

CONNECTIONS

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University

Institutions,
Professions, and the Public:
Focus on the
Public-Academy
Relationship

The Footbridge Forum

By Denise Dowling

The Clark Fork River separates the north side of the University of Montana from Missoula. The river is both a literal and symbolic division between the campus and the town. Despite this natural and cultural barrier, students and citizens often make their way between the two, thanks to a wooden footbridge.

This bridge, which connects the university with the larger community in which it is located, suggested a name for a series of four community forums produced and aired by students at KBGA College Radio. We called it the Footbridge Forum. In partnership with the Kettering Foundation and with other units of the university, we set out to explore the potential for broadcasting public deliberation on the radio.

The format called for assembling participants in the studio to discuss among themselves a pressing community issue and to field phone calls and e-mails from listeners. Our goal was to include

the university community as well as the greater Missoula community. Historically, these two groups, though often polarized, share many common problems.

We began by brainstorming possible topics for the first program, set to air in December 2003. This discussion yielded so many subjects — from gender issues to underage drinking, from education funding to growth issues and the economy — that no reasoned conclusion was possible. So, we decided to allow the first forum participants to determine the issues to be discussed at the subsequent forums.

Perhaps the most difficult part of preparing for the show was identifying participants to take part in the forum. The student producers wanted to include people with diverse viewpoints, but finding people to pair with those viewpoints turned out to be more difficult than they had imagined. They called on friends, family, classmates, and professors to help them find participants. Clearly, guest



Denise Dowling



selection was not going to be a scientific process.

Despite these difficulties, a rich group of participants filled the seats for the first show. Students, business owners, minorities, single parents, men, and women were all represented. The panel had more men than women, more students than nonstudents, and too many people. Three scheduled panel members did not show up, leading to the first two of these problems, but ameliorating the third. It was one of the many learning experiences that led to the steady improvement of subsequent forums.

In the months that followed, we produced three more forums: "Whose Missoula Is This?" a discussion of town/

gown relationships; "Shelter Shock," in which participants explored the high cost of housing in the Missoula area; and "Wage Rage," a search for ways to keep young people in the state in the face of prevailing low wages.

On the whole, the Footbridge Forum was a success. Although we had still not worked out all the problems after four forums, we did nevertheless learn so much along the way that we can safely say we got appreciably closer with each broadcast to genuine deliberation on the air.

Denise Dowling is an assistant professor in the Radio-Television Department in the School of Journalism at the University of Montana. She can be reached by E-mail at denise.dowling@mso.umt.edu.

New Stories for Television: Promoting Public Judgment in Colombia

By Catalina Arango

Although Colombian journalists are die-hard traditionalists and remain attached to old journalistic routines, the time has come for them to face their fear of change and begin the job of creating new visions for their audiences.

For many years, public life in my country has been seen as the exclusive province of political parties, traditional organizations, and government officials. And, on the whole, Colombian citizens have long been disinclined to involve themselves in politics and public life. But some Colombian citizens

are tired of being treated as ignorant or as victims of the events that sweep over them; they want to be seen as participants and intelligent members of the public life. They are ready to make connections; they are learning the importance of deliberation; and, step-by-step, they are losing their fear of participating in public affairs.

Moreover, citizen audiences no longer see TV news reports as isolated dots in an empty space. Rather, they perceive them as threads in a complex net — connected, intersected, and superimposed. Events in Colombia have a past and a future, causes and consequences. They have visible and invisible faces.

Television journalists in Colombia should take an active role in this process. They must begin thinking of their audiences as citizens in order to help convince



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