



Sustaining Local News: Student Contributions to a News-Academic Partnership

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Abstract

News-academic partnerships provide content that contributes to local media ecosystems, and, in some cases, fill in gaps in coverage for news outlets. No research to date has analyzed student contributions to news-academic partnerships to understand how this collaborative journalism model may serve audiences. This study analyzed stories published by students at a mid-Atlantic university as part of an ongoing distribution partnership with a local newspaper. Findings reveal students contributed stories with depth and breadth that extended beyond campus boundaries. This study adds to a growing body of work suggesting news-academic partnerships are a valuable model to sustain local news.

In regions where communities are experiencing dwindling sources for local news, academic institutions have stepped up – and stepped in – to replenish news coverage to their surrounding communities. Since 2005, the U.S. has lost more than two newspapers per week, and with it, two-thirds of its journalists (Local News Initiative, 2023). In 2023, newsrooms across the country eliminated more than 2,700 positions, noted as “the highest number of jobs cuts in the industry” (Darcy, 2023). Royal *et al.* (2020) contends that one of the responsibilities of higher education is to continually “adapt and adjust” to industry standards – this is particularly important to journalism programs as the media industry explores new approaches to identify, understand and engage its audience. One such approach is content production partnerships be-

tween news outlets and academic programs – known as news-academic partnerships. These collaborations involve multiple stakeholders: audiences, media outlets, universities, colleges administration and faculty, and students (Salahi & Smith, 2021). Students who participate in news-academic partnerships produce content that contributes to their local media ecosystems. Some partnerships require students to produce daily or weekly content that helps to fill the news gap for many local outlets who do not have the resources and staff, yet they are not intended to replace staffing at news outlets. No research to date has analyzed student-produced news stories under the news-academic partnerships to better gauge what student-produced work adds to the local news ecosystem.

While there is no complete formal database that

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provides an accurate count on the total number of news-academic partnerships in existence, The University of Vermont's Center for Community News estimates that, as of 2023, there are at least 130 partnerships that exist across the nation. These partnership structures are defined quite broadly, and may include student-run news services, university-owned local media, and collaborations between college courses and a local news outlet. For the purposes of this study, we chose to focus on a distribution partnership structure, which involves a local news outlet serving as a vessel for publishing student-produced news stories. The student-produced newspaper and local news outlet are both located in a state in the mid-Atlantic region. Content produced by the students is printed weekly and packaged as a single insert for the Friday edition of the local newspaper. The distinction of the content allowed us to accurately identify student contributions to the news-academic partnerships and analyze the content produced.

To holistically understand the dynamics of content produced through this particular news-academic partnership, it is necessary to analyze the types of news stories produced, as well as their locale to the community. While stakeholders in news-academic partnerships have implied that the works produced benefit the communities the news outlet serves, there is no scholarship that analyzes the content distributed to audiences. We hypothesize student contributions to the local news ecosystem keep a community informed at a time when local media are reducing news coverage because of resource constraints. Even when collaborating with well-resourced newsrooms, some student contributions can support the goals of enhancing news coverage by providing time intensive stories, embedded field reporting, and ultimately rebuilding trust in local communities. While this particular study did not look at experimental storytelling methods such as multimedia approaches to news, there are news-academic partnerships producing such work.

This quantitative study aimed to analyze the weekly news content produced by students at a state university between September 2021 to December 2022 (three academic semesters) as part of an ongoing news-academic partnership with its area's local newspaper. The university initiated the partnership with the news outlet more than five years ago. The local news outlet, however, provides independence to the student-produced news stories. Students choose

the stories they will cover through traditional editorial meetings, and the work produced is edited and formatted by the students. The work is then sent to the local newspaper for printing at a discounted price, which allows the local newspaper to distribute the university weekly paper as an insert in its Friday issues. Students are not paid by the local newspaper for their contributions.

Through a content analysis, we assessed the most prominent news story topics covered, length of stories, the presence of conflict, images, and the proximity of news covered to the campus. These measurements provided insight into the breadth of news coverage produced by students and distributed by the local daily newspaper to the broader community.

Conceptual Framework

Collaborative Journalism

According to Jenkins and Graves (2019), collaborative approaches to journalism allows news outlets to report on topics they would not typically cover as well as “engage with familiar subjects in more comprehensive ways.” While there are various collaborative models Jenkins and Graves (2019) contend the primary structures employed by news outlets are: single-subject reporting with contributions to the topic from journalists and non-journalists; partnered startup and legacy news organizations conducting a single investigation; a single newsroom that distributes its content across partnered outlets.

In recent years, media outlets have migrated toward collaborative journalism practices to expand engagement and reach within the communities it serves (Ali *et al.*, 2018). However, collaborative journalism as a methodology is not new, with international media outlets relying on the journalism model for primarily investigative news throughout the 1970s and well into the 1990s (Houston, 2010). Alfter (2016) alternatively uses “cross-border collaborative journalism” to conceptualize a modern-era collaborative journalism model, which encourages networking between journalists and/or media outlets. Ultimately, she argues the quality of journalism strengthens when there is collaboration because of allowed time to inquire and investigate on issues of importance to a community. Moreover, she contends, better quality journalism directly contributes to a more informed society.

News-academic partnerships serve as an example of an emerging collaborative model to help outlets enhance their news coverage. The pairing of news

outlets with academic programs provides a form of experiential learning within an academic setting while serving the professional needs of a newsroom. Just as there are many forms of news-academic partnerships, the conceptualization of “collaboration” can be ambiguous at times. Collaborative models of journalism—in whatever its decided form—can be more accurate, informative and impactful (Salahi & Smith, 2021/2022). It is worth exploring the types of content that contribute to the news ecosphere and the ultimate strategy of informing communities and sharing their stories.

Experiential Learning

News-academic partnerships are a form of experiential learning that can be an effective practice for students to retain fundamental and abstract concepts of the journalism discipline by undergoing concrete experiences and producing content through a process of active experimentation (Salahi & Smith, 2022). John Dewey’s (1938) theory of experiential learning posits that knowledge is socially constructed based on experiences. Environments create the context for learners to apply knowledge and skills so they feel connected to the content and integrated into a broader community. Learners then gain additional knowledge and understanding through the experiences, which can ultimately encourage critical thinking and informed citizenry.

Previous scholarship has explored the benefits to students of engaging in experiential learning opportunities to strengthen their practice by contributing professional-level work to community publications (Reed, 2018). In a case study examining experiential learning practices, Parks (2015) found that it is beneficial to students’ abilities to build news writing and editing skills, they need to actively engage in practical, professional-level work. Similarly, Kocic (2017) argued that production learning models such as experiential learning are useful for students to garner practical skills needed to be a professional journalist as well as serve the pedagogical needs of faculty.

Kolb (1984/2015) emphasizes the importance of engaging in a cycle of learning that involves four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. When applied to news-academic partnerships, this framework can help identify ways in which such partnerships can be designed to maximize learning and create meaningful, concrete experiences. Simply put,

these experiences help students learn how to think by allowing them to seek answers to questions and communicate their findings to diverse audiences—both practical outcomes in the journalism discipline. In this particular research, the students were responsible for reporting and producing content that was distributed by a local news outlet to a wider audience than a student media outlet. Thus, students inherently reflect on creating relevant journalism and actively contribute to the news ecosystem. While the students do not report to the local newspaper’s editor, nor are they assigned stories by professors, ultimately, the local news outlet collaborates with the student newsroom by amplifying their work. This distribution-based collaboration allows for students to think critically, self-direct and assume responsibility for the integrity of their work.

In addition to carrying out the pragmatic practices of journalism through the experiential learning opportunities, Kolb (1984/2015) contends it is important to take time to self-reflect on what was learned in order to further develop journalistic practices based on a variety of factors that may include individual skills development and audience engagement. Subsequently, self-assessment allows those engaged in the partnership to identify the underlying newsgathering principles that can inform new approaches, projects, or initiatives.

Previous scholarship aimed at understanding experiential learning in journalism education has explored training-based journalism education through Kolb’s conceptual framework. Specifically, scholars have aimed to understand how journalism education can balance teaching practical skills while also maintaining the higher education mission of critical inquiry (Evans, 2019; Reed, 2018; Greenberg, 2007). Greenberg (2007) ultimately suggested that journalism education can be enriched by teaching theory and practice simultaneously. Evans (2019) posited that journalism students would benefit greatly if they were able to spend their last year of higher education in the classroom in order to reflect and expand upon their experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom.

The high level of engagement in a news-academic partnership allows students to apply concepts and offers self-reflection critical to learning. Such a partnership allows students to practice standards of journalism outside of traditional coursework. At the macro level, news-academic partnerships in any form—including the distribution model studied here—

could build stronger connections between academia and industry. At the individual-student level, these opportunities bridge connections between classroom learning and provide the chance for students to exercise learned skills. By applying Kolb's theory of experiential learning to news-academic partnerships, both parties can engage in a meaningful cycle of learning that allows them to deepen their knowledge and skills, while also creating impactful work that benefits society.

Research Questions

This study sought to understand the types of stories students in a news-academic partnership produce, that—through a distribution partnership—serves as additional news coverage to a local publication. Specifically, through a content analysis, we examined the topics of stories, the proximity of the stories to campus, conflict presented within stories, as well as ongoing coverage of an issue of importance to the community. The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the most common types of topics that students contribute to a news-academic partnership?

RQ2: To what extent do students cover issues that extend beyond the campus community?

Methodology

To understand the type of contributions students make to a news-academic partnership, we conducted a content analysis of 19 issues of student produced newspaper, a weekly multi-page insert produced by students, that is included in a newspaper located in the same state where the university is located. A content analysis is “any technique for making inferences by systematically and *objectively* identifying special characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1968, p. 608, *emphasis in original*).

Our selective sample spanned three academic semesters (*student produced newspaper* halts publication during the summer)—from September 2021 to December 2022. Special editions of the insert that were dedicated to covering a single topic (i.e. housing guides for students), were excluded from analysis.

The news-academic partnership between the university and the city's local newspaper was chosen because the content created through the partnership was packaged in a way that allowed for readers to distinguish the content created by students, as opposed

to journalists on the local newspaper's staff. Distinguishable content made it easier for us to know which content to include in our analysis.

The unit of analysis for the content analysis was full news articles presented on the front page of the insert. The two authors analyzed 75 news articles according to a preset coding scheme created by the researchers. Intercoder reliability coding tests among two coders for all coded items reached the acceptable Scott's Pi agreement of .75 or higher for coding reliability in content analyses (Scott, 1955).

Manifest content—information that is easily visible, countable, and cataloged (Krippendorff, 2013)—measured was:

- Headline/title and subheading (if applicable)
- Proximity of news story to community (on campus, local, regional, state, outside the state, unclear to reader)
- Type of story (issue, unexpected event, entertainment, editorial/opinion)
- Topic of story (government/politics, crime, disaster/accident, business/economy, people, sports, arts/entertainment, etc.)
- Conflict present
- Occurrence of news story (first time presented, recurring)
- Photograph present
- Topic of photograph (person, place, stock photo, etc.)

Results

Of the 75 student-written stories that were analyzed, 53 (71%) were categorized as “issue” stories, relating to improving daily life, guiding people's decisions, or providing information about on-going community debates. Examples of these stories include headlines such as “Mon County BOE [Board of Education] reinforces pride flag ban;” “Gee says tuition hikes likely;” “WV lawmakers approve abortion ban.” A total of 12 stories (16%) were categorized as “unexpected events,” such as local crime, accidents and disasters; 10 front page stories (13%) were considered “soft news,” on feature topics such as human interest stories and personality profiles.

We created 14 topic categories to code stories (Table 1). A majority of the stories (n = 18) were categorized as health-related. This seems intuitive given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic during the time period of analysis and the changing policies of the university and recommendations of local agencies to

Table 1: News Story Topics

Topics of News Stories	Count
Health	18
Crime	15
Business/Economy	12
Government/Politics	9
Education	7
Public Moral Problems	6
Welfare	3
Sports	3
Arts/Entertainment	2
Other	0
Total	75

mitigate transmission. Crime (n = 15) and business (n = 15) stories that centered on situations and establishments both on and off campus were also prominent topics of coverage.

Stories classified as public moral problems centered on stories related to racial justice discrimination, bias and societal inequities such as civil action and community rallies. (i.e. “Black WVU leaders say more work needed to foster community for students of color”).

Students focused primarily on campus-related issues focused on events and issues that occurred on campus. In coding proximity of news stories, overwhelmingly, the stories were coded as “On Campus” (n=55). Fifteen out of the 75 coded stories were considered “local” or on campus but also within the city and its surrounding communities. Four of the coded stories were considered “state” stories or news that was considered useful across West Virginia. There were no stories coded for “outside the state” or “regional,” meaning hyperfocused on northern West Virginia but not including the county in which the campus resides.

Out of the 75 stories, 48 were coded for “conflict,” meaning there were multiple perspectives – including disagreements – presented in a story highlighting a

Table 2: Indicators of In-Depth Reporting (N=75)

Indicators of in-depth reporting	% of stories (n)
Conflicting viewpoints	68% (48)
Story jumps	56% (42)
Original images	68% (51)

controversy. Twenty-seven news articles were coded for no conflict, meaning they only presented information through a traditional journalism structure of answering the who, what, where, when, and why.

It was not always clear to the reader whether the story presented was new or recurring. Forty-nine of the 75 stories were not clear in their occurrence, while 19 of the stories were thought to be presented to the audience for the first time. Only 7 stories were coded as “recurring” stories, which were considered articles readers would recognize as a follow-up story or a story that references a recurring topic. Follow-up stories can indicate the time investment of student reporters and could denote importance of an issue to the community.

Another indication of time investment is story length. The majority of news stories (n=42) were long enough to jump inside the newspaper for additional coverage, also signaling issue importance within the community. Some examples of topics that spanned beyond the front page include a feature story on the local transit system, profiles of new businesses, and policy changes by the university, such as Covid-19-related mask vaccine mandates. Thirty-three of the stories were contained to the front page, while the remainder of stories continued onto inside pages.

Topic importance to a news organization can also be measured by the presence of additional resources into news coverage, including supplemental reporting methods such as photographs and infographics. The news articles were coded for photographs. Out of the 75 articles coded, 51 of them had photographs to supplement their articles. The photos coded were primarily original photos taken by the students of people (n=25), while 15 of the photographs featured a place. Eleven of the photographs were coded for “other” (n=5) and “generic” (n=6). “Other” photos ranged from screenshots of messages to a data graph. “Generic” photos included images of an on-campus

emergency call box and a piece of uncooked chicken.

Discussion

News-academic partnerships create valuable content contributions for stakeholders—audiences, media outlets, universities and colleges, administration and faculty, and students—and may supplement news coverage with already-established resources. As the results of this study indicate, students produced work that contributed to their local media ecosystems. The findings revealed stories related to health, crime and business were most prominently featured on the front page(RQ1). These topics seemed to reflect the news cycle of the period of time the content was published (fall 2021 - fall 2022), when students were returned to campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, not all of the health, crime, or business stories were related to COVID-19. While topics such as health, crime, and business traditionally are important news to any community – no matter the size and/or locale – student-contributed news on such important topics benefits the local media ecosystem by generating a form of collaborative journalism (Jenkins & Graves, 2019). A news-academic partnership such as the one between the student produced newspaper and the local newspaper generates a broader amount of information to be disseminated because multiple layers of the surrounding community can be covered. These students are also uniquely positioned to contribute these types of stories since they are embedded in the university community and have access to sources, especially in stories that include conflicts or multiple perspectives.

Collaborative journalism practices are increasing (Ali *et al.*, 2018), and a distribution partnership such as the one between this particular student produced newspaper and the local news outlet is a partnership model that can be replicated by any local news outlet partnering with an academic program with a fully operational print and/or online news publication. This pairing, like other news-academic partnerships, provides enhanced news coverage to the city’s residents and assists with professional needs of the local newspaper’s newsroom. The partnership also fulfills the role of higher education institutions in providing experiential learning opportunities for students and a gateway into the profession. While it’s difficult to measure, within the framework of this study, the impact of the students’ stories to the readership in this community, the findings suggest that the contribu-

tions provide news and information that supplements the regional news ecosystem, which likely reduces the density of news voids.

We could not get a clear understanding of whether students continued their coverage on particular topics through follow-up stories. These findings indicate that students are engaging in experiential learning (Salahi & Smith, 2021); that is, they are practicing the principles of journalism by seeking out multiple sources of information to write stories that provide a more holistic view of a topic of importance to the community they serve (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). As Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984/2015) posit, this form of experiential learning creates an environment where students can feel confident in and connected to the profession as well as their community through active experimentation and reflect on their experience to inform their future work.

The news-academic partnership experiential learning opportunity should not be a one-off for students, though. As Kolb (1984/2015) posited, experiential learning is not simply “doing.” Kolb suggests experiential learning is a process, and requires that students build critical thinking skills. News-academic partnerships allow for students to practice the skills they’ve learned while, in an academic setting, and reflect on what they are producing and why they are producing it through editorial and advisor meetings. Ideally, the work they have produced reflects the society in which they live. This reflection allows students to go beyond the traditional journalistic five “W’s” so that upon graduating from the university setting, students are professionally and intellectually prepared to contribute impactful stories that serve a democratic society.

Limitations

This research was limited to a single news-academic partnership in which it was easy to distinguish student contributions through a separate insert within an established newspaper. The findings may not represent the types of content or contributions students in other news-academic partnerships may produce. Moreover, we only analyzed stories within an 18-month stretch, which may have limited the types of content produced, especially given the moment of time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this limitation, analysis of student-produced content in a news-academic partnership is important to understand the ways in which student contributions could

help fill news gaps and sustain community news. Further research can expand upon these initial findings.

Additionally, while we know the information produced by the students was available to the general local newspaper's audience, we do not want to overstate the students' contributions to the newspaper. It is unclear whether the stories that were included in student produced newspaper insert were already covered by reporters in the local newspaper or if the students' work truly complemented the newspaper's coverage.

To more clearly understand the impact of news-academic partnerships, future research should examine the extent to which communities may benefit from the student-contributed coverage, as ultimately many of these partnerships aim to serve the public with robust and trusted local news. Future research should also garner students' perceptions of news-academic partnerships, as students bear the weight as journalism learners and practitioners. Understanding students' perceptions of their contributions may provide insights into the types of stories they might contribute and the sources they select to include. Additionally, future research could expand categories of analyses to include measuring diversity (i.e. race, gender) in sources included within a story.

Student reporters for the news outlet studied were financially compensated by the university-based newsroom. The news outlet did not provide additional compensation for their contributions to the newspaper. Our previous research indicates that this is a common compensation structure for news-academic partnerships. In some cases, students are not financially compensated. While we acknowledge the importance of a paid structure for news-academic partnerships to eliminate a possible barrier of entry into the journalism profession, other compensation structures include course credit toward student graduation and/or a pipeline for future employment by the news organization they have partnered with.

Universities play a critical role in the communities where they reside, and it is important to understand the positive and negative effects of a university on its community, especially those that rely on these institutions as an economic source. Challenges to consider include how much, if any, editorial control academic institutions may have in the content that is being produced by their faculty and students; how much, if any, legal representation an academic institution may provide to ensure legal protections to faculty and students who engage in content production for

a public audience; how much, if any, ownership does an academic institution retain over the content that is produced within the partnership.

Conclusion

More journalism programs are engaging in partnerships with local news outlets. These partnerships are often created to offer students experiential opportunities while providing resources to news outlets. Collaborative journalism endeavors such as those similar to the partnership between student produced newspaper and the local newspaper also help establish community identity, foster university/community relationships, spur economic development, and create cultural awareness, which are all necessary to provide meaningful experiences for students and help sustain news organizations.

For academicians, as revealed in our previous study (Salahi & Smith, 2022) examining the motivations of faculty who lead news-academic partnerships, these endeavors provide a personal and professionally enriching form of advising; partnerships are seen by some faculty as their direct connection to the news industry, and their way of investing to sustain local news through a partnership that distributes student-produced work. This content analysis, in particular, provides a more focused look at the type of contributions made within one collaborative structure that can serve as an example of how a partnership might help bolster local news coverage.

The primary purpose of this study was to understand student contributions to news content to their broader community. The students produced a large quantity of news articles ranging from health stories to business profiles. The findings revealed that the students who contribute to the news-academic partnership serve a primary role in the collaboration as their content provides the local newspaper readers with additional stories about campus news that impacts the broader community. Despite the useful findings of this particular research, it is important to understand that engaging in partnerships is a complex process that requires commitment from multiple stakeholders: students, news outlets, community members, faculty, and university administration.

For news-academic partnerships to succeed, students' roles within news-academic partnerships require time, inquiry, motivation, confidence, and journalistic ethics. Additionally, the community the outlet serves needs to trust in journalism, the journalistic

process, and engagement in the news source. Faculty who help to lead the partnerships need to provide time, resources, motivation/incentives, mentorship, and inquiry. University administration's commitment must entail financial resources, trust in faculty and students, and reciprocity to the local community (Salahi & Smith, 2021/2022).

While news-academic partnerships require extensive commitment from students, media organizations, community members, faculty, and university administration, we contend these partnerships are worth the investments because they go beyond simply providing experiential learning for students; they also generate resources for news outlets, community information to the audience, mentorship opportunities for faculty (Salahi & Smith, 2021/2022), and the potential of campus-to-career pipelines for universities (Salahi & Smith, 2021/2022). Ultimately, these partnerships are meaningful because they have the potential to foster healthy symbiotic relationships between a university and the local community, which in turn has the potential to restore public trust in journalism.

Growing research on news-academic partnerships has shown that academic institutions play an important role in contributing to the local news ecosystem and, in some cases, serve as a main provider of news and information in areas with little to no source of local news. This suggests that news-academic partnerships are more than experiential learning opportunities for students; they are a business model worth adopting as local news looks for sustainable economic options in uncertain times.

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