



**JOURNALISM AND CITIZENSHIP:
FINDINGS FROM A PILOT COURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA**

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Preface

By Paul Voakes, Professor of Journalism, Emeritus, University of Colorado

What does journalism have to do with citizenship? Quite a lot, the authors of the following report would argue. Their challenge, in piloting the course “Journalism and Citizenship,” was to see whether journalism students would agree.

The results, of course, were mixed. But the conclusions the authors drew from their classroom experience offer a good deal of hope and suggest—in my mind, at least—a new type of curriculum that could help improve both democratic practice and journalism.

Lee Becker, Tudor Vlad, and Andreea Voina seized a serendipitous opportunity (to fill a curricular void) in the spring semester of 2017 at Georgia’s Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication to design an experimental course. For the first time in any journalism program, the course set out to explore the connections among three areas of study: citizenship, professionalism, and journalism. The students were assigned to read, write, and talk about each area, and as the course progressed, Professor Lee Becker, the trio’s lead instructor and the lead author of this report, brought the three areas into closer and closer contact. Because the students were seniors majoring in journalism, most of their learning was about professions and citizens and whether our common reliance on professions helped or hindered citizens in their democratic work. The assignment for the final paper was a brilliant synthesis of disparate elements: Design a course that would help non-journalists practice journalism.

Becker has addressed a serious gap in journalism education. At best, we pay lip service to the notion that journalism strengthens democracies and helps citizens. The underlying assumption of that lip service is that accurate articles about important public issues will lead to better-informed voters—ergo, democracy is served. But Becker wanted students to explore what citizens really do—or need to do—for themselves and their communities, beyond casting the occasional vote, and then explore how journalism can best help with that. This report makes no secret of the authors’ position that journalists should pay far more attention to citizens’ information needs and communicative abilities—even to the point of citizens contributing to the journalistic enterprise themselves.

By the end of the semester, as you’ll see, most students had a more nuanced understanding of citizenship and community. But most still endorsed the notion that journalism is a means by which trained professionals impart knowledge to citizens, using a perspective of detached objectivity. From a civic-engagement point of view, this may

seem a disappointing result. Worse, Becker discovered midway through the course that not 1 of the 11 students intended to pursue a career in mainstream journalism.

Nonetheless, I see the Becker course as the beginning of a promising path forward. The 0-for-11 discovery symbolizes a larger trend: The work of journalism is still necessary to our democracy, but this work will be controlled less and less by a profession. The explosion of internet-based, interactive communication, in tandem with a collapsing corporate model for news, virtually assures that.

So why do students continue to enroll in journalism courses? I think it's because they value the skill set a journalism degree delivers, and they see career opportunities in dozens of communication-related fields that will value those skills as well. The problem is that this generation of students does not, as the Becker course reveals, readily see the larger, essential democratic mission of journalism.

Communication is vital to democratic practice, but disinformation, misinformation, gossip, rumor, and naïve inaccuracy now compete too easily with reliable information. Also, a community's system of news and information is no longer the exclusive purview of the news company hiring professional journalists. The newsletters, social-media feeds, and blogs of neighborhoods, civic organizations, institutions, and individual activists comprise an ecology of news that professional journalists contribute to—yet no longer dominate.

And these are the same persons and groups who are responsible, in every community, for making public life go well. Is it possible that the missions of journalism and citizenship are closely aligned? I believe so, as do the authors of this report. Every act of democratic deliberation, from naming and framing problems to the archiving of what a community has collectively learned about those problems, depends on the responsible sharing of reliable information. That's what journalists do. Despite the demise of their public-information monopolies in America's communities, citizens still need journalists. We need people who are trained and committed to monitor those in power for abuses; to sift through the data in our information-overloaded environment to help us make sense of current events; to verify or debunk claims that have people wondering; to provide a respected platform for diverse citizens' voices to be heard; and to persist as an independent institution that facilitates citizens' efforts to improve their communities' well-being.

But clearly, the late-20th-century model of journalism that blended sensationalism with detached objectivity was not serving democracy well. As citizens' trust in their institutions plummeted over the last four decades, so too did citizens' trust in their news media.

A change is in order, and as the Becker report suggests, higher education should be part of that change. Just as our nation needs people to commit to doing the work of journalism, our nation needs people to commit to doing the work of citizenship. And the two cannot be held separate. Citizens are capable of enhancing, even performing, the work of journalism, and journalists are capable of enhancing the work of citizens. My own research shows that when journalists and citizens work together on reporting projects, journalists' trust in citizens' abilities improves and citizens' trust in their media improves.

And as Becker himself states, "A single course is only the first step" in shifting the way young people think about journalism and democracy. I foresee, in the not-too-distant future, an interdisciplinary curriculum in Communication and Community.

Becker recommends infusing the rest of the journalism curriculum with a greater awareness of the work of citizens, which is laudable. But why confine that awareness to the journalism department? As the authors point out, only a few journalism students will be journalists all their adult lives, but all journalism students—all university students, for that matter—will be citizens. It's time to promote civic education as a core competence in a university education.

The study of citizenship is complex and broad—too broad for a single academic department. Journalism students, for example, need to learn how a community communicates, such as through "listening posts" or "third spaces," so they can pursue stories that accurately reflect the needs and curiosities of ordinary citizens. They need to understand how citizens deliberate as they seek a course of action to address a wicked problem. Non-journalists who are civically engaged need to know how to tell stories effectively using multiple media and how to request appropriate government records, as well as how to evaluate news reports for bias or falsity. There isn't a single journalism professor, or political science, sociology, or communications professor, who can teach all of that—especially not in one semester.

More important than any particular skill set is the mindset I wish students could embrace: that journalists can facilitate democratic deliberation, and that citizens have a great capacity for finding and sharing reliable information.

A coherent combination of media and democracy courses needn't derail a student's pursuit of any particular degree: Three or four courses (out of 40 in a typical undergraduate degree) could effectively instill an appreciation for the work of citizens and journalism's role in that work.

This idea is hardly far-fetched. In 2012, the US Department of Education urged colleges and universities to "make civic learning and democratic engagement an animating national priority," and hundreds of the nation's roughly 3,000 four-year

colleges and universities have responded by creating courses or even initiating broader programs in civic engagement. At the top of this list is Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. Dozens of other universities now offer multidisciplinary certificates in civic engagement, and dozens more now include civic engagement courses in their core (required) curricula. So far, journalism rarely has a seat at this table. But to the extent that public communication is a key ingredient in the dynamics of the democratic process, journalism does belong. We can look to MIT's Center for Civic Media; Duke University's program Civic Engagement in a Changing Media Environment; the Youth Academy for Media and Civic Engagement at USC's Annenberg School of Communication; and the master's program in Media and Public Engagement at the University of Colorado, Boulder, as leading examples.

Universities are structurally conservative, of course, and academic silos will hinder the acceptance of programs like these. Here a university's central administration plays a key role in providing incentives to reach across departmental borders. Again, we have a precedent. Ten years ago, SUNY Stony Brook's president launched a campus-wide News Literacy program that included a course for the general-education core. Since then, more than 10,000 students have taken it.

One course—such as the fascinating course described here—is only the beginning. When we consider the challenges facing democratic practice in 2019, we can appreciate there's a lot at stake. As David Holwerk, the Kettering Foundation's director of communications, has said, advocates for democracy don't necessarily concern themselves with journalism or journalism education, "except as they pertain to making citizens more effective actors in a democracy." This report describes a creative, pioneering effort in that regard and a template upon which a broader curriculum can be constructed.

Introduction

Journalism curricula at universities in the United States routinely include discussion of citizens, identified as those served by journalists and journalism. It would be the rare course in journalism that did not include that service orientation. Less common is coursework that focuses on citizenship or on citizen perspectives on journalism.

This report outlines the development and implementation of a university-level course in journalism designed to examine the relationship between journalism and citizens. The course contained two distinct components: (1) a critical examination of journalism as practiced, focusing on how journalism treats citizens; and (2) a plan of action to bring about change in the relationship between journalism and citizens.

The report contains details of the creation of a course, Journalism and Citizenship, and of its implementation in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia. It includes a critical assessment of what was done by the instructor and others working with him on introducing the class and by the students in taking the class. It also contains data on how student views of both journalism and citizens changed over the course of the semester.

The data come from detailed notes created during the development and implementation of the Journalism and Citizenship course, responses of students to survey questions and self-reflective assignments that were integrated into the class, and from video records of class discussions. The course was treated as a research enterprise designed to learn what went well and what did not. Approval was granted by the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board to treat the course as a study involving human subjects so that the data from the students, minus identifiers, could be used in this report.

In sum, this report provides guidelines for the development and implementation of a course on the relationship between journalism and citizens, applicable to journalism and other university curricula in the future. A fuller report available from the Kettering Foundation includes detailed notes about how the class was taught that could be used by anyone wishing to add a course to a university journalism curriculum in the future.

Description of Course

The three authors of this report taught the course as a senior-level, topical seminar in the Journalism Department of the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication in the Spring of 2017.

The course met twice a week for a total of 30 sessions of 75 minutes each.

Of the 11 students who enrolled in Journalism and Citizenship, 8 were in Magazine, 2 were in Public Affairs Journalism, and 1 was in Publication Management. Ten of the 11 were graduating in the spring of 2017. The remaining student was graduating in the summer of 2017. The class consisted of nine women and two men.

Lee Becker was the teacher of record. Tudor Vlad assisted in preparing materials for the course and participated in class discussions. Andreea Voina participated in classroom discussions, assisted with organization of records and data from the students, and video recorded parts of many class sessions.

The course began with the view that journalism is an act of citizenship and fundamental to deliberative democracy. The course incorporated a critical assessment of how journalism as traditionally practiced deals with citizens. Included was an examination of how news is constructed, how expertise is assessed, and how citizens are imagined. The class analyzed the professional model of journalism to understand how that model influences the relationship between journalists and the communities they serve. Building on this critical assessment of journalism as practiced, the course explored alternative ways for journalists to interact with citizens and examined ways to encourage citizens to engage in journalism.

We adopted three textbooks for the course:

- Brown, David Warfield (2014). *America's Culture of Professionalism*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Keen, Andrew (2007). *The Cult of the Amateur*. New York: Doubleday.
- Mathews, David (2014). *The Ecology of Democracy*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.

We supplemented the books with outside materials.

We had planned to take the students into the community to meet people in the community whom our students would otherwise not likely make contact. The short duration of the class made it impossible to use class time for this purpose. The students convinced us that their work and class schedules made it impossible for us to find a common time outside class to meet. As an alternative, we invited five speakers to come to the class to help the students understand the work of citizens and the diversity of the community surrounding them. We also required students to volunteer at a local food bank for one, three-hour shift.

Progression of Course

In the initial class, students introduced themselves in very general terms by indicating their major and their hometowns. We introduced ourselves as well. We reviewed the syllabus and course goals.

Students also were asked to sign consent forms to allow us to use their responses to questions and comments made in the class as part of this report. Students were given the option of not signing the forms. All agreed to allow use of their data, without identifiers.

Students then responded to 10 questions presented to them sequentially. At the end of the first session, the students uploaded their responses to the class website.

As the class progressed through the semester, we gave the students what we identified as five small graded assignments, four significant graded assignments, and a final graded assignment.

The Data: What We Observed

The data we observed included students' discussion of their career aspirations, the comments they made about the three books assigned for the course, their responses to the class assignments, and the comments they made during the classroom discussions.

In looking at the classroom discussions, we examined how the students talked about citizens and citizenship, their discussion of their specific career plans, and their comments on the experience working as a volunteer at the local food bank.

We also looked at the product of the final assignment we gave the students, which asked the students to design a journalism class for citizens.

We examined how the students responded to the initial survey given them in their first class and to that same survey at the end of the class and analyzed in detail comments students made about the class in the final assessment session.

Conclusions

The data from the students, and our experiences in teaching the class, lead us to a number of conclusions.

Students began the class with only primitive notions about what being a citizen meant.

Students focused on legal definitions of citizenship in the responses to the questionnaire we gave them at the beginning of the class. Voting was a key part of citizenship, they said. They also told us that they had not discussed citizenship in any detail in any of their earlier classes. They were told frequently that journalists served citizens, they said, but they didn't recall much of a conversation from their classes about the actual needs of citizens. It is possible that the students remembered their classes wrong, but this is what they remembered. They also told us that they had not talked with their parents much about being citizens. The students had only vague notions about how property ownership influences a person's attachment to community. Many said they did not understand what a mortgage was or how it worked.

Students did not have a very clear understanding of the relationship between being a journalist and being a citizen.

Most of the students thought that journalists were citizens, but they also said that journalists held a special status that kept them from being fully engaged as citizens. The students talked about bias if the journalist was attached to the community, but they didn't talk about the consequences of not being attached to a community. In fact, there was little evidence they had even thought about the latter. The students seemed to struggle to talk about journalists as citizens. On the one hand, they suggested that journalists should be involved in their communities, but, on the other hand, some said that if journalists expressed their opinions while covering community issues, they would move away from the principle of "objectivity" that is closely associated to the work of journalists.

Students changed their views about citizens during the class much more than they changed their views about journalists.

The final questionnaire showed dramatic shifts in how the students defined citizenship. Gone was the focus on legal definitions. In its place was an understanding that citizens can engage in their communities in a variety of ways beyond voting. "When I hear the word 'citizen,' I think of members of the community," one student said in response to that final questionnaire. "These members can be citizens of multiple groups and communities, ranging from schools and neighborhoods to the national level."

The students, however, retained rather fixed notions about journalists. They clearly felt that journalists must be professionals, despite the arguments made in the class readings against the professional model. Brown, in *America's Culture of Professionalism*, argued that professionals, including journalists, by definition, stand detached from those they serve and thus are unable to really accept the value of what the citizens do and contribute. The students did not see this detachment as a problem.

The strongest evidence of this continued preference for a professional model came from the final papers. The students mostly proposed teaching citizens to be professional journalists rather than offer ways to help citizens use journalism as a tool of citizenship.

The students told us that they had been presented with the professional model of journalism in their introductory classes and in other classes as they moved through their journalism programs. If any of the professors challenged the value of being a professional, the students didn't retain it. For the students, it was an act of faith that journalists should want to be professionals.

The students were very critical of citizens who practice journalism.

The students accepted the argument, at the center of Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur*, that amateurs could not do journalism. The students did not have any confidence that citizens could do the type of journalism that the students think needs to be done. In their final papers, students mostly said their efforts to teach citizens to be journalists would be failures because the citizens would not be able to practice at the proper level. What the students wanted to teach the citizens was what they had learned in their own classes, i.e., how to write as a traditional journalist, how to apply traditional journalistic standards, and the importance of established journalistic ethics.

The students did not see themselves as part of the community, though most called themselves citizens.

The students struggled to find language to describe their links to the university, the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, their sororities and fraternities, and their other social groups.

When we asked them to describe how they would talk about their linkages to these groups, they had difficulty translating what they did as students to the idea of citizenship.

One of the students said she was too young to be a real citizen, and she wouldn't be a citizen until she graduated, found a job, and moved to a more permanent residence.

"I've never had to think about it," one student said of being a citizen. "We never talk about citizenship this way."

The students did not recognize the problems confronting community journalism.

The students knew that the job market was a difficult one. But they didn't understand what the collapse of market-based journalism meant for local communities. In that sense, they didn't translate the media changes to the central concerns of the course.

The students had only rudimentary notions of what might be done to serve the needs of communities as fewer journalists from the traditional media work in those communities. They, again, rejected the idea that amateurs could do journalism. They said they had not considered the idea that tax policies might be modified to support local journalism or that non-journalistic organizations might do journalism.

We didn't learn early enough who our students were.

We began, hoping we would have some students from outside the college in the class. We felt the class would be enriched by a discussion between the students who wanted to work as journalists and those who were interested in journalism from the perspective of someone without aspirations to work as journalists. In the end, we had 11 journalism students who had almost no interest in careers in journalism. All planned to use their writing skills in their future careers, and they were willing to use those skills to land almost any kind of job on graduation. None of the students planned a career in journalism. We didn't learn that until more than halfway through the class, and we learned it only because the students gave hints of their plans to our outside speakers.

The students subsequently told us that they didn't think their professors wanted to know what their career plans were and wanted to assume the students planned to be journalists. The students said their career aspirations were not something they talked about in classes. They also told us they weren't sure they would have told us their plans had we asked explicitly at the beginning of the class. They said it took some time for them to feel comfortable enough to tell us, and they said that their plans, in some cases, became clearer as the semester progressed and they found the traditional journalism market extremely difficult to access and of limited interest to them.

In hindsight, we wish we had tried earlier to get the students comfortable talking about their aspirations. We would have talked with them about citizenship and journalism at least somewhat differently had we known that they were much more likely to use their communication skills as citizens than as working journalists.

Recommendations

We believe a class on journalism and citizenship should be a critical part of a journalism curriculum.

We asked the students at the end of the class whether they believed it should be a part of the Grady curriculum. We are cautious in taking too seriously their answers, given that they knew what we wanted them to say, but they all said the curriculum *should* be expanded to incorporate the class. They said the course made them think about issues that were new to them.

Given what we heard from the students, we believe they need a class on journalism and citizenship if they plan to practice traditional journalism. They need an opportunity to learn about deliberative democracy, about the work of citizens, and about communication among citizens. They need to move beyond the legalistic ideas about citizens they are likely to bring to the class.

If traditional journalists are to serve as a liaison between government and those being governed, the journalists need to know more about those being governed. In addition, to address the lack of trust between the media and the citizens, the students, as future journalistic practitioners, need to be more tuned in to the lives of citizens.

While our group of graduating seniors might have been unusual, we know that not all students graduating from journalism programs are going to have careers as professional journalists. All of them, however, are going to have careers as citizens. A class that prepares them for the role of citizen is a worthwhile addition to a journalism curriculum.

The class also should be available to those who do not seek a career in journalism. They, too, need to understand citizenship and the role journalism can play in it.

A single course is only a first step.

The experience teaching the class brought home to us how deeply embedded the idea of professionalism is in the typical journalism curriculum. Students are told they are being educated to become professionals to serve citizens. They are not taught that they will be citizens as well or that citizens have expertise that is to be respected and valued by journalists. And they are not taught that citizens can do journalism as an act of citizenship.

The single class didn't really dent the notion that citizens are to be served by journalists or that the professional model is the appropriate one for journalism. The course helped students better understand citizenship, but it did relatively little to challenge the basic assumptions that journalism is the province of professionals and that

society is well served by the distance professionalism creates between the service and client classes.

The broader goal has to be to introduce the issues raised in this class at the very beginning of the journalism curriculum and to make sure those issues are incorporated into classes that follow.

Contributors

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This is a shortened version of a full report by this title submitted to the Kettering Foundation.

About the Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an independent, nonpartisan research organization rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Everything Kettering researches relates to one central question: what does it take for democracy to work as it should? Chartered as an operating corporation, Kettering does not make grants. The foundation's small staff and extensive network of associates collaborate with community organizations, government agencies, researchers, scholars, and citizens, all of whom share their experiences with us.

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