

Los Rostros del Caño: An Exploration In Immersion Journalism from University

The communities surrounding Caño Martín Peña, located in Santurce, a suburb of San Juan, Puerto Rico, are recognized as a historical space that has typically been socially discriminated, politically abandoned and environmentally unattended. With more than 26 thousand inhabitants, the eight communities that form the Caño Martín Peña confront a social, political and environmental struggle of almost two decades. The culture of the community was transformed into self-government and the management that community leaders carry out to strengthen their neighborhood has been recognized internationally.

With this in mind, I introduced my students to an immersive journalism experience in the eight communities surrounding Caño Martín Peña. To achieve this effort, I established CMU 391 (Immersion Journalism) as an elective course for journalism students. A group of 13 students was part of the experience of six months of coverage in the community.

To fulfill the purpose of journalism to be the voice of the people, the university linked the course to the national newspaper of Puerto Rico, El Nuevo Día. Three stories produced by the three groups of students were published in this newspaper. In the same way, the students created three podcasts that were published on the university's radio station, Radio Activa. Finally, they produced a series of vlogs that were published on the YouTube channel of the university.

The course worked the study of the phases of the immersion journalist entering into a community to witness facts and behaviors in the first person. The initial goal was to encourage the development of the ability to distinguish and search for news or news angle of a story and writing, text editing, audio, and videos.

In the same way, the search for context and news background about the community or the place to be investigated is strengthened. The students were based on planning, preparation, and editing of the developed journalistic material: text, audio, and video.

Immersion journalism is one of the most important branches of journalism. Every student who aspires to develop a career in the field of journalism must acquire knowledge in the techniques of research, contextualization, research, and selection of news, development of audiovisual content and text.

In the classroom, the students received orientation about covering a vulnerable community, searching for sources, making videos and podcasts, and doing environmental journalism. Also, at the beginning of the semester, the students did an investigation based on the history of the communities to understand the complaints of its members. They received one on one interaction with the professor during the semester to know how the status of the journalistic work was.

At the end of the course, and as part of the Month of Communications in the university, the students came back to the community to present how challenging and inspirational was this opportunity of reporting hands-on. In this course, the students learned about the important responsibility that the journalism represents in history, the decision making and the future of the communities.

During this event, the students reacted to the opportunity of doing immersion journalism. They were impressed by knowing a historical community and its social battles, exposing the issues of the community members, and exploring different ways of reporting thru multimedia. Most of the students are graduation candidates and taking this course they realized social journalism is their goal as professionals. Without any doubt, this experience made them sure one thing that Gabriel García Márquez said on one occasion: "The journalism is the best job in the world."