

FINAL REPORT:

Applying principles to practice: Developing civic journalism on a university based community radio station

Deborah Wilson, School of Journalism, University of Lincoln

Introduction:

Both civic journalism and community radio are relatively new concepts in the UK: Civic Journalism, also known as Public Journalism, is often confused with Citizen Journalism and is an American term which has not yet found much foothold in the UK. "Civic journalism is an effort to reach out to the public more aggressively in the reporting process, to listen to how citizens frame their problems and what citizens see as solutions to those problems.... and then to use that information to enrich news stories."¹ An interesting overview of the perspectives of civic/public/community journalism is presented by Steele at Poynter Online.²

Community radio is, in this country, a very recent addition to the media environment with the first station being launched in November 2005. They are a: "... not-for-profit radio service, designed to operate on a small scale and to deliver social gain to one or more communities."³ This new 'Third Tier' of radio, was developed to serve a distinct purpose, separate from the main aims and objectives of existing mainstream radio; to provide community benefit or social gain. Supporters of community radio had lobbied for years, stressing the value of giving 'a voice to the voiceless', but as the country had considered itself already well served, with both BBC and commercial local radio stations serving smaller TSAs, the Government took some persuading of the need for community radio. However, the legislation needed was finally passed in 2004 and Lincoln was one of the first universities to succeed in gaining a new full-time licence for a community radio station (as opposed to a student radio station) and Siren FM was launched on the Brayford Pool campus in August 2007.⁴

This project has been looking into the viability and benefits of applying the principles of civic journalism to the medium of radio, using Siren FM and the Lincoln School of Journalism's broadcast news students as a case study. The project aimed to evaluate how far applying the basic principles of civic journalism offers that voice to the communities served by a small scale not-for-profit radio station and at the same time benefits journalism education by enhancing the students' development of essential journalistic skills and practices.

Background:

Mainstream journalism education in the university sector follows a consensus approach as the basis for the curriculum; reporting (in some or all media), the law as it pertains to journalists, the production of artefacts and the study of the environment in which the journalist must operate. This is usually accompanied by ethics, sometimes also by human rights, the reporting of social and cultural diversity, the history of journalism and perhaps a form of international perspective. Additionally, some universities apply for accreditation and this can include the NCTJ (the National Council for the Training of Journalists), the PTC (the Periodical Training Council) and the BJTC (the Broadcast Journalism Training Council). The latter body currently accredits 15 undergraduate programmes of the 165 single subject courses in Journalism available in the HE sector.⁵ The criteria are stringent, but even when Schools of Journalism such as the one at the University of Lincoln have successfully met these criteria, news editors say that students are still lacking the grounding in basic skills they need to be effective journalists. Indeed, Peter Karstel at the University of Windesheim in the Netherlands refers to the "growing distance between the requirements for the industry and the provided skills and knowledge by the Schools of Journalism", arguing that the practices of civic journalism addressed that gap.⁶

Karstel has written of the use of civic journalism in the classroom which, he says, "...has elements which are highly suitable for educational purposes"⁷. Windesheim has an innovative programme; "Work in your Neighbourhood" where they have put community journalism into practice. Their Journalism students

produce a web-based news site for the community in which they work and now have two online newsrooms in their town of Zwolle. The tutors have found that this 'shop floor' news production environment enhances techniques and skills, particularly in newsgathering and treatment, far better than traditional in-course news days can facilitate and at the same time challenges the students' understanding of news values and their application.

This project aimed to take this work at Windesheim and adapt it to radio but, rather than replicate the 'Work in your Neighbourhood' project and establish a newsroom or newsrooms in the community, the aim was to build on the links between the LSJ and Siren FM to forge stronger, independent, community based journalism which offered a real alternative or addition to the mainstream news available to the people of Lincoln and to establish a group of community journalists (CJs) comprising Lincoln's broadcast journalism students and members of the communities served by Siren FM working together.

The main objectives of the project were as follows:

1. Develop a programme of curriculum in the teaching of community radio journalism which could then be adapted to suit any media.
2. Provide the basis for the development and teaching of community broadcast journalism within the growing third tier of radio which benefits both students and the communities those media serve.
3. Apply the concepts of civic journalism to the medium of radio and devise strategies for the teaching of community radio journalism.
4. Involve members of the communities that are served by the output of the station in their own news production, learning and working together with University students.

Realising the objectives:

Prior to this project, students studying Level 2 Radio Production on the BA (Hons) Journalism have provided a small scale news output for Siren FM, as part of their assessment tasks, but this tended to follow a formulaic approach to local news provision along conservative mainstream lines. The expected professional standards cannot be abandoned and student work must still satisfy accreditation criteria, but the students were enabled, by this project, to expand on their news output by sourcing and reporting on community-based stories. This was facilitated by the introduction of 'non-computer news days' where the students are deprived of their computer terminals and required instead to make 'analogue' connections with the communities in the greater Lincoln area and source stories using fundamental journalistic principles, i.e. they have to use a telephone rather than the internet, get out of the newsroom and make contacts, talk to people, listen to people and use their eyes and ears. Their brief is to find at least 3 stories in Lincoln which are related to community groups or have community impact. There are more than 200 community groups in the greater Lincoln area, which means the students have access to many potential stories. They are able to switch their computers on only when they have returned to the newsroom with quality audio. The resulting news stories were original, interesting and more directly relevant to the Siren FM's TSA than the standard mainstream fare so far delivered and this, it would be argued by editors, forms the bedrock of good basic journalism. If practiced regularly, it could reduce the momentum of the sausage-factory approach to news production, particularly the re-versioning of press releases coming from a range of public relations bodies.

The Level 2 Radio News students are also required to fulfil an obligation of at least 5 news shifts on Siren FM – during which time they worked alongside members of the community, producing and presenting the daily 'drivetime' news bulletins.

The Level 3 Radio News students are expected to work in a similar way but at a higher level by researching, producing and presenting their own weekly community based news and current affairs programme live on Siren FM. Again, employing the principles of civic journalism, the students are expected to unearth stories which have not been covered by the local mainstream news providers and are relevant to Siren's target audience. The aim for the next academic year is to have members of the community work together with the students on this programme on a weekly basis.

These 2 curriculum developments earned the Lincoln School of Journalism the BJTC's award for Innovation in Broadcast Journalism Teaching, 2008. More importantly, for the aims of this project, was what the students themselves learned in engaging with the development of a form of journalism which features a different emphasis on agenda setting. Their response to this can be seen in the student feedback section below.

Over the year, the project holder has developed and validated a new programme; a Foundation Degree in Community Journalism and has co-authored a Masters programme in Community Radio, both of which will employ techniques learned through this project and will start this coming academic year.

An organic methodology:

The main aspects of the methodological approach to this project had to be radically adjusted as the year progressed, initial plans to train the community journalist, whether student or not, had to be revised in many respects.

In the main, the intended formal approach proved too difficult to implement. Volunteers from the community had limited time available and coordinating their individual schedules to accommodate a training timetable proved impossible for the lead trainer. A more individual one-to-one training, whilst potentially more time consuming, was delivered latterly. This had the added advantage of addressing the other main challenge; that of the confidence levels of the non-student volunteers. Whilst their willingness to engage in the process was never in question, the lead trainer found they lacked the necessary confidence to both relate to students with ease and take their production work to the level we were aiming for as quickly as we would like. The only effective way of moving the work involving community volunteers forward was to offer a boutique individualized service. The technical training was then taught to the community volunteers as essentially envisaged; newsgathering, interviewing, recording, editing and production, albeit adapted to the individual volunteer's confidence level. Whilst most of the output was at the less ambitious end of the spectrum, with interviews and traditional correspondent two-ways in the studio dominating rather than the production of audio packages (short features including a number of sound elements), progress was made by the community journalists. Some of their work can be heard here: www.davebussey.co.uk/cjs and more will be made available in the autumn via Siren FM's new website when it is redeveloped.

There is no doubt that any community based journalism enhances Siren FM's social gain content; any fair, accurate and responsible local journalism is a huge benefit to the station. As far as journalism education is concerned, the key aspect as to whether the student journalists' skills and techniques have been enhanced could be documented by student feedback; have they advanced in their understanding of any aspects of journalism theory, for example news values, the consideration of audience, etc?

Student feedback:

A small scale survey was completed by a proportion of the students who have been involved in the project this academic year. The questionnaire was designed to discover how far the students had grasped the principles of civic journalism by the end of the year and how they felt operating as a community journalist had impacted on their own journalism practice.

The responses in the first section did show, in the main, a good understanding of civic journalism as it is being developed at Lincoln. Although one response shows that the tag 'community journalism' was still being confused with the 'citizen journalist': "An example of the rise of community journalism would be a reliance on 'people on the ground' sending in their mobile phone pictures during the 7/7 bombings."

However, others showed a more informed perspective:

"Journalism completed with local resources. News which arises from talking to locals and exploring what stories can surface locally rather than trawling the internet for stories with a lack of a local angle and cultural proximity."

A second respondent demonstrated an awareness of the opportunity to offer a 'voice to the voiceless:

"Community journalism not only provides stories and local interest pieces from your local area but also allows the voice of members of the community into your reportage. This could include opinions on the latest council budgets to an entire street raising money for charity."

A third respondent noted the engagement with the audience: "Working on behalf of the community to bring them issues and news which you think will be important and relevant to them as opposed to national, broad news."

Responses to the question dealing with the differences between a mainstream and a community journalist were interesting:

"More of a flexibility with deadlines, working on building relationships with local leaders in order to produce original content rather than a reliance on press releases. And a lot more independent work."

"Mainstream journalists prefer a more 'catchy' hook as it were to their stories, journalists prefer their story to hit hard and grab attention via more dramatic means whereas community journalism has the aspect of it being local sourced and directly connected to an audience without needing such a dramatic hook."

However, one respondent seemed to be tempted to see community journalism as an opportunity to take an 'easier' route towards accessing news sources:

"The journalist builds contacts locally that will be happy to provide interviews and local insight whereas national mainstream contacts would not always be available."

In the second section, the students were also asked how they thought their journalistic skills and techniques may have benefitted from working as a community journalist with Siren FM.

"An understanding that anyone can be a contact, they don't have to be in an important position."

"Contacts within the community lead to new stories and more contact in turn it is always fantastic to have a domino effect of contacts and stories"

"I have completely changed the way I find stories since working on Siren FM, as we worked on the 5-6 show we had to find stories that hadn't been reported on all day and create different angles on them for the listeners. I have learnt simply to speak to people you may not think of straight away as they may have a different view or angle on the story which can make it much more interesting."

"Becoming independent from the internet."

"The stories we chose for the show were ones that would affect the audience and I learnt to think of the stories in relation to the people who would be listening to them rather than what was the big story of that day."

"I will not essentially assume that the more 'well known' story is a better one. My knowledge of what the listener wants will have improved."

"You must look at the bigger picture when selecting news stories, find out what is going to interest and affect your audience."

Conclusions and recommendations:

The student feedback was very promising, and in many respects this best demonstrated the project has borne fruit in the education of student journalists. It would seem the students are starting, through the

practice of community journalism, by which here is meant the application of the principles of civic journalism to community radio, to understand how to work effectively as community journalists whilst still satisfying the professional expectations articulated by the BJTC. Their responses to the questionnaire show that the majority of the students can demonstrate a good understanding of the concept of community journalism and in so doing are discovering for themselves a 'best practice' approach to basic journalism techniques which are increasingly overlooked in the mainstream sector. This will hopefully set the grounding for reflective practice in future journalistic endeavour.

The integration of the community volunteers was the main challenge in this project, but achievements were made here also with small but committed numbers of volunteers beginning to engage with the students in the creation of joint community based journalistic artefacts. The output of news and current affairs on Siren FM will feature a greater drive to conflate the student journalists' activities with those of the community journalists.

There is a real potential for sustainability with the work carried out for this project, both at Siren FM and in the Lincoln School of Journalism, with enhancements to existing course curriculum and new programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels featuring community journalism as a key component.

The aspects of civic journalism have entered into the lexicon of broadcast news curriculum at the School of Journalism in Lincoln and the students involved in this project are now starting to operate with greater independent news sense and an understanding of the importance of engaging with their audience, a consideration of the communities they serve, and the possibilities of working together with the consumer as producer; the community based journalist.

The work carried out for this project has been widely disseminated at UK and international conferences. The response has been positive and both research into community journalism and the development of the practices will continue. Not only has the Community Journalist now become an integral part of the community radio station, Siren FM, but community radio and community journalism have become an integral part of the academic provision at the University of Lincoln, with the new Masters programme and a new Foundation Degree being launched in Community Radio⁸ and Community Journalism⁹ respectively this coming September.

¹ The Media: Partner, Forum, or Foe? Animating Democracy 2003 National Exchange on Art & Civic Dialogue http://www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy/pdf/programs/national_exchange/sessions/media.pdf [accessed 16th June 2009]

² STEELE, B (2007) The Ethics of Civic Journalism: Independence as the Guide www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=5594 [accessed 13th July 2009]

³ Community Radio: Annual Report on the Sector, Ofcom. http://www.ofcom.org.uk/radio/ifi/rbl/commun_radio/cr_annualrpt/cr_annualrpt.pdf [accessed 16th June 2009]

⁴ See www.sirenonline.co.uk

⁵ Sources: UCAS and BJTC

⁶ KARSTEL, Peter (2007) Bridging the gap: Journalism and Education in Journalism; a Civic Approach. Paper presented at the IAMCR conference, UNESCO, Paris.

⁷ KARSTEL, Peter (2007) Bridging the gap: Journalism and Education in Journalism; a Civic Approach. Paper presented at the IAMCR conference, UNESCO, Paris.

⁸ http://www.lincoln.ac.uk/journalism/courses/postgraduate/community_radio/default.asp

⁹ http://www.lincoln.ac.uk/journalism/courses/undergraduate/community_journalism/default.asp