

## Committing Acts of Journalism: Engaging Non-Majors in Community Journalism Writing & Reporting

Americans are constantly bombarded with media messages across multiple platforms. In the Digital Age, social media have amplified this information barrage, and users are not often able to distinguish informative and true messages from those containing promotion, persuasion, misinformation, and outright lies. As such, I sought to expand my class offerings beyond my journalism majors who are trained to produce accurate, ethical news and reach students who had little exposure to journalistic training. To help them understand the real-life impacts of journalism work, I chose the frame of community journalism so they would engage with members of our small town, develop a true understanding of the issues affecting them, and produce news serving that audience.

I piloted this effort as a new class in our Honors College, titled “Engaging the Community Through Journalism.” Throughout the semester, students participated in an assignment aimed at achieving four objectives: researching community journalism and its impact, engaging the local community, thinking critically about ways to meet the community’s needs, and demonstrating their understanding by committing acts of journalism. Students accomplished these goals in four steps:

### 1. Research Paper

To begin, students needed to examine ways in which newsrooms have engaged with community members. Students used the text *Engaged Journalism*, by Jake Batsell, as well as other sources from journals and trade publications, to examine how newsrooms have practiced community journalism tactics in the past. They turned their findings into a white paper directed at newsroom managers, explaining how newsrooms can engage with community members, why this is important, and what some of the results of these efforts have been. Students then made recommendations to the class indicating what strategies we should use for our project.

### 2. Engaging Residents

We used a method developed by the journalism consulting company Hearken, which trains reporters to engage with the community by asking residents what questions they have about their area and involving those question-askers during their search for answers.<sup>1</sup> Students split into small teams, selected locations throughout the community, and set up tables for gathering residents’ questions. Teams had to research their locations and write a letter of intent to city and business leaders asking permission to solicit questions from passersby. The teams spoke with a minimum of 25 residents, gathering questions and contact information from each person.

### 3. Storytelling Product

Students selected a question to report from the list they compiled. They followed up with question-askers, seeking more details about the question and why they wanted it reported. As Hearken reporters do, students kept question-askers informed throughout the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Hearken (n.d.). Overview. Accessed at: <https://www.wearehearken.com/>

Students produced news articles investigating their questions, using community leaders, experts, and average citizens as sources. In their stories, students had to go beyond simply answering a question. They needed to explore the context, history, and other issues impacting their investigation.

#### **4. Distribution**

A news product only makes an impact when people see/hear it. The last step of the project was for students to determine how they would package their stories and distribute them to the community. Students chose to create both a website and printed tabloid-style publications. They sent the website address to question-askers, city leaders, and sources and asked them to share it with others. They contacted local media and offered their stories for publication. They also took printed copies of the publication to the locations where they solicited questions and distributed them to passersby. Each team also made videos assessing the project, evaluating its strengths and weaknesses and making recommendations for future changes. Students, faculty, and staff were invited to the video screenings.

Students learned about the community and how journalists work through this assignment. They developed an understanding of media from two perspectives, learning what audiences want from their news media and how journalists work to fulfill those needs. Although students received some training in traditional journalistic practices, including AP style, story formatting, and interviewing techniques, I largely let them structure stories in ways they thought would appeal to readers. Here are some examples of questions students pursued and their findings:

- One resident asked whether there was any truth to an old rumor about a locally well-known standpipe. Legend has it, couples with unwanted babies would discard them into the top of the pipe in the late 1800s. The student investigated and found the story to be untrue. He researched how the story got started, and he discovered, like many myths, the story circulated to keep children away from the dangerous pipe and equipment surrounding it.
- Another resident asked why the sidewalks were so unkempt in her neighborhood. After talking with various city officials and neighborhood residents, the student learned and shared the process the city uses to determine what sidewalks get repaired and when. She also discovered there is an online system for filing maintenance requests, which the residents she spoke with did not know about. The sidewalk in question is scheduled for maintenance in a couple of years, but city leaders also said routine maintenance is the responsibility of the homeowners, not the city.
- Another question-asker wondered why there are not more/better forms of public transportation in town. The student rode around on the town's trolley and bus system and discovered they were seldom-used. She was also able to verify some of the residents' issues with the transportation. She brought these concerns to city transportation officials, who advised her they know of the issues and are working to

correct them. They also acknowledged a lack of marketing is partially to blame for residents not knowing about the transportation options in town.

Students enjoyed the experience and developed both a deeper connection to the community and a better understanding of how journalism works within our society. Upon reflecting on the class project in their video assessments, students remarked they were proud of the work they produced, and they developed a deeper appreciation for the work journalists do. The community responded positively to the stories students produced, expressing gratitude and satisfaction in their closing interviews.