

An Ethical Citizen-driven Community Journalism

A Proposal Submitted in Partial Completion of Master of Arts Program

Journalism and Mass Communication

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### Abstract

The project addresses journalism on the local level, where community newspapers and nearby metropolitan papers have reduced and consolidated staffs, resulting in reduced coverage of local government and businesses. This set of circumstances leaves citizens with limited recourse: (1) continue to exist in a news vacuum that leaves them vulnerable to the vagaries of unchecked government and business decisions and susceptible to an unreliable social media or (2) have citizens take on the responsibility for filling the void themselves. This project attempts to take on the latter by providing a website with resources for citizens who would like to raise the standard of journalism in their communities, be it a town, city or school. This proposal emphasizes an ethical approach that seeks to get participants to define what ethical, quality journalism is and gain an appreciation of how this journalism is conducted. The website will provide resources for interested citizens to learn about journalism ethics, apply them to their current news providers, determine a new standard, and, if so motivated, produce their own journalism within the determined parameters. The resources will be available on [bristoledition.org](http://bristoledition.org), a website that anyone may access.

### An Ethical Citizen-driven Community Journalism

The press's efforts to remedy its financial woes have resulted in a retreat from the social responsibility model of the press, resulting in readers, especially those in smaller or mid-sized markets, receiving less news overall, but more importantly what news they do receive is less substantive. At the same time and in concert with the retreat from the social responsibility model, many of these community newspapers have been sold and combined or closed all together, creating an even greater or imbalanced news hole. In John (2007), the author found that a shift from the social responsibility theory of the press tended to leave its audience less informed about substantive issues. His study covers "a mid-sized Midwest community over time" (p. 2). At about the same time and continuing through this decade, corporate players, such as the Journal Register Co., began buying smaller community publications, consolidating printing operations and news staff, which negatively affected coverage while appearing to address the financial issues. Writing on his blog, Mutter (2008) reported JRC adopted a strategy that called for "aggregating neighboring newspapers into ever-larger clusters that would make it possible to sell advertising more efficiently while lowering the costs of producing the publications." The strategy resulted in short-term profits but long-term deficits in local coverage. Eventually, JRC's experience resulted in a series of bankruptcies, reorganizations, and sell-offs. At time of its first bankruptcy, JRC owned "20 daily and 159 other newspapers, serving parts of Philadelphia, Michigan, Connecticut, the Cleveland area and New York," with about 3,500 employees (The Associated Press, 2009). Around 1998, JRC owned 24 dailies and 185 non-dailies in Connecticut, Philadelphia, Ohio, central New England, and Capital-Saratoga and Mid-Hudson, New York, regions ("History of Journal," n.d.).

The trend of this diminishment in coverage in these smaller and mid-size markets is national and international. Sass (2017) wrote: “It may be a matter of some concern for readers that scores of local newspapers are trading hands in a wave of consolidation across the country, often leaving longtime family owners for bigger corporate bosses. And they may or may not share the same connection and commitment to the communities.” While Sass focused on United States, a recent study of local news providers across Canada concluded, “Newsrooms outside the big cities are closing, and with them goes the critical information citizens require for everyday life” (Lindgren, Corbett, & Hodson, 2017).

Larger publications do little to fill this void. Tippet (2017) interviewed the coordinator of the National Rural Assembly, who in speaking of Athens, Ga., with its population of 125,000, said, “If I’m reading The New York Times online, I’m intrigued by the flyover picture that gets told of, especially, rural communities. There’s not a whole lot of embedded journalists at the moment who are, I think, spending the real time it’s gonna take to tell the nuanced, complex story of historical trauma in rural communities...I’m struck by how that complexity is not there.” In a separate podcast, internationally renowned author Ian McEwan bemoaned the loss of local coverage: “...no experienced journalists are there to keep an eye on town halls and their politics and the whole pork barrel business that might overwhelm us” (Clayson, 2016).

Smarsh, in The New York Times, wrote: “The demise of local news was the backdrop of my early career, making me keenly aware of how a dearth of local reporting resources is inextricably woven into today’s divisive political climate” (2018). She concluded: “Coastal media is often criticized for inadequate ‘parachute journalism’ into Middle America, but it shouldn’t be New York’s job to understand Nebraska. Nebraska understands Nebraska” (2018).

### **Literature Review**

The literature shows that professional journalists have been grappling with the phenomena of citizen and participatory journalism for decades. It also shows that ethical values journalists have developed over the years to maintain their integrity, ones that dominated the editor as gatekeeper model of the press, are ones citizens now need to adopt as their own (Ethical Journalism Network, 2015). In addition, the literature shows many news media have been experimenting with various roles for citizens to fill, working in concert with their staff or organization. From its earliest roots, the literature reports a constructionist educational model is an effective way of teaching people to fill new roles.

### **Professional Versus Lay Roles**

One hurdle for professionals when it comes to new roles for citizens is the division which they see between professionals and lay people. In “The tension between professional control and open participation: Journalism and its boundaries,” Lewis wrote, “While it is true that other media professionals are redefining their roles in a participatory media environment...., journalism, ..., has found digital media and digital culture to be particularly unsettling to its professional paradigm” (2012, p. 3). In Lewis’s account, journalism “lacks the trappings of a classical profession: It has no monopoly on the training and certification of its workforce, nor has the means to prevent others from engaging in its work, and, while it has self-policing mechanisms of ethical codes, its power to enforce compliance is minimal” (p. 6). Despite the classical trappings of professionalism, Lewis concluded, society has benefitted from journalistic professionalism with its ethical standards (p. 13). In the same breath, he wrote, however, it is a mistake to think that even in the days of the press as gatekeeper “end-user participation [was] unique to the read-write web” (p. 16).

Lewis wrote that in today's environment "what sets apart the present media is the *ease* with which individuals may participate in the creation and distribution of media, on a scale and with a reach unimaginable in earlier times" (p. 16). This development, one of convergence, where "longstanding distinctions between media creation and media consumption [have become] increasingly fluid," has resulted "not merely in a technological phenomenon, but also a cultural one ..." (p. 17). Whether under the title of "participatory culture" or "digital culture," "end users feel enabled and encouraged to participate in the creation and circulation of media" (p. 17). This greater participation on such an expansive level achieves "normative aims of collective wisdom and well-being" (p. 19). Throughout, this participation bridges individual agency and the concerns of the group using digital means to solve group problems (p. 19).

Lewis stated that "there is emerging evidence--small but significant--that journalism's ideological commitment to control, rooted in an institutional instinct toward protecting legitimacy and boundaries, may be giving way to a hybrid logic of adaptability and openness: a willingness to see audiences on a more peer level, to appreciate their contributions, and to find normative purpose in transparency and participation" (p. 23). In effect, Lewis wrote, as journalism shifts from product to process, "journalist and audiences both recognize, and respect, what citizens can contribute when news becomes a mutually shared process, requiring forms of 'work' from both groups" (p. 24). Lewis concluded the resulting "ethic of participation" is a natural outgrowth of this professional-participatory tension and is accepted as normal where digital journalism is concerned (p. 24). In the end, Lewis anticipated that these circumstances might "lead to a revised logic for journalism: one that preserves certain ethical practices and boundaries that lend legitimacy, abandons jurisdictional claims that have lost their currency in the new environment, and embraces fresh values, ...." (p. 25).

In Campbell (2014), the author “argues that fully understanding and situating citizen journalism requires moving beyond the journalism-centered focus which dominates the literature towards a consideration of citizen journalism that incorporates theories and practices of citizenship alongside those of journalism” (p. 4). He acknowledged the divide between those who “argue that anyone can be a journalist” and “those who express concerns about the undervaluing of professional skills, training and values” of the journalist (p. 4). He distinguished between two theories: that of the informed citizen and the monitorial citizen, as they relate to citizens and journalism, concluding that these models fall short of capturing the complexities of journalism in the age of social media (p. 9). Citizenship, according to Campbell, eclipses a legal definition. He wrote: “Seen from a radical democracy perspective, citizens’ media materialize as important sites where citizenship is forged” (p. 10).

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014), wrote, “Where journalism’s role once was to simply provide information as a tool of self-governance, it now becomes a role of providing citizens with the tools they need to extract knowledge for themselves from the undifferentiated flood of rumor, propaganda, gossip, fact, assertion, and allegation the communications systems now produces” (p. 290). They proposed inviting “the community into the process by which the news is produced” (p. 290). They recommend three areas where the process might begin: (1) transparency, as the “beginning of a new connection between the journalist and the citizen”; (2) partnering with citizens who can help “gather news in ways more sophisticated than we imagine,” by “approaching them as a new group of sources, organizing their intelligence, and vetting and synthesizing that intelligence into a whole”; and (3) “listening when the public reacts to the news” (pp. 290-291). They concluded, “The more active citizens become in the news, in turn, the more responsibility they begin to bear for it” (p. 291). In a previous work, Kovach and

Rosenstiel (2010) suggested both an expanding role for journalists as well as citizens: “the new or next journalism means a new role of being something of a Socratic teacher, in which the presentation of the news is accompanied by material, perhaps, even tutorials, to help develop the skills needed to turn that material into knowledge” (p. 201).

### **Ethics as a Common Denominator**

Increasingly, with the advent of social media, the literature shows that lay people are performing, as White said, “acts of journalism” (Ethical Journalism Network, 2015). He added, “although, you might say the door is open to far more people being engaged in journalism, that does not dilute the importance of standards and quality in the work that is being done” (2015). In addressing freedom of expression, White made clear distinctions between it and journalism:

Free expression, it's great and it's liberating and it's an important part of democracy but it's not journalism. Journalism is quite distinct. Because journalism is not free expression in that sense: it's press freedom; it's the freedom of journalists to express themselves but within a framework of values, and that framework of values are the ethics of journalism. It's about self-restraint. Journalists don't allow themselves free expression. They constrain their expression inside the ethical framework of the work that they do. (2015)

A remedy for White, then, becomes a matter of educating the lay person about journalistic ethics: “We need to work out how we can transfer the values of journalism into the whole online communications spectrum” (2015).

Where “morals determine our own present actions,” “often affected by religion, by society,” basically, “our own personal actions,” ethics “are an external system of codes of conduct that [journalism] professionals have developed in order to justify the special place which [they] see [they] have in a functioning society and democracy” (Ethical Journalism Network,

2018). Patterson & Wilkins (2011) wrote: “Moral systems are not synonymous with ethics. *Ethics begins when elements within a moral system conflict.* Ethics is less about the conflict between right and wrong than it is about the conflict between equally compelling (or equally unattractive) alternatives and the choices that must be made between them” (p. 4).

Kidder (2003) defined ethics as “not a blind impartiality, doling out right and wrong according to some stone-cold canon of ancient and immutable law” (p. 50). He called ethics “a warm and supremely human activity that cares enough for others to want right to prevail” (p. 50). He wrote “ethical fitness is like character – which, we’ve been told, is what you are in the dark, when no one’s looking” (p. 51). It is “private and personal. But it’s also public and social” (p. 51).

Merrill (1997) addressed broad ethical considerations and a blanket definition of journalistic ethics: “A journalist must *care* about doing the right thing, must *want* to be ethical; such a sincere desire will lead the journalist to seek out moral wisdom as a guide to ethical decision making” (p. 28). It is this development, “ethically through various stages,” that a person evidences “greater ethical maturity and sophistication” (p. 28). The framework for this journalistic maturity exists throughout the profession, from the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics, to the ethical standards for specific publications, such as The New York Times with an entire catalogue of topics, Politico with a single page, and National Public Radio with a handbook. Many media organizations have created ethics courses for students, professional, and lay people. Among these, Poynter’s News University offers the course, “Ethics of Journalism,” which can be completed online over time. The Ethical Journalism Network offers “The Ethical Journalist’s Toolkit.”

Ethics is not simply the concern of journalists. A growing number of institutions have made ethical decision-making tools available to the public via the internet. Harvard University's *The Guidebook to its GoodWork Toolkit* (2010), a publication of its GoodWork Project, features "a collection of intriguing narratives and dilemmas" that workers face in their attempt to "carry out work of high quality," none with a clear-cut solution but intended "as invitations, to ponder how work is accomplished, and how it might be carried out in a better way" (p. 5). Among these is an example of a young journalist grappling with an ethical issue of her own (p. 75). In addition, "The Good Project," a part of the GoodWork Project, features a digital tool, "Ethical Dilemmas and Value-Based Decisions," with a module, entitled "To Print or Not to Print" ("To Print," n.d.).

### **Projects Featuring Citizens Involved in Journalism Projects**

The literature shows that projects featuring citizen and participatory journalism began as technology enabling such participation became available. With the increasing availability of technology as it related to the production of and dissemination of the news, early on the MIT Media Lab and its Electronic Publishing Group engaged in several projects under Bender, who espoused the following on his homepage under "Thoughts on the future of news (circa 1996)":

The application of technology to the future of the news is not only about the efficiency of professional production and distribution of news. It is also about providing the news consumer with tools that facilitate creation, access and use of news in both individual and communal contexts. While the adoption of digital communication technology by the news industry will enhance consumer access to information it must also support news as a "community service." News as a service model is one in which the consumer of news is an active engaged participant. (n.d.)

Picard (2005) found, “Learners construct new knowledge most effectively when they are in the process of constructing something external which they can examine for themselves and discuss with others”:

Learners feel differently about the knowledge when they experience themselves as active participants with control over (and personal involvement in) the learning process. And the way they feel about the knowledge profoundly influences what they will do with it and especially how they reflect on it, which in turn influences how it grows and connects. (p. 262.)

In addition, Picard found that participants in print and radio journalism, “facilitated by easy-to-use tools, led to an active debate over the content of their stories and, more importantly, the processes that they engage in as media producers” and that the “collaborative editing process seems to help them develop a critical stance towards traditional media. ... they begin to understand the biases and critical thought processes that are the norm for professional journalists” (p. 262).

Turpeinen (2000) pursued community publishing in light of social learning. He characterized community as having three attributes: purpose, identity, and communication (p. 19). He included common goals and projects. He conceded each community is different: “They have personality like individuals, they have differing needs and motivations. Community members learn from one another's experiences, set common strategies, develop a shared vocabulary, and have common norms and means” (p. 19). Community communication can be understood “as the evolving script, which creates and sustains the individual within the group” (p. 19). Ultimately, Turpeinen concluded that the group he worked with, which happened to be

senior citizens, benefitted socially from their participation in the group as well as producing journalism.

Driscoll (2008), in his work with community journalism, found himself allied with MIT and several students working on doctoral programs, including Turpeinen. Driscoll wrote: “The rise of citizen journalism has been spawned by the invention of the Worldwide Web while being abetted by the mainstream media’s drift toward a fixation with the bottom line and away from its responsibilities as a servant of the public” (p. 13). In posing the question, “Why does MIT (and the Media Lab) spend so much time working with communities?” he responded: “The two most obvious answers are (1) altruism and (2) the need to test technology in real-world settings.... A third aspect, which especially pertains to the Media Lab, has to do with the sometimes-controversial educational philosophy called ‘constructionism.’” (p. 70). He quoted from a chapter by Edith S. Ackermann, “The cycle of self-directed learning is...an iterative process by which learners invent for themselves the very tools and mediations that best support the exploration of intriguing ideas” (pp. 71-72). Driscoll included three projects he was personally involved with that developed around constructionism: The Melrose (MA) Mirror Silverstringers, The Junior Journal, and The Rye Reflection Surfers. The Mirror and Rye Reflections involved senior citizens who produced their own web-based publications. The Junior Journal involved high school students from around the globe. The latter had a six-year run (p. 85). Of the senior-led publications, Rye Reflections is no longer accessible online with no end of publication date, and The Melrose Mirror ceased publication in December 2017. Driscoll concluded: “Philosophically the ideal situation would be to have community-journalism groups that maintain their independence with assistance from the media organizations in such a way that both benefit” (p. 85). The media needs to experiment “in the citizen-journalism realm, not to add

to circulation or add to the bottom line. With the public good as the only goal, the question that needs to be resolved is how everyone can best co-exist” (p. 85). He posed the following question: “How about a recipe that includes one part independent community-journalism group, one part media news operation and one part liaison person bridging the two with some form of compensation as a binding agent? Stir, but don’t mix. Of course an alternative recipe could call for all to maintain their own independence, co-existing as competitors, friendly or otherwise” (p. 85). He included scholastic publications as potentially fulfilling this role, citing programs begun under the aegis of The New York Times, but cautioned that they “tend to suffer from the top-down syndrome” (p. 85).

The ISeeChange website touts on its stories page: “Weather and climate change reporting from the ground up. You’ve posted and we’ve listened! Read in depth reports on the changes people are observing in their local environments and how these observations relate to trends or patterns scientists are seeing” (“I See Change,” n.d.). Koski described ISeeChange as “a news project that involves ordinary people at every stage in the climate reporting process” (n.d.). She continued, “It’s a departure from citizen journalism, which leaves reporting in the hands of well-intentioned amateurs, and user-generated content, which casts journalists as curators over material of widely varying quality and reliability. This approach treats audiences as collaborators in a professionally managed reporting process, deepening audience involvement and even improving the quality of stories reporters produce” (Koski, n.d.).

Curious City, “an ongoing news experiment at WBEZ, online at [wbez.org](http://wbez.org) and on the radio dial around Chicago at 91.5 FM,” has for its mission “to include the public in editorial decision-making, make journalism more transparent and strengthen multimedia coverage about Chicago, the surrounding region and its people (past or present)” (“Curious City,” n.d.). Jennifer

Brandel is the journalist behind the program, which she calls “public-powered journalism” (Koski, n.d.). “Curious City started as an experiment—to test whether audiences had good story ideas, and what would happen if journalists gave them some editorial control” (Koski, n.d.).

City Bureau, also of Chicago, publishes the following on its home page: “Journalism, civic engagement and public tools for the public good--follow us as we create a media lab built on people-power in Chicago” (City Bureau, n.d.). Its mission describes the program as “a nonprofit civic journalism lab based in Woodlawn on the South Side of Chicago. We bring journalists and community members together in a collaborative spirit to produce equitable media coverage, encourage civic participation and hold powerful forces to account” (“Our Mission,” n.d.). City Bureau offers citizen reporting programs for early career journalists as well as veteran reporters, a public newsroom drawing members of the media and citizens each week to learn more about the reporting process, and documentary training for community members.

### **Project Defined**

The problem this project addresses is how to get Nebraskans to understand Nebraskans, or to get people on the local level to understand their news needs and effectively resolve the gap in coverage. The literature calls upon readers to take more responsibility for their news habits as in this charge by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2011) who wrote, “In the twenty-first century, we are becoming new citizens, responsible for ourselves in new ways.... Those of us who take advantage of this will be energized by the stimulation of learning and growing” (p. 167). Working from an ethical perspective, this project proposes to answer this problem by creating a website that provides readers with tools to take more responsibility for their news habits, including steps to produce their own journalism.

Journalism, as it has developed, has created its own ethos. This ethos is protected by the First Amendment, and yet it provides checks and balances of its own—an ethical code—having been tested over time, with its practitioners continuing to refine and hone their understanding of these codes as they practice journalism. The premise upon which this project is based is that the more familiar the public becomes with these, the more they will appreciate what the news media does and the more likely they will be in a position to make decisions about their own news habits, from determining the quality of the type of coverage they should expect from their local news providers to producing their own journalism, if necessary.

Activities and resources developed through this project will be available online at [bristoledition.org](http://bristoledition.org), a citizen-driven website of mine intended to model journalism of this type. Initially, the content will be provided by people I have approached to write columns or blogs and a few others who participated in sessions with volunteers solicited to discuss this ethical approach to citizen-driven journalism. All material associated with this project will be included in a tab titled, “Citizen-driven journalism,” to be found on the navigation menu across the top of the website. Other tabs on the navigation menu will be “News,” “Arts,” “Opinion,” “About us,” and others. Once a person clicks on the “Citizen-driven journalism” tab, a pull-down menu will appear with five to seven choices, including but not limited to the following: “Ethics as a foundation,” “Ethics in action,” “Ethical exercises,” “Ethical partnering” and “An ethical organization.” Each of the topics will include an introduction, definitions, exercises/lessons, links to resources and recommendations. Among the anticipated outcomes is for anyone or any group referring to the website to be able to understand and apply an ethical framework to journalism, and within this framework, to determine goals for their own community news needs, decide whether and how to advocate for these goals, and if they choose, to produce journalism

that meets these goals or at least challenges existing media to raise their own standards. Among the skills to be acquired are setting ethical guidelines for reporting, conducting editorial meetings, and implementing an audit to ensure that the ethical values of accuracy, independence, impartiality, humanity, and accountability are respected from the personal to the professional and the organizational levels.

The target for this proposal is any group of citizens who might be inclined to take on a project of this sort; however, other targets would be educators at all levels of instruction from middle school to the college level. The ultimate goal is to provide material that advances a more journalism-savvy readership, with citizens taking more responsibility for the quality of coverage of their community, including being able to recognize when and how they commit their own acts of journalism. To ensure that the final product receives proper attention, the website will produce journalism of its own, specifically coverage of its community based on choices by local decision makers. The website will continue to function after the project is completed. A model of this ethical approach to citizen-driven journalism, it will also continue to be a source for promoting and publishing accounts of further progress, including sponsoring workshops and events, and engaging citizens and challenging them to maintain ethical fitness. In other words, the website will be a hub that prompts local citizens to not only do their own journalism but track their progress for others to follow. For this website, several volunteers who participated in this project work have continued to volunteer. Others have been solicited for their knowledge of the community and interest in writing about it.

### **Methodology**

I have consulted literature on citizen-, community- and participatory-journalism, delved into ethical journalism resources and explored current efforts to engage readers in determining,

evaluating, and affecting the quality and content of journalism as it exists in a specific locale. In preparation for this project, I also consulted with a group of volunteers who gathered specifically to discuss how to conduct local journalism within this ethical framework scenario. These individuals responded to Facebook posts targeted to their community and personal requests from me. None had to have any experience with journalism. Of those who responded, one took a journalism course in college. The conversations during consultations asked for members of the group to react to the research and questions about how best to develop resources. Among their concerns were negotiating practicalities, such as, how to, ethically, manage their time as well as conflicts that might arise when reporting on people with whom they live, work and sometimes socialize. The final project will not be limited to the concerns of the group, but it will be informed by their concerns in light of the literature and resources provided from the literature review.

### **Limitations of Project**

This project addresses one set of people in a specific location. Consequently, it will not provide a one-answer-fits-all scenario, but a process for people in different locations to determine what works best for them. In addition, the project will not deal with financial issues nor will it deal with legal issues beyond introducing basic concepts. It will, however, provide resources for interested parties to pursue each of these issues on their own. It will not delve deeply into social media and its various incarnations. Only basic information about technology requirements and websites will be provided. Rather, the focus will be on the development of an “ethical fitness” model, as defined by Kidder (2003): “First, it’s what you let others know you to be—the way you communicate to others an openness to ethical concern, a willingness to engage tough moral issues, an invitation to challenge your actions by your values. Second, ethical fitness

doesn't exist in a personal vacuum.... Third, ethical fitness benefits mightily from an organizational culture" (pp. 54-55). This resource would be for those interested in the problem of local news coverage, and the resource would guide them through the first steps leading them to evaluate local coverage and produce their own journalism. This resource, in other words, is a jumping off point, with the understanding that anyone motivated to participate will learn along the way. The primary concern of this project, then, is to provide regular citizens with the ethically-centered, critical thinking skills associated with journalism, so that they can appreciate quality journalism when they see it, evaluate the journalism in their community, and take action to improve coverage, through reporting and commentary or by challenging the status quo. Once the project has been completed and the website is operating regularly, those involved will pursue avenues to publicize and promote the website in their locale and adjacent areas.

### **Conclusion**

A small project of this type encourages citizens of communities where local journalism is either so diminished it has become a shell of its former self or that finds itself dependent on parachute reporting for vital information. The project invokes an ethical foundation or framework to promote understanding of how journalism works. Using resources that are readily available online, the project aims to create a website, [bristoledition.org](http://bristoledition.org), that guides others through the process of learning about journalism and provides them with a model. A goal of this project is to address the needs of citizens who would like to assume some responsibility for raising the standard of journalism that exists in their locale. It assumes that an ethical framework, allowing citizens to get to the heart of journalistic enterprise, provides these citizens with a seat at the table, so to speak, in the quickest manner. A long-range goal would be to develop a plan to reach educators, such as those in secondary schools and post-secondary institutions, but only

after the website establishes itself. Overall, the hope is that anyone who uses this resource will develop that ethically framed, journalism-based critical thinking fast becoming a requirement of contemporary society.

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