave the country a more rigid position on border security, was in office. Congressional representatives from Washington State were among the majority advocating a more expansive Border Patrol.

While the forum followed an agenda inside the meeting location, outside a group demonstrating support for the Border Patrol gathered with signs and slogans.

Among attendees inside were several citizens who later joined our Citizens' Journalism class at the Peninsula College Port Townsend campus. During discussion about the role and responsibilities of the news media in providing balanced coverage of issues, people and events within our community, the Border Patrol forum became a focus: How could the Leader publisher moderate a forum, offer what some believed to be biased remarks, then support a staff-written news account about the forum and write an editorial decrying and condemning the Border Patrol's activities in and around the Olympic Peninsula?

A challenge on point!

So we talked about it. First, the publisher was acting as a moderator for a forum on an issue of public interest, even concern. In that role he moved the conversation along encapsulating

participant responses as he moved from speaker to speaker. He posed questions to panelists. We found little to argue about for that role.

The news story was a challenging matter for our students. Should he have overseen the coverage? We thought not, and our discussion took us to the roles of an independent staff reporter and the newspaper editor. The Leader had the luxury of being independent of the publisher. But many of our community newspapers have limited news staffs where the role of a publisher-editor-reporter-ad rep often melds into one. Reviewing the story, it seemed to withstand the challenge of objectivity on its own, but the fact the writer was employed by the forum moderator who had established his position via remarks and leading questions left citizen-critics unconvinced the news report was without bias. Substantiating their criticism was the apparent absence of any mention of the demonstration in support of the Border Patrol. To these critics, the local news media failed to match its claimed standards.

So we brought in The Leader publisher to face his critics. It was an inspiring exchange, one where both “sides” left with a great deal more respect for each other’s perspectives. The publisher agreed a more careful approach is needed to prevent “perception” becoming “reality.” And the critics agreed that a reporter, even a publisher, sometimes couldn’t cover all the details of a meeting, such as the peripheral demonstration, when being a participant in the event he or she is covering.

Our “students” also reaffirmed their roles and responsibilities in the exercise of a free press. Rather than rail on the incomplete, inaccurate or biased news accounts, as they see them, they must become pro-active in calling to account any miscarriage of their news media’s responsibilities. Standards and ethics should be critically evaluated by all news media, and the public should be involved with understanding and measuring the success or failure in meeting these news values. Better yet, the community press must realize that its readers, listeners, viewers have just as great a stake in the reporting process as the professional journalists providing their news accounts.

Understanding the news gathering process is critical to an engaged and informed readership. Community news media must not take readers for granted. Discussing and evaluating journalism standards without understanding readers’ standards and expectations, widens the schism between the two. Engage your citizens and improve your readership!

Part Three: Creating a Citizens' Journalism forum

Reviewing and examining the emerging Journalism Literacy programs from coast to coast suggests there is growing interest in reconnecting our readers-viewers-listeners to credible and responsible news media. But these programs, in the most part, are focused on an academic classroom. The major exception discussed in the April 2009 Publishers' Auxiliary focuses on the efforts of the Standard-Times of New Bedford, Mass., and its Journalism School. Its content brings readers into the mix of news reporting and writing. The school attempts to educate participants on the principles and purpose of journalism. The PubAux account describes S-T's program as getting "more eyes and ears on the ground," according to former S-T editor Ken Hartnett. He directs the school begun nine years ago from an S-T-sponsored community forum. It evolved from their becoming a focal element for groups and communities under-represented in the S-T news pages.

We launched a similar effort on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State in the Spring Quarter 2008 through Peninsula College where I was teaching Journalism and advising the student newspaper. Our class drew in not those less represented in the community news media, but rather those interested in accuracy and accountability for a more responsive and responsible press. We'll describe that effort, its purpose, process and outcome later. For now we should look at where Journalism Literacy, under whatever title, is heading.

Coincidental to the Standard-Times school is the emergence of a Citizens Journalism and Journalism Literacy groundswell from academicians to professionals. State University of New York at Stony Brook on Long Island has created the newest School of Journalism in the United States from scratch. And within that school is the first Center for Journalism Literacy, a mere two years old. This year, another program focused on the values, ethics, responsibilities and accountability of the news media has been launched, bring together professional Journalists who volunteer to enter K-12 classrooms to put a face to the Journalistic ethic and its standards. Participating journalists no longer are faces, names or voices coming from a distance. They are moving into the trenches of education to provide students and educators with a new, fresh approach to news appreciation. From the reporting and writing and the editing and presentation, they are creating a dialogue with those who are and should be the news media's persistent critics: their consumers. But students and young adults are the most distant consumers of the Journalistic

ethic. Blogs, social networks, peer interaction are stronger lures to these potential news constituencies than are the traditional news media.

These new programs are coming from a distance. The national news media may spark a renewed interest in journalism consumption, but our community press is the grassroots entity that'll make such programs meaningful and successful. And these national programs target students, not the general consumership of our traditional media today.

My college students, in my classrooms, supposedly focusing on journalism as a social science, have little interest or inclination to following the traditional journalism path. They want to learn how to use reporting and writing skills to connect to their special-interest networks. They are narrow minded, narrowly focused. Our job has been to open their eyes and minds to the broader mission and purpose: Journalism as the cornerstone of a magnetic and dynamic democracy. Their response: So what? Who cares? They generally want to interact with each other about their immediate situations rather than engage in any analytical dialogue about the national budget, the Iraq war or President Obama's trip to the Middle East and Europe. They have little, if any, interest in the actions of their city council, or the state legislature's intent to raise tuition and cut academic programs. We try to open their "narrow" minds to the broader issues affecting them. We engage them in evaluating cause and effect, process and outcome. And most of them discover not only the world around them and beyond, but the value of having access to or creating — through curiosity and skepticism — carefully crafted stories with accountable and reliable sourcing that provide unique stories to a much broader constituency than their favorite social network. The information, the news, those stories do affect the lives of their readers; those stories do have meaning; those stories do respond to their "So What?" and "Who Cares" attitudes.

And that's why we launched what we call our Citizens' Journalism project. Not to get citizens' eyes and ears on the ground to provide a more inclusive package for our news products, but to get those consumers more engaged, more critically involved with their news resources. It becomes their responsibility to hold the community (and regional and national) news media accountable.

Where SUNY at Stony Brook targets 10,000 students with its Journalism Literacy classes, we're engaging our local readers a dozen at a time. At \$40 per student (the registration fee), our

progress is slow. But as community newspapers engage this process as sponsors and advocates, hundreds and thousands of readers will respond. It should be free to them. You're their hometown news media. You're responsible for their attitudes about your products. It's up to you to expand your own editorial focus: engage your readers in dialogue; talk with them, not to them; seek out their attitudes and biases so they can understand yours. Restore meaning to your content, not for the professional awards you may garner, but to retain the loyalty of those you profess to serve. Remember, the community news you provide isn't yours, it's theirs. Readers subscribe to their newspaper, not your newspaper. And they'll respond to your Citizens' Journalism classes with a renewed vigor . . . and paid subscriptions that should be renewed over their lifetime.

So engage your constituents. Get into the school classrooms to discuss and evaluate the purpose of journalism. Emphasize professional Journalism standards and ethics for accountability and responsibility. And provide the reasons and rationale for free and independent journalism.

Part Four: Process leads to outcome

So much for the mission and analysis. How do you make this Journalism Literacy, this Citizens' Journalism program work?

Start with a public forum discussing and debating a prominent community issue. Organize the program to emphasize the cause and effect, not the personalities of those supporting or opposing the issue.

Provide in-depth preview and overview articles before the forum.

Cover the forum, not just the "special" panelists, but also those from the audience who choose to speak or ask questions. Follow up immediately after the program with attendees to add depth and context to their concerns and observations.

Publish the forum accounts, and use the editorial page to focus on a point-counterpoint dialogue featuring either forum panelists, or other sources able to focus on the pro and con of the issue, or at least the variable positions you see emerging: maybe two who support an issue, but have differing perspectives on how it affects your community.

Provide a thoughtful editorial analysis of the forum topic. Offer a conclusion, and a process to achieve that goal.

You're not done.

Now, invite your readers to gather to review your coverage, to analyze your editorial positions, to evaluate the outcome related to journalism standards and ethics.

Create, then, a schedule of community meetings where you and the news staff engage in a community dialogue on the values, ethics, responsibilities of journalists, and invite your readers to measure your coverage against those standards.

Create the tools, the handouts, so participants have a record of these educational forums. Some examples for such handouts appear in the addenda.

Have students keep a log, a diary, of their news consumption. What specific stories did they view on television news? What specific stories did they listen to on radio news? What specific stories did they read in the newspapers? Include in the log the time/date of audio and visual news, online news, the newspaper stories. Have them measure the time they spent listening, viewing, reading. Have them record the news Web sites they viewed and collect any responses they made to such news sites. Evaluate with them the logged stories and compare coverage of the same story across the media: TV report on this subject was 45 seconds; newspaper account was 25 inches, etc. Compare content and context. Focus especially on the content of your publication to show contrast of depth, direct importance to reader, identifiable sources within your community. Help them evaluate the regional and national news by suggesting they compare stories and sources in the contrasting media. Have them use the Internet to explore further the details and sources. Show them how to get answers to questions that relate to regional and national stories. Then guide them on how to respond and reflect on your news accounts. You want them curious, but less skeptical of professional news resources, especially yours.

Use PowerPoint and video to examine in detail various journalistic points to ponder: Movies such as "Shattered Glass"(depicting the journalistic fraud of Stephen Glass at the "New Republic" magazine) and "All The President's Men" focusing on investigative reporting and

Watergate. Cite the use of anonymous or protected sources in news coverage: is it ethical; is it reliable; is it honest?

Use the PBS Frontline video “News Wars” to highlight where news media have been and where they are heading. Most important here is to respond to what is presented. The national news media have sometimes failed their mission, but do you have the courage and professional journalistic fortitude to admit and describe your news coverage failures? Why didn’t you cover the arrest of your former school superintendent for soliciting the services of a prostitute when he was visiting a distant city? He still lives in your community and has served as director of prominent public agencies after retiring from the school district post. Are you willing to discuss in detail the libel suit filed against your paper, what led to the suit and how you reacted? On the question of the ex-school superintendent’s act, invite him to be part of a panel that discusses the perceptions and realities of covering the lives of public officials. Regarding the libel suit, bring in the plaintiff and the attorneys to examine not just the reporting error, but the process that led to such an outcome.

These may be dramatic examples of community mea culpa, but there are others that could lead to the same sort of dialogue:

A. Contentious zoning and land use issues in your city and county — invite the city or county executive, an elected officer such as the mayor or chairman of the board of county commissioners, the chairman of the planning commission, the staff planner, the land owners who may be seeking a zoning privilege or exemption that is the center of a contentious public process. Review and discuss your news medium’s sourcing, and presentation style of related stories. Discuss related editorials and their purpose. Explain the difference between opinion in editorials and objectivity (fairness and balance) of news accounts. Help readers/consumers understand the differences related to your journalistic mission.

B. Local school financing issues, such as special tax levies, are endemic to our communities so invite the school board chairman, the chief executive, and a representative of opponents and supporters of the financing issue to an open forum. Discuss the far-ranging effects of public financing on your community, not just the “emotional” effect. Help your reading constituency understand such issues, but help them formulate a reaction that earns attention and response from those responsible and

accountable for the school's fiscal program. What we're seeking is an engagement of readers face-to-face beyond our print products.

Continue to promote reader reaction to your news coverage. Make letters to your editor for publication an easy process, not one steeped with limitations. Allow reader participation via the Internet and email. Just remember: letter writers must be responsible and accountable, so their names should be published.

For reader forums, a mini-course syllabus is another addendum. It is an example, one we have used in our community, for a 10-hour class (five two-hour sessions) that begins with an overview of journalism, its standards, ethics and principles, then uses the tools and community resources to integrate those standards at our publications. Additionally, we offer the syllabus for the Journalism Literacy class at State University of New York Stony Brook. Understand, this latter class outline is focused toward undergraduate students, regardless of major. The effort being crafted by The News Literacy Project is similar, but is designed for pre-college educational institutions such as grade, middle and high schools where a single class visit by a professional journalist may be the limit of the program. It also plans to offer curriculum packages for K-12 courses to complement such subjects as Civics, Social Studies, History, Journalism, Language Arts and related liberal arts classes.

The Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University conducted its first News Literacy conference March 11-13, 2009, billing it as "Setting A National Agenda" for the program.

For your forums and "classes," select a convenient public site such as the community library, a school classroom or auditorium, a community center, a conference room at your newspaper (if big enough), or a conference room at a local restaurant or hotel . . . and spring for lunch.

Create a staff team to present programs at your local service clubs. Perform a give-and-take session of journalism credibility focusing on a specific issue at these programs and encourage challenging questions and comments. Go beyond the "lecture" or "speech."

Meet your readers at local coffee shops, at church socials, at grange halls to talk about the journalistic process. Then listen to their concerns, their questions. Give honest and precise answers. If you make reporting mistakes, admit them.

Part of your ongoing Journalism Literacy program should be presentations to elementary, middle and high school students. And include the local college or university in the mix if you have one. Engage students in the English Department, the History Department, the Law School, the Social Sciences Department, and the Science Department. Accuracy and accountability are high standards for these unrelated disciplines just as they should be for the Journalism Department of institutions of higher education.

Your ability to engage your readers is not one person's responsibility. It is a "Whole Newspaper Program." Have reporters and editors call sources used in news accounts to see if the messages are accurate and in context. Have staff randomly call readers/subscribers to get their views and reactions on your news stories. Ask them what information is missing that would make the stories more useful. And ask readers for story ideas. Talk with them, not to them, and listen!

Should you use this program of journalism literacy, journalism accountability and responsibility, to help create "citizen journalists?" Make that a separate adventure. A class on reporting and writing for your audience and community could help create broader coverage, but it comes with the additional burden of measuring citizens' news contributions against professional journalism standards. Anything less just dissipates your credibility.

A list of various on-line resources accompanies this article; it is not intended to be the definitive list, but a launch-point for your list.

Follow up regularly with your readers to see if the message they get from your news accounts is what you expected: is their perception of the news account the reality? Continually self-evaluate: are your stories fair, balanced, accurate; do they use reliable, accountable sourcing; is the writing clear, concise; are quotes in context; do reporters provide sufficient background in follow-up stories? Do you periodically evaluate reporters' and editors' biases? Do you adjust staff coverage to avoid conflicts of interest?

And remind yourself that your credibility as a professional journalist is at stake in every story you print!

Recommended additional resources:

News Wars: PBS Frontline documentary with teaching guide (DVD)

Correcting News Mistakes: The Importance of Being Journalism Watchdogs

A very good curriculum guide produced by The Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University, with PowerPoint disc

Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method. Excellent text for this type of program by Carole Rich

Subscriptions to local, regional and national newspapers

Various Web sites: news organizations, blogs, commentators — see Online Information Document

Appendices:

- Syllabus: Citizens' Journalism — course outline for Peninsula College and Port Townsend and Jefferson County Leader
- Syllabus: News Literacy — University of New York Stony Brook, Center for News Literacy; required of all freshmen, all disciplines.
- Syllabus: Journalism 101 — Standard-Times, New Bedford, Mass.
- Web sites of Special Interest — Includes variety of commentators, bloggers, professional news organizations, special interest groups (localize to fit your area)
- Contact Information — local, regional contacts for news sourcing, local government (localize to fit your area)
- Society of Professional Journalists Ethics Code
- Journalism Literacy: an introduction to your program as a news release
- Evaluating Your News Sources: example of students' news log or diary
- Sample introductory remarks for the class
- Sample handout: The Myth of Objectivity, by Jay Davis. Excellent piece on dealing with objectivity versus subjectivity.
- Principles of Journalism: produced by The Committee of Concerned Journalists, this is a concise encapsulation of the principles we in the profession attempt to practice.