

## **Expert Report Syndicate 5: Ready for impact: How engaged media research can help build strong community-university collaborations in telling local stories**

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The idea for this session emerged from a multi-pronged initiative by faculty, students and administrators of the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication at Hofstra University involving ongoing research about the pressing communication and information needs of the local community, and a series of hyper-local reporting projects that our undergraduate and graduate journalism students have been working on in collaboration with local news media outlets serving the neighborhoods surrounding the university.

The goal is to explore the potential links between collaborative community-based communication research on the one hand, and innovative, university-based reporting/storytelling models designed to fill the gaps created by “news deserts” on the other. In line with this year’s theme of the World Journalism Education Congress, “*Is it time to reboot journalism education?*” we hope to share experiences and discuss the most effective ways we can impart these experiences to our students in the classroom in order to provide them with the critical tools and skillsets to have both short and long-term impacts on the local communities we are serving.

Indirectly, this syndicate is an off-shoot of our ongoing *Suburban News Desert*<sup>1</sup> Research Project which we began in the Fall of 2022. We examined the phenomenon of the existing news deserts in our local community, demonstrating how, despite being located within the largest media market in the U.S., in a region saturated with mass media of all kinds, the predominantly black and brown communities in the neighborhoods surrounding our campus in suburban New York<sup>2</sup> continue to be underserved when it comes to the underlying issues they face on a regular basis. Our research involved focus groups with a diverse range of community leaders and local journalists, surveys of those same two sets of groups, and a six-month news audit of the local coverage about those local communities. We followed this up with brainstorming sessions with community leaders on how to develop potential collaborations and build partnerships to fill in those news and information gaps in the future.

The underlying problem of news deserts has been documented extensively across the country, and has resulted in a measurable deterioration in civic dialogue as a result of local newspapers and other media outlets closing. This crisis has led many universities, communication schools and journalism programs to establish local journalism initiatives to try to fill the void created by the existing news deserts. University-led news reporting programs and community media centers connected to academic institutions have existed for decades, but given the current crisis in the mass communication ecosystem in the U.S., they are needed now more than ever.

All the evidence shows that this is a rapidly-growing movement of university-led, community-based local reporting. According to the Center for Community News, CCN, based at the University of Vermont, today there are more than 170 university-led news reporting programs in the U.S., with over 2,200 students participating in news-academic partnerships annually. In 2024, these students produced over 10,000 stories through 67 programs and have partnered with up to 1,555 outlets annually. Based on distribution and pageview data provided by partnership leaders to the CCN, more than 14-Million readers received their news from student reporters.<sup>3</sup>

This impressive and growing number does not take into account the dozens of educational media centers serving a diverse range of communities across the country with media literacy and research programs, media production training, and formation in digital content creation. Such high-impact, community-based initiatives are driven by a variety of overarching goals, including enhancing civic engagement that can lead to an impact on policy, encouraging innovative, locally-based storytelling, and improving access for marginalized communities. It is understood that the foundation of this impressive range of media content-creation must be grounded on addressing the information needs of local communities, which is why thoughtful, critical media scholarship focused on the crisis in democratic communication is necessary for the long-term success of these initiatives.

As important as the meticulous data collection carried out by the CCN has been in measuring the reporting output of student-led reporting programs in terms of overall quantity, there is still a lot to be understood about how this reporting is actually impacting the local communities that are represented in this growing pool of local journalism output. This is especially important to consider when we discuss local communities where the majority of the population come from underrepresented demographics, particularly Black, Latino, and other communities of color.

Part of our motivation to carry out the above-mentioned Suburban News Desert study came from previous collaborative media training and production experiences we've had in the local communities surrounding Hofstra. It also comes from our own, lived experiences as working journalists, documentarians and media creators, giving us a clear understanding that the so-called "news desert" is not a new concept in communities of color, which for decades have been ignored and stereotyped by mainstream media organizations, as many media scholars have documented.

There is a considerable amount of literature that demonstrates how the nation's news media, regardless of political leanings, had remained "the press" of White America, with Native American, African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian American journalists "systematically excluded" from newsrooms across the country. As Gonzalez and Torres eloquently describe in their book *News for All the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media* (Verso, 2012), the lack of representation in newsrooms resulted in an "almost routine distortion of the lives and events of people of color by the press."

Recognizing this discrepancy is necessary moving forward with any future work in the community, and as educators, we must find creative and effective ways in demonstrating this to our students so as to have lasting impact on their work. Where communities have experienced harm or marginalization because of problematic news coverage or lack thereof, acknowledgement of that history is necessary for developing any future relationship. Identifying the local needs or expectations of the community in terms of news content is part of the process, as well as shifting the focus of news coverage to more accurately reflect the reality of the communities being reported on.<sup>4</sup>

So, how do we measure the outcomes of any media collaboration in the community, not so much in terms of quantity of stories published, podcasts completed or videos produced, but insofar as it is engaging local communities and impacting in a constructive way the social fabric of neighborhoods that have been traditionally marginalized and/or misrepresented? How do we build sustainable partnerships, not only with local media organizations, but with community-based organizations, in telling a diverse range of stories to different audiences using accessible platforms? How do we organically incorporate these concepts into our journalism and media production curricula so students understand that equitable representation should not be exceptional, but inherently tied to the storytelling process? The central question the members of this syndicate will discuss and answer is: **"If high-impact, engaged, university-based newsrooms, partnered with community-based media, are one key to preserve and advance the journalism profession, how can we grow those already in place, and how can we build more of them?"**

These are among the questions we might ask through engaged research that can serve as part of an ongoing conversation with various stakeholders: CBO's, community leaders, local media outlets, and the students and faculty within our academic programs. If we are able to harness these findings in meaningful ways, perhaps we'll expand opportunities for our collaborative newsrooms to commit to reporting that truly serves the needs of its diverse audiences.

<sup>1</sup> Visit the interactive website for the Suburban News Deserts project at <https://newsdesert.hofstra.edu/>; for the full essay, go to <https://tccitsu.com/the-suburban-news-desert-where-communities-of-color-are-starved-for-critical-information-amid-crime-centered-news-coverage/>.

<sup>2</sup> Hofstra University is located in the Town of Hempstead, in Long Island, just east of the New York City border with Nassau County.

<sup>3</sup> For the latest mapping report from the Center for Community News, visit <https://www.uvm.edu/ccn/research-reports-and-case-studies/visualizing-power-universities-maps-and-news-desert>

<sup>4</sup> There is a lot of literature on best practices for equitable reporting and inclusive storytelling approaches, both in journalism and in other community media platforms. One very useful approach that applies to the kind of collaborations we've been developing at Hofstra is by journalist and educator Heather Bryant. See <https://hbcompass.medium.com/a-roadmap-for-equitable-inclusion-1005a82ea6dd>