

The State of Jefferson and the Future of Regional Journalism

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Abstract

With a focus on Josephine County in southern Oregon, this essay explores how media industry closures, consolidations, and cutbacks are adversely affecting coverage of regional and local news in many parts of the country, and the communities served. It addresses how numerous journalism schools are expanding their programs to fill the void. Specifically, the article explores how the School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC) at the University of Oregon established an experimental class of undergraduates to cover such stories, and why. The author is a professor in multimedia journalism at the SOJC and oversaw a team of a dozen student journalists who covered Josephine County as a special assignment.

Secessionists envision the State of Jefferson as an autonomous province carved from rural communities now part of southern Oregon and northern California. Real or imagined, the State of Jefferson is located at the center of an ideological divide. Events unfolding in Josephine County, Oregon, which borders California, focus on the plight of social services. The issues at stake also provide a lens for examining the state of regional journalism.

Josephine County made national headlines in spring 2013 when National Public Radio (NPR) and the *New York Daily News* picked up a story about a local woman's desperate call to 911. In a documented audio recording, she was heard panicking as her ex-boyfriend forced his way into her home. Due to budget cuts, the operator told her there were no available officers on duty to respond. Her request for help went unanswered, and she was raped (Hastings, 2013; Templeton, 2013).

The incident is just one example of how this southwestern Oregon community is grappling with maintaining public safety amidst political debates about tax increases, small government, environmental protection, and timber subsidies. Burglaries are up 70% and theft nearly 80%, as legislators attempt to address social service issues that will determine Josephine County's future (Johnson, 2013). What that future holds is uncertain.

Media scholars join other social scientists in posing a related and unanswered question: how can communities like Josephine County come to consensus about such complex matters when regional news organizations—charged with keeping the public informed—are also cutting back? With a focus on Josephine County, this essay explores how media industry closures, consolidations, and cutbacks are adversely affecting coverage of regional and local news in many parts of the country and the communities served. It addresses how numerous journalism

schools are expanding their programs to fill the void. Specifically, this article explores how the School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC) at the University of Oregon established an experimental class of undergraduates to cover such stories, and why. I am a professor in multimedia journalism at the SOJC, and I oversaw a team of a dozen student journalists who covered Josephine County as a special assignment.

The decline of mainstream news organizations has itself been in the news over the past decade, and cutbacks in the Pacific Northwest have shared the headlines. In 2009, the 150-year-old *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* cut its print edition in favor of a less costly online-only offering. In 2013, following several rounds of layoffs, the West Coast's oldest continually published newspaper, the *Oregonian*, announced it was reducing home delivery to just three days a week.

Broadcast media in the region have also been affected by cutbacks and corporate consolidation. In 2013, Fisher Communications, a Seattle-based owner of broadcast properties throughout the region, bought KMTR-TV in Eugene. The company consolidated that station's newsgathering operations with KVAL-TV, a Eugene television property it already owned. Within months of that announcement, Fisher was acquired by the Sinclair Broadcast Group, a Maryland-based operator of 144 television stations across the United States (Ramakrishnan, 2013). Prior to divesting its broadcast holdings, Fisher took pride in the fact that its roots were in the Pacific Northwest and that its reach extended to Roseburg, Oregon, which neighbors Josephine County.

Continuing cutbacks and consolidation in Northwest media have prompted other news organizations in the region to explore expansion. Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB), the state's NPR and Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) affiliate, pointed to the diminishing presence of the Associated Press (AP) and the *Oregonian* when it announced plans to build a statewide news consortium. In March 2013, OPB hired a former AP reporter to travel the state and seek participation from daily, weekly, tribal, and college newspapers, as well as television stations and bloggers. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Oregon Community Fund split the start up costs, granting OPB a total of \$500,000 to launch the initiative (Schaffer, 2013).

The strategy seeks to make previous competitors into partners, inviting them to join forces to achieve mutual objectives. Online content management software allows participants to share stories at no cost during the first two years of the program. The hope is that over time participants will find increasing value in the service and will pay in future years. Some 40 to 50 potential contributors were approached as prospects, including the SOJC.

We welcomed the invitation as an opportunity, given that active news gathering is an integral part of journalism education. Since their inception, journalism schools have had student-produced publications, radio broadcasts, and television programs. However, the distribution of student media has most often remained distinct from professional media, in the form of college-operated newspapers and broadcast stations. More recently, financially challenged mainstream media companies have embraced the practice of including student-produced content alongside professional work. The practice is so pervasive that a special session convened to discuss the matter at the 2012 annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in Chicago. Deans, professors, and legal scholars gathered from Columbia University, University of Missouri, University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), University of Southern California (Annenberg), Boston University, University of Maryland, Arizona State

University, University of Minnesota, and University of Oregon. They were joined by executives from the Knight Foundation, the Poynter Institute, and the Student Press Law Center. Participants sought to identify and share “best practices” through continued dialogue. Concerns centered on potential liabilities, yet most agreed that potential benefits outweighed risks.

The SOJC has been forward thinking in terms of establishing partnerships. OR Media is our in-house production unit, which I manage in addition to my research and teaching accountabilities. Our objective is to cultivate alliances with mainstream media companies and create public venues for the best of our students’ work. Our partners include the PBS NewsHour, OPB, the *Oregonian*, the *Register-Guard*, KEZI-TV, KVAL-TV, and KLCC-FM. Our production operation consists of three full-time recent graduates who mentor teams of students. The mentors bridge a generational gap between instructors and students, and allow for consistent production outflow during holiday and vacation breaks. We manage a cohort of approximately 25 students who meet each term on Wednesday afternoons from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. It is a variable (one to four) credit course, chosen by students based on pre-established goals and objectives. Students suggest and bring projects, or join existing teams. Our approach is in keeping with the teaching hospital pedagogical model, advanced by Eric Newton at the Knight Foundation (Newton, 2013).

Our partnerships seek to provide students with richer and more immersive work experiences, when compared to traditional internship programs where the opportunity to engage in real reporting can be limited. The trend towards mainstream distribution of student work provides emerging journalists with opportunities to gain professional bylines and screen credits from distinguished news organizations, and to pursue higher-profile assignments.

The SOJC viewed the social services situation unfolding in Josephine County as an opportunity for our students to uncover stories that perhaps were being missed by the mainstream news outlets because of financial constraints. Mark Blaine, the area coordinator for our journalism program, conceived the project and worked closely with me on implementation. Our intent was to recruit a team of student writers and multimedia storytellers to investigate untold stories, and to share the completed work with our media partners.

Students were eager to take on the project. However, as an institution, we had to pause to consider potential risks and ethical issues. Unforeseen liabilities can arise when students leave an insulated campus environment to embark on news-related assignments, especially in crime-challenged communities. As instructors, we operate with an understanding that student journalists are journalists-in-training, meaning many are first-time reporters.

Beyond safety issues, we needed to also be mindful of cultural differences—whether real or perceived. The city of Eugene and the University of Oregon are often characterized in the popular press as havens for “liberal elites,” who may not fully grasp nor respect working-class values. The university enrolls students from all over the world, and strives to foster a culture of inclusiveness. Yet it is fair to acknowledge that individuals bring a personal perspective to the new experiences they encounter.

Student journalists can also be judged by community members as less than legitimate because of their youth and inexperience. Young journalists can carry an extra burden when working to establish trust and credibility with prospective sources. As professors, we stress that building rapport is an essential step in the process of documenting an authentic and meaningful story.

We instructed the team of students to leave their green-and-yellow UO Ducks regalia at home when entering Josephine County. There was much discussion about also leaving personal biases behind. While important to address, we did not view any of these issues as insurmountable. Relevant matters were discussed and we agreed to view challenges that might arise as potential educational opportunities.

Encouraging student leadership is considered a “best practice” in journalism education. It establishes a management structure that is driven by students rather than instructors—empowering young people to take ownership of their learning, as opposed to viewing the experience as a traditional hierarchically organized class. However, a commitment to student leadership brings its own set of challenges. To succeed, instructors must step back into the often uncomfortable role of advisor. This requires a high level of trust and transparency by all parties. Students charged with managing their peers can encounter unforeseen difficulties. Tensions can arise in the process of holding peers accountable for the quality and timely delivery of their work.

I was fortunate to recruit Adrian Black, one of our nontraditional students, to lead the team. Black served previously in the US armed forces, and is four to five years older than most of his classmates. He also had tackled tough reporting assignments, through internships with professional publications. He later confessed that his military experience was both a bonus and a burden. Several students resisted his regimented approach to making requests.

Placing students in leadership positions in no way allowed our instructor team to abdicate responsibility for ensuring proper oversight of the project. There were numerous discussions about professionalism and safety. Students were instructed to travel in teams of two, whenever possible. This was especially stressed to students choosing to participate in police “ride-alongs,” where outcomes sometimes can be unpredictable.

In one harrowing incident, circumstances changed in an instant. A team of students rode along with a sheriff who was suddenly rerouted to the scene of a suicide shooting. With lights flashing and sirens blaring, the patrol car sped off to investigate the scene of the tragedy. Yellow police tape, an ambulance, and a medic team left little to the imagination about what would be found inside. The students were asked to wait in the police vehicle until the sheriff could assess the real gravity of the situation. Within minutes, they were invited to enter the home of the deceased—with their cameras (see Figures 1-3, next page).

The incident was cause for alarm for a multitude of reasons. We were concerned about the psychological wellbeing of the students who had not anticipated how the experience might unfold. They also were faced with an ethical dilemma. How should they capture the story? While law officials authorized their actions, they were on their own to determine the appropriateness of documenting certain details. They were thrust into making the kind of moment-by-moment decisions that are familiar to seasoned journalists, dealing with a delicate balance between serving public interest and a family’s right to privacy.

While television crime dramas like “CSI: Crimes Scene Investigation” and “Law and Order” show graphic depictions of gun-inflicted wounds, news organizations generally shield the public from such lurid details. The students intuitively framed their camera shots in a manner that excluded explicit images—while grappling with their inner-emotions about being present in the room.

Faculty members, our dean, and I became aware of the details the following Monday. We sat with the students involved individually, and offered the option of professional



Figure 1. Josephine County Sheriff Gil Gilbertson arrives at the scene of a self-inflicted gunshot wound, near Grants Pass, Oregon (photograph by Adrian Black).



Figure 2. Gilbertson interacts with the victim's spouse while emergency medical technicians attempt to stabilize the victim and call for transportation (photograph by Adrian Black).



Figure 3. An ambulance technician arrives with a stretcher (photograph by Adrian Black).

psychological support. Michael Busian, the younger of the two students, shared that while he was shaken by the experience, he had few regrets. His ride-along mate that day was student team leader Adrian Black. Prior military experience introduced Black to the grim reality of death several years before, allowing him to lend support to his classmate.

Law officials in Josephine County provided our students unfettered access because they want to bring public awareness to the difficulties they encounter daily because of strained resources. The sheriff's office only has one deputy to answer calls in a county of 83,000 people. Two years earlier, there were 22 deputies. Meanwhile, the number of citizens applying to carry concealed weapons rose 49% in 2012 (Johnson, 2013). Simultaneously, civilian anti-crime groups are stepping forward to fill the gap. Legislators and community members fear that without change a tragic incident like the one that led to the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman may be imminent.

It is reasonable to ask whether citizen patrol units and student journalists should have to face violence in ways that trained professionals come to expect. Both are stepping forward to fulfill a public service—one to inform, the other to protect. While budget crises led to this present change in practices, a valid question is the effect on the future of both professions. Student journalists are not financially compensated for the content they contribute to news organizations, nor are citizen anti-crime groups that patrol neighborhoods. It is difficult to get corporations and taxpayers to start paying for services they are accustomed to receiving for free.

Journalism schools welcome opportunities to train students in real and significant ways. However, our larger mission is to prepare them to become working professionals. We know the future will continue to be marked by technological change, but we trust that future will include compensation, and will be guided by journalism's core principles of ethics, transparency, and fairness. In similar fashion, we know that economic challenges are cyclical, and trust that legislators and community members in Josephine County will arrive at solutions that will lift them out of the current crisis.

As a society faced with uncertainties, we learn to measure and mitigate our actions—with a shared commitment to serving the greater good.

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