

Hyper-local learning: enhancing employability, sustaining professional practice

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Abstract. This paper reviews, as a case study in enhancing teaching and learning on journalism programmes, the development of a ‘hyper-local’ news website set up in an English city by a freelance journalist on which students volunteer as reporters and editors. The review finds that the news site met initial expectations in providing a supportive space to develop students’ skills and knowledge, but that it later developed in unexpected trajectories. The project became a space for innovation and experimentation in journalism practice and the paper concludes that such a venture can sustain professional values, knowledge, skills and practices; encourage innovation and enhance journalism students’ employability. There was evidence that the project contributed to community sustainability and helped to resolve dilemmas which arise when journalism students undertake unpaid placements to gain work experience in media organisations which might be making editorial staff redundant.

Key words: *Journalism education; hyper-local; employability; professional sustainability; community sustainability*

Introduction

This paper examines, as a case study in enhancing teaching and learning on journalism programmes in higher education, the development of a ‘hyper-local’ news website. This was set up in September 2009 in Newcastle upon Tyne by freelance journalist Ian Wylie, a former section-editor of the British national newspaper *The Guardian*, in collaboration with the author, who leads the journalism programmes at Newcastle University. The reporters and

‘content providers’ and latterly editors, were made up of journalism students working on the project as volunteers.

The review finds that the news site met the initial, but narrow, expectations of tutors in providing a valuable and supportive space in which student journalists could develop traditional skills and knowledge and explore the role of journalism in a community. But it developed, and continues to do so, in a number of unexpected and (in terms of journalism education) beneficial directions. This evolution has been driven in part by a desire to make the endeavour self-sustaining as an entrepreneurial enterprise; by constant critical reflection on the role(s) of journalism within the community and the manner in which the project could meet the community’s needs; and by seizing opportunities to experiment and try something new. This has resulted in collaborations involving local schools; civic institutions; civil society; the BBC; the BALTIC contemporary Arts Centre and the Turner Prize contemporary art exhibition on Tyneside; independent media professionals working in the area. At the time of writing, journalism workshops within the local community are being organised to share skills and knowledge and tell untold stories. The unexpected trajectories the project has taken have been characterised by development of personal and institutional relationships and mutually beneficial networks of support within and beyond its immediate community of use and the seizure of opportunities which arise as a result of these relationships to meet those perceived needs and explore new directions in journalism.

The enterprise has thus become a space in which experimentation takes place in new ways of doing journalism and producing new journalistic products, by-products and processes, both online and offline. The paper concludes that such an experience can enhance journalism students’ employability and sustain professional values, knowledge skills and practices while encouraging innovation at a time of significant transformation for journalism. It found evidence that such journalism has a role in enhancing the sustainability of communities, and it is upon such communities having an interest in journalism that journalism, and journalists, find sustenance – a virtuous circle.

But the paper notes that the development of such a project is characterised by a complex range of dynamics and these dynamics are likely to be different, and generate different outcomes, in different communities and localities. So while the study is indicative of practices and processes which are likely to be of benefit, it does not offer a template for universal application. One particular benefit of such projects is, however, that they offer alternative means of gaining work experience to student journalists who are sometimes encouraged to undertake unpaid placements in media organisations which might be making their own editorial staff redundant.

Work and work-place experience in journalism education

Experience of the workplace – variously referred to as placements, internships and more formally work-based learning - has a long tradition in education programmes which specifically address vocational subjects and is seen as valuable by educators, students, governments and industry alike. Reeder (2000, p.206), citing research by Candy, Crebert, & O’Leary (1994) and Crebert (1995), says students find value in work experience because it allows them to test their learning against real world problems and they produce something that is used by others. He points to surveys of teachers, media professionals and social workers which show them to believe they learned more from their work placements than from their academic programmes (ACE, 1999, p. 35; Ciofalo, 1992; Clare, 1999). In Britain, the Dearing report, which strongly influenced government higher education policy, proposed that workplace experience should be extended to all courses (NCIHE, 1997). On journalism programmes specifically, work experience is considered to be desirable by Britain’s industry accreditation body, the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ)¹ and essential by the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC)².

Employers and students alike see work-placements as opportunities for students to impress and possibly gain permanent work. Purdey’s research into radio journalism recruitment found that ‘most telling was the number of editors who recruited people who had worked with them on work experience: 56.3 percent of BBC editors recruited via that route while in commercial radio the figure rose to 78.1 percent’ (2000, p.332). Employers also see work experience as an opportunity for their organisation to benefit from those who bring ‘a young person’s knowledge of multimedia to the job’ (Austin and Cokley, 2006, p.84).

1 NCTJ Accreditation Standards and Information Pack- course accreditation performance indicator: ‘Students are encouraged to gain work experience and there is sufficient time allowed for this.’ http://www.nctj.com/assets/library/document/a/original/accred_info_standard_sept_11.pdf

2 BJTC Guidelines for Accreditation and Requirements (Section 3.8): available at http://www.winchesterjournalism.co.uk/Joomla_1.5_DDM/

But placements can be problematic. From the university's point of view, the variability of such experiences poses significant problems in assessment and arranging placements for large numbers of students can be very demanding on academics' time. It can be disruptive to other elements of the course, taking the student away from classes for several weeks. It can be unproductive if the student is not given an opportunity, during the placement, to engage in a variety of useful tasks. Bradford and Halliday (2009) reported that trainee journalists who were employed on Northcliffe Media's local newspapers and news websites in Britain who had expected to put their knowledge and skills in multimedia journalism into practice providing online content found that they were given little opportunity to do so and were disappointed at being obliged to concentrate on print publication. It is unlikely then that work-experience candidates would have been given opportunities to produce multi-media content. Ethical issues also arise when unpaid students are producing content for publications which are cutting the jobs of editorial staff.

The number of students on journalism programmes is growing. In Australia, Austin and Cokley (2006, p.79) found industry recruiters introducing new ways to manage the number of journalism students who were seeking internships. In Britain, Hanna and Sanders (2007, p.404) reported that:

in 1994/95 the equivalent of 415 British full-time students joined (journalism) programmes ... In 2004/5 the total was 2,035, a "pattern of explosive growth" which Splichal and Sparks (1994, p. 115) observed occurring earlier in other countries.

This presents problems for journalism organisations which traditionally provide work placements for students. In 2011 Britain's BBC restricted to 190 the number of placements it made available to students on 'nearly 70' BJTC-accredited programmes³ and these were rationed accordingly. (Newcastle University was allocated five placements for a programme with 27 students.) Newsroom executives working in severely time-pressured environments can find it difficult to oversee students on work placement, assign tasks, guide them in the performance of those tasks and provide feedback on completion. The quality of the experience for both host and student can be unpredictable and a bad experience can have far-reaching consequences. Hanna and Sanders (2007, p.409) found that the proportion of journalism students planning to enter the field through local newspapers declined as the course progressed and they noted: 'This perhaps reflects internship experiences and/or perceptions that this sector offers comparatively low pay.' In one respect such an experience can be seen as valuable, convincing the student that that is not their choice for a career after all. But there is a danger that their experience colours their overall view of journalism – a field which offers a very wide and varied range of work and career paths.

In a review of the literature on the value of prior work-experience, Anakwe and Greenhaus (2000, p.5) found those 'studies (Page et al., 1981; Taylor, 1988; Luzzo, 1995) that have undertaken a more rigorous approach in examining the benefits of prior work experience suggest that the *characteristics* of prior work experience rather than its existence or non-existence should be investigated' (my emphasis). Brooks et al (1995, p.346) discovered that 'internship and work experiences that include a high degree of variety, feedback and opportunities to deal with others may be more effective for progressing through the career development process than experiences without these qualities'.

But research on workplace experience on vocational education has focused on experience in the traditional workplace, as part of educational programmes designed predominantly to produce people equipped with skills to function as employees and, in journalism education, to train students to work in newspapers and latterly for radio or TV broadcasters (see Becker, 2003; Dickson, 2000; O'Dell, 1935, cited in Mensing, 2010, p.513). Yet, employees of journalists can no longer be regarded as such a homogenous group. Non-governmental organisations, charities, local authorities, even operators of cruise liners, are among many varied non-media organisations which employ journalists around the world to produce newspapers, websites and TV and radio content. Baines and Kennedy (2010, p.99) questioned the validity of educating journalists primarily for employment in traditional industry sectors while journalism undergoes significant long-term systemic, economic, technological, structural, cultural and societal transformations (Aldridge, 1998; Davies, 2008; Deuze, 2008, 2009; McNair, 2003; Rosen, 1999). For many journalists, working freelance or entrepreneurially, the concept of a 'work place' might be fluid, or even meaningless. So experience of work as a process, rather than work-places and situated products may be more valuable, as long as it provides the high degree of opportunities identified by Brooks (1995).

Mensing (2010, p.512) notes the changes journalism is undergoing and argues that were journalism educators to move their focus away from 'the transmission-driven, industry-conceived model of journalism' and towards the community they 'could reconnect journalism with its democratic roots and take advantage of new forms of news creation, production, editing and distribution'. She argues that:

3 Personal communication. For BJTC-accredited courses see <http://www.bjtc.org.uk/>

A community-oriented model of journalism would place the journalist as reporter, editor and facilitator within a community ... and refocus attention on the role that journalism can play in the health of a community... Working with students in a laboratory of inquiry, researching how journalism matters and experimenting with ways to practice journalism in a rapidly reconfiguring environment could reinvigorate journalism programs and encourage more productive connections between the work of educators, scholars, and practitioners. (*ibid.*)

There is a great deal to commend this community focus, and the BJTC for one recognises the value of and encourages placements in ‘non-mainstream’ media organisations (see note 2). Of course, traditional media concerns such as the BBC, CNN and major newspaper and magazine publishers around the world remain the largest employers of journalists. The brief list of non-media industry employment opportunities for journalists given above suggests that there remains a demand for industry-model employment, even if that employment is not necessarily in a traditional news-industry, and Purdey’s work reinforces the value of industry experience as a route into paid work. So there remains a place for workplace experience in the learning process.

But students emerging from, as Mensing puts it, ‘a laboratory of inquiry, researching how journalism matters and experimenting with ways to practice journalism in a rapidly reconfiguring environment’ offer those industries employing them advantages that do not necessarily come with students whose work experience has focused on gaining familiarity with current industry practice. For example, the BBC’s policy in recruitment is indicated by Mark Harrison, Head of Digital Production, BBC Vision:

I am looking for creative people . . . Production teams will gather in creative clusters round projects rather than programmes . . . the most valuable quality will be the ability to walk into a team, adapt to the needs of the project and acquire the skills needed . . . When I was head of Arts at the BBC, I had young producers whose big ambition was to produce a perfect Arena programme. I told them that I was doing that 30 years ago, you need to bring the creativity you use in your home life to a production for the BBC . . . I am looking for mindset, rather than skill-set. (Speaking at the BBC Connect and Create conference, Liverpool John Moore’s University, 19 January, 2009)

The BBC’s focus is thus not on specific skills, but on the creative process, on innovation, and his comments possess a clear commercial logic: does a media organisation most need people who can do what it and its competitors already do, or people who distinguish what it does by finding new ways to engage with audiences?

This paper will present a case that the hyper-local project under review offers that change of focus from an industry-conceived towards a community-focused model of journalism and provides the laboratory of inquiry which allows students to experiment with new ways to practice journalism. But it also embeds within the learning professional knowledge, values and practices – and that in doing so it is supporting both community sustainability and the sustainability of journalism, as practice as well as process and equipping journalists to, as de Burgh puts it, ‘make essential contributions as analysts and brokers of information’ (2003, p.95).

Methodology

The continuing study on which this paper is based adopts and is informed by an ‘action research’ approach, defined by Reason and Bradbury as:

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing ... [which] seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.’ (2001, p.1)

Action research has a long-established critical role in developing education theory and practice and embraces a much wider sphere of engagement within the educational subject area than the development of pedagogical practice. Carr and Kemmis highlight the essentially collaborative nature of the methodology and conceive of the teacher-researcher as:

‘a member of a ‘critical community made up of teachers, students, parents and others concerned for the development and reform of education. The professional responsibility of the teacher is to offer an approach to this task. To create conditions under which the critical community can be galvanised into action in support of educational values, to model the review and improvement process and to organise it to colleagues, students, parents and others can be actively involved in the development of education.’ (Carr and Kemms, 1966, p.5)

In the current case study, both educational and journalistic practice intersect and the 'critical community' embraces both journalist and educator colleagues, students and community members as they are 'galvanised into action' in support of educational, journalistic and communitarian values.

The hyper-local journalism project, Jesmond Local, was launched in September 2009 and I have worked closely with the project's editor, Ian Wylie, since then to facilitate institutional support from Newcastle University, encourage the student journalists to engage with the project, and taken part periodically in critically reflexive discussions with the editor to analyse and evaluate current practices and procedures and explore possible new directions for development and exploration. I have not been involved in the day-to-day running of Jesmond Local. I have recorded my meetings with the editor and these transcribed recordings, and those of meetings with several student participants, have been subject to a framework analytical approach (Richie et al, 2003) within the context of issues raised within the literature and research on work experience as an element programmes of learning in higher education (university level) and specifically with regard to work in journalism. Other data comes from qualitative reflections on current and past students' experience with Jesmond Local submitted in late December 2011. No attempt has been made to gather quantitative data regarding the total numbers of students who have engaged with the project or how many have continued to be engaged throughout their course.

Students who have taken part in the project have been drawn from four academic programmes at Newcastle University: The BA (Hons) in Media, Communication and Cultural Studies (three years); MA Media and Journalism (one year full time, two years part time); MA Media and Public Relations (one year full time, two years part time); MA International Multi-Media Journalism (one year full time only). Undergraduate students on the BA programme have usually joined in the second year and taken part in the project for two years. Most MA participants have been full time students and taken part for one year. Three of the students have graduated and are working full time in media-related jobs, but maintain a commitment to Jesmond Local and continue to engage with it and the projects it has generated.

Eleven participants were interviewed for this paper. They were: the editor, Ian Wylie (IW);

two MA journalism students who were involved at the start of the project, one of whom, "EI", continues to work in media in the region and continues to take part in the project; the other, "SG", gained a job on graduation in 2010 as a newspaper journalist in another part of the country and has no longer any contact with the project; one graduate who now works on a community newspaper in the USA, "KP"; a student who graduated in 2011 and is currently working as a journalist for the BBC but continues to engage with Jesmond Local: "TC". The remainder are six MA journalism students who are currently studying for an MA in journalism and are working on Jesmond Local: "FI", "MH", "OT", "NM", "KS" and "EI".

IW, EI and TC were all interviewed on tape at various times and EI and TC were also invited to contribute their thoughts on their experience of the project. No prompts were given regarding which aspects of that experience they might focus on because it was important to discover what they highlighted as – and perceived to be - significant aspects of their experience, but there is a risk that their recollections and reflections might have been influenced by memories of topics discussed during previous interviews. The others were invited to submit their thoughts and were not prompted about areas of particular interest. The academic programmes referred to above draw an international cohort and while most who take part in the project are British, NM and OT are Greek, MH is Italian and IN is a US citizen. The initials of all the students and former students who have contributed to this review have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

The number of participants is small, but this is a qualitative study and while its findings are indicative they do not offer and are not intended to offer statistical generalisation. The range of participants allows the project to be interrogated from a number of perspectives, specifically: its value as an adjunct to classroom studies, its value in terms of enhancing employability and its value in terms of community and professional sustainability. Former students now working in journalism were able to reflect on the relevance to their current jobs of their experience on Jesmond Local.

The establishment of the hyper-local project

Long-term systemic, economic, technological, structural, cultural and societal transformations in news media around the world (Aldridge, 1998; Davies, 2008; Deuze, 2008, 2009; McNair, 2003; Rosen, 1999) mean traditional news industry career paths are dissolving and journalism graduates are embarking on professional lives which are increasingly likely to feature consecutive and concurrent periods of employment, contract/project work and self-employment inside and outside the traditional news-industry sectors. Journalism educators and programmes need to prepare students to survive and succeed in such a landscape and this issue was addressed by myself and a Newcastle University colleague in a paper for the Association for Jour-

nalism Education conference in June 2009⁴ and in a subsequent article in *Journalism Practice* (Baines and Kennedy, 2010). We argued that journalism courses should introduce students to opportunities to embark on entrepreneurial media careers as well as preparing them for employment in traditional industry sectors, and cited the then emerging hyper-local news sites as examples of enterprises which might offer such opportunities, such as Novelda (digital and print)⁵, in Alicante, Spain, which was launched by two graduates: one in journalism, the other in business.

Ian Wylie, who had recently left *The Guardian* as a section editor (work and personal finance) to embark on a full-time freelance career writing primarily for the business press (such as the *Financial Times* in the UK and *Monocle Magazine* in the US) saw a blog-report of our conference paper. He lived in Newcastle and contacted me to discuss the establishment of a hyper-local site in the city. As a result, Ian launched the hyper-local news site Jesmond Local (<http://jesmondlocal.com/>) providing news and information to the Newcastle city suburb of Jesmond. This is a fairly prosperous and multicultural area with a population of some 16,000 made up of students, elderly people, families, and served by independent traders and businesses, a small chain supermarket, schools, bars and restaurants. It has a strong cultural life and a perceived sense of community and local identity. Students on Newcastle University's post-graduate programmes in Journalism and PR and undergraduate programme in media and cultural studies were invited to join the project.

Jesmond Local's initial concept was similar to that of a traditional local newspaper: to be paid for by advertising, but online and multi-media rather than print, serving a particularly small, though metropolitan, community – a suburb, rather than a town or city. Reporters are given patches (beats): crime, shopping, business, property; community, transport; food and drink, politics; sport; arts and culture; environment. At weekly news conferences reporters pitch ideas and are assigned stories by the editor. He invites outside speakers to many of these conferences – such as council, police and private sector press officers; experienced journalist from national and local print and broadcasting backgrounds; politicians and people whom the news media regularly contact, to allow the student reporters to explore the terms on which reporters and sources negotiate engagements and to build networks and contacts.

Cultural shift

Reflecting on the project nine months after the launch, Wylie spoke of his personal expectations. He comes from a national newspaper background where, despite the benefits of new technologies, face-to-face contact with sources was now rare and despite managements' efforts to encourage journalists to work collaboratively, he had found that 'people didn't work collaboratively. He said 'it became very territorial', people would guard their ideas, 'it was all about by-line, self-promotion, getting to the story'. But as a freelance, 'I am quite sociable and didn't like the idea of sitting at a desk at home on my own', so the opportunity to work in a team was attractive. He also thought that hyper-local journalism offered him an opportunity to 'give something back': to the community in which he lived by putting his skills and knowledge at its disposal and journalism and by sharing those skills and knowledge with the students. He also had to negotiate a shift in news values:

My nervousness about this project was ... can I get excited about reporting on flower arranging. But it's not just about reporting, it's not just about bringing a newspaper out. It's about being woven into the fabric of that community, about being part of that community. You got to know the people behind the flower-arranging feature, the bobby on the beat, and all these stories are important, they are important to me because they are important to people I have got to know as friends.

Wylie believed that what he and the students, as journalists, could bring to the community was 'training, skills, the high value we place on good quality, reliable, truthful news – but that didn't mean that news could not be done in different ways.'

New ways to do journalism

Students gained the opportunity to put into practice in the field, their classroom learning and try out new ways to do journalism.

I am honestly proud to be part of it – it is a very efficient way of putting everything we learn on the course into practice. (NM)

We were able to experiment with new digital reporting styles rooted in the values of newspaper journalism. (EI)

⁴ AJE conference and AGM, City University, London 18-19 June, 2009

⁵ Novelda Digital: <http://www.noveldadigital.es/>

The work at Jesmond Local has enabled me to gain a greater understanding of networking. (FI)

It has armed me with essential knowledge of social media... I have developed my writing skills ... I have acquired more confidence; I have understood the importance of writing for a specific audience and specific medium. I have gained enormous experience finding stories, reporting them and finding new ways to engage my audience in creative and innovative ways. (OT)

Ian really kept me at the forefront of new digital media, introducing me to tools such as ‘cover it live’ ... ‘audio boo’ [and] ‘Bambuster’, which is a live video-streaming app. that I used to livestream Jesmond Local’s meeting with the Geordie Shore cast. (TC)

Students also recognise the value in what they are doing as journalists to the community which they regard themselves as serving.

Working with JL has given me a huge insight into social and community journalism ... really brought it home about the role of a journalist in society – the way in which hyper-local can increase social cohesion, increase social inclusion and engender community spirit, and organising and covering an election hustings (when rival election candidates face collective public questioning) even highlighted the power of hyper-local journalism to drive community interest in local politics. What I really loved about it was I was out and about on the streets of Jesmond, not tied to a desk like so many journalists are these days. (TC)

I was interested in contributing to the Jesmond community while gaining some hands-on work in journalism. (MH)

The work at Jesmond Local has allowed me to gain a greater understanding of networking – how to meet people, find contacts and build bonds. (EI)

The experience of immersion in a community and the opportunity to explore the complexities of community life is valued later when it is found to inform the practice of journalism on a mainstream local newspaper.

I think my time at Jesmond Local taught me to really appreciate the role of a journalist within a community. That has helped greatly in my current job, which is as a night-time, cops, breaking news and general assignment reporter at a paper in --- (USA). It is situated in a very unique area, which is a major, major tourist spot during the summer months. As such, the newspaper circulation fluctuates between the peak season and the off-season and the community here, especially off-season, is extremely strong and in-tune to what is happening around them. (KP)

The experience of reporting on Jesmond with a fluctuating student population and settled resident population has possibly been useful in preparing KP for a community with similar characteristics, but I would suggest that what is more important is the legacy of continuing critical reflection on the journalist’s role within a specific community – a recognition that communities are diverse and have different needs of journalism.

These understandings of the journalist’s role within a community resonate with Jansson’s definition of community sustainability in his study of ICT networks in rural Sweden:

The enduring potential of a particular community to maintain the social and cultural interests of its inhabitants, including equal access to various services, good opportunities for political and cultural participation, expression and integration and an enduring sense of community.’ (Jansson, 2010, p180)

The student journalists are embracing, through their experience on Jesmond Local, communitarian values of extending access to information about the community and of use to their audience, expanding opportunities for ‘cultural participation, expression and integration’ and are seeking to sustain ‘an enduring sense of community’.

Collaborative journalism and sharing skills

But from the beginning, the students involved in the project approached journalism not as a highly competitive endeavour – an exercise in getting the by-line, the story, promoting themselves, which was Wylie’s experience of newsroom-culture – but as collaborators in a joint enterprise, reflecting on and exploring new ways to do journalism.

Jesmond Local is founded on communication, openness and sharing ideas. (OT)

I’m elated to be making interesting and useful stuff and working with such a cracking bunch of talented and passionate people. (EI)

It is great to be working with such a dedicated team. (MH)

Journalism and community sustainability

There is a strong case to be put that the Jesmond Local project has met Mensing’s call (2010, p.512) for

a focus in journalism education away from “the transmission-driven, industry-conceived model of journalism” and towards the community, reconnecting journalism with its democratic roots and taking advantage of new forms of news creation, production, editing and distribution. But an initial expectation was that more people within the community would join the project, telling stories, creating content. And reflecting on the exercise nine months later, Wylie noted that they had not done so. This was a pragmatic issue: it is difficult maintaining the momentum of the news site when student journalists are on holiday, but a site in which journalists tell the community stories about itself is not an ideal paradigm for a journalism which, to paraphrase James Carey (1989), amplifies the conversation society has with itself. “For me, that is the next big leap,” Ian said. “So how do we go and find them, engage them, equip them with the skills. For me, that is clearly the next step.”

I have argued that if journalists are to play a role in amplifying that conversation, then “teaching journalism is part of doing journalism”⁶. Jeff Jarvis of New York University notes in his column in Britain’s *The Guardian* newspaper that this sharing of skills lies at the heart of hyper-local journalism:

A key skill of journalism today is learning how to recast the relationship with the public: not just broadcasting news, but organising, supporting, curating, even educating people. Part of supporting community journalism is helping community members learn and this, too, is new: journalists have never been terribly generous with their skills (priesthoods never are). (Jarvis, 2009)

It is this willingness to share that underpins the Jesmond Local project: Ian Wylie sharing his time, skills and knowledge with the students; journalists and sources sharing their time skills and knowledge with the students; former students returning to share their knowledge: EI and TC now both work in media, but continue to work with Jesmond Local. So the student journalists on Jesmond Local are to run ‘journalism bootcamps’ in 2012, working with and sharing their skills and knowledge not only with each other, but with members of the wider community to find and tell untold stories from that community over a three week period. The intention is in part to broaden the conceptualisation of journalism which accommodates the role of journalist within a network rather than as part of an industrial process: as community participant, as educator, curator and facilitator - as well as broadcaster- of news.

Experimentation and the ‘laboratory of inquiry

Jesmond Local has become a hub for new experiments doing journalism and journalism-related activities:

It has become involved in organising community-based events such as election hustings and concerts and the team take part in as well as reporting and recording the annual community festival.

It is embedded in the university’s journalism education delivery and is also working in schools and the community through the ‘journalism bootcamps’ to extend media literacy and media practice and production.

It has broadcast a community radio show.

In December 2011, it produced a ‘pop-up’ magazine in a single weekend for the Turner Prize exhibition⁷ and award, which covered production costs and raised a further £1,000 for charity. The team plan further pop-up projects in a number of different formats and platforms – from websites to mobile phone apps – to mark major occasions and to offer further pop-up publications as a commercial revenue source.

In November 2011, Jesmond Local produced a documentary on a special school (a school for children with learning difficulties) for the BBC Radio 3 Free Thinking Festival⁸ held on Tyneside and embracing the festival’s theme of ‘Change’.

The team are also working on plans to produce a further documentary and explore the possibility of engaging in community TV.

The pop-up magazine project involved the students and other creative sector professionals based in the North East of England including designers, illustrators, photographers, filmmakers and business development people.

It was a real buzz to work with such an interesting and diverse bunch of people on such an exciting project. We’re now planning to trial the pop-up concept with different formats, subjects and groups of people over the coming months and years, all rooted in community journalism. EI

Ian said in December 2011:

6 See the discussion paper on the AJE website: <http://www.ajeuk.org/2010/11/22/is-%E2%80%98teaching-journalism%E2%80%99-part-of-%E2%80%98doing-journalism%E2%80%99/>

7 Turner Prize 2011 BAL TIC Exhibition <http://www.balticmill.com/whatsOn/future/ExhibitionDetail.php?exhibID=148>

8 BBC R3 Free Thinking Festival 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0144txn>

I thought it was just going to be about Jesmond Local and the upload of stories every day. That is the anchor, but the stuff that has taken in forward has been the one-offs. The publishing project has taken us forward, the ‘bootcamps’ will take us forward. I think this TV thing, if we make a really good short film . . . will take us forward and accelerate our progress. Whereas the day-to-day stuff, it is important and it is what allows us to teach our students the business. So maybe it should be more closely linked to the education, because how we pass on our values about what we are about and what good journalism is about is through Jesmond Local.

There are two distinct but interdependent objectives at play here: to both maintain our journalistic values, and to explore, experiment, interrogate how professional practices might be adapted and deployed better to sustain those communities in which they are hosted.

Enhancing employability

The experience offered by the hyper-local project meets Brooks et al’s (1995, p.346) criteria for effectiveness in work experience in that it provides ‘a high degree of variety, feedback and opportunities to deal with others’. In the weekly news conferences, meetings with industry professionals and projects such as the Turner Prize magazine produced in a weekend, it provides a replication of the work-place experience in terms of the news gathering, editing and production processes and the critical community which came together to undertake the project.

The best experience by far was the 48-hour magazine that we created at the BALTIC; it was a unique experience for me. We had the chance to see how an actual newspaper is in the making . . . the contacts we made with individuals that work in the industry (journalists, photographers, illustrators) were of extreme value. (NM)

Purdey, above, found that recruiters of radio journalists tended to recruit those who had worked with them on placement and TC, who was recruited by BBC local radio upon graduation (this at a time of significant job cuts being announced by BBC local radio) had enjoyed a placement with the corporation’s international radio wing, BBC World Service. But she was also invited to interview by Sky TV, which was recruiting at the time to launch a new local TV service. TC said “There is no doubt” that her hyper local experience played a role in her landing her job with the BBC and being sought out as a candidate by Sky. SG, who had also undertaken a placement in a mainstream regional newspaper, was recruited upon graduation by Trinity Mirror, a national publisher of local and regional newspapers and immediately given her own district to report on and weekly edition to fill. She later said that her experience on Jesmond Local had been:

invaluable as one of my main roles . . . is to generate stories from (named village) in particular, a front page splash every week, which can be difficult . . . the experience we all gained (with Jesmond Local) through attending council meetings, holding a live hustings debate and tweeting and live-blogging has proved invaluable at the (named newspaper) and I now use these skills during important debates which affect the whole of (the county) and have a loyal twitter fan-base who provide me with stories and quotes. Being part of a small hyper-local site has helped me and my paper realise that stories can be found online and in small streets and villages that might otherwise be ignored. (SG)

There is recognition here that communities are not homogenous, of the importance of wider inclusivity in local reporting and of the importance of developing professional practices to achieve that inclusivity. There is also strong support for Austin and Cokley’s finding (2006, p.84) that employers see value in work experience as an opportunity for their organisation to benefit from those who bring ‘a young person’s knowledge of multimedia to the job’. But it also indicates that at a time when journalism is undergoing significant transformations, projects such as this are, in Mensing’s phrase (2010, p.512) “take[ing] advantage of new forms of news creation, production, editing and distribution” in order to “reconnect journalism with its democratic roots”. Industrial media organisations, such as Sky TV, the BBC and Trinity Mirror are finding value in their recruits’ experience of the project as a “laboratory of inquiry, researching how journalism matters and experimenting with ways to practice journalism in a rapidly reconfiguring environment” (*ibid*) and their recruits’ innovative, reflexive, experimental approach to their practice.

New directions in employability

The value of this project in terms of employability does not lie solely, or even primarily, in enhancing opportunities for students to find employment in mainstream – industrial – media. Jarvis has argued that ‘The structure – the ecosystem – of news will not be dominated by a few corporations but likely will be made up of networks of many start-ups performing specialized functions based on the opportunities they see in e market. . . .’ (Nov 1, 2009)⁹ and Baines and Kennedy (2010) have argued that journalism education must

⁹ ‘The Future of News in Entrepreneurial’ Blog Posting on The Buzz Machine: <http://www.buzzmachine.com/2009/11/01/the-future-of-journalism-is-entrepreneurial/>

equip students for an entrepreneurial career path to equip them to identify such opportunities and equip them with the business skills to exploit them. Both arguments are open to challenge. However, some industrial media organisations are reorganising parts of their operations along those entrepreneurial lines, characterised by Mark Harrison's model of "production teams ... gather(ed) in creative clusters round projects rather than programmes" (Liverpool John Moore's University, 19 January, 2009). Such a media ecosystem also offers opportunities for start-ups which both serve the needs of larger organisations and compete with them.

Finding a sustainable business model to support Jesmond Local has been elusive but Wylie has concluded that while no single sufficient source of funding will sustain such a project – as advertising sustained the regional and local press for so long – a 'bootstrap' approach, drawing in a variety of strands of support both financially and in kind, is developing. Wylie supports Jesmond Local in part from his earnings as a freelance writer for the *Financial Times*, *Guardian* etc. The hyper-local operation and the projects which have grown out of it have opened doors to fees for formal teaching on university programmes, support for the journalism education in the community from the university and the charitable trust and advertising revenue which paid for the pop-up magazine and provided a surplus for charity. Involvement in the annual Jesmond Festival offers opportunities to access specific funding resources from the city council. Advertising space on the site and sponsorship for specific projects and campaigns is sought from local businesses and organisations. Support in kind comes from within the community in the provision of facilities and rooms. Students and other media professionals give their time and commitment for free and students are able to access university media equipment such as camcorders and audio-recorders to produce content for Jesmond Local – further support in kind.

But the mutually supportive relationships that the project has given rise to also offers 'network capital', a variety of social capital and a resource which can support entrepreneurial sustainability (Wong and Salaff, 1998; Welman, 2001; Fafchamps and Minten, 2002). Wylie said of the media professionals who took part in the pop-up magazine project:

A lot of these guys work on their own and they really enjoyed being part of something bigger. People who are freelance, they don't often get a chance to be in an office environment.

He is now exploring hosting a gathering of independent publishers in the region so the project starts to become a "hub or a network, or just a means of encouraging local journalists - there are lots of them out there working on their own". Wylie sees the unexpected developments which have arisen as a result of Jesmond Local – such as the pop-up magazine - as offering the project greater potential for commercial sustainability.

The students have the opportunity in such a project to be part of this process of development of a business model and find value in it. SG recalls:

I got involved with Jesmond Local even before it was called Jesmond Local so, at the very beginning. It started out as a small team and we worked together to create the branding and the website. It was a lot of hard work, but very worthwhile and it let me have a go at getting behind a brand new idea, work on it and try to push it to the next level. It was all very exciting. If this is the future of journalism, I hope that once again, one day, I will be able to get involved in a project like this. Maybe even set up my own. (SG)

Conclusion

The project's sustainability in strictly commercial terms is precarious and it continues as it does largely because it has at its centre an individual who has high levels of professional expertise, is committed to the project and is prepared to subsidise it in part from his earnings as a freelance journalist working at the higher levels of his profession for national and international audiences. The project has also attracted a strong and supportive network of individuals and institutions of civil society. It has grown and developed in unpredictable but beneficial ways as a result of the editor's and his associates' search for a financial sustainability; the constant critical reflection on journalism processes and purposes and the willingness to experiment and seize opportunities. For these reasons, it does not offer a template which can be implemented at will in another location. But it does bring to the fore a number of factors which can support and sustain a work-experience environment for journalism students which is not embedded in the industry, but in the community and which encourages critical reflection, innovation and experimentation at a time when journalism needs to explore new directions.

This review has found that the project offers, and continues to offer, student journalists relevant experience of work in which they can apply skills and knowledge learned in the classroom in a real-world context. It offers the "high degree of variety, feedback and opportunities to deal with others" which Brooks et al (1995, p.346) found to be conducive to effective career progression. It did not offer experience of journalism situated in an industrial media work-place, but it was able to offer critical components of such a placement:

news production routines through weekly editorial conferences; meeting of deadlines; reporting a patch (beat); regular contact with professionals and one-off experiences replicating workplace activity, such as the pop-up Turner Prize magazine.

The culture of journalism in which this experience was embedded was found to be supportive and collaborative, rather than conflicted and competitive, which is seen by the editor as atypical of many journalistic workplaces and there is a body of literature which supports this (Aldridge, 1998; Ross, 2001; Filak, 2004). This collaborative culture also extended to a commitment to sharing skills and knowledge with the wider community and a commitment to supporting civic engagement and community sustainability, confounding Jarvis's (2009) scepticism that journalists, like priests, would be prepared to share their mysteries. Where Hanna and Sanders (2007) found evidence that work experience could be a factor in students' decision not to pursue a career in journalism, this was not the case here and all the respondents had found it to be a positive experience. However, these findings should be treated as indicative, rather than conclusive because the sample was small and did not include any who might have lost interest in the project and fallen out along the way. The opportunity to participate in the project was voluntary, and so those who seized the opportunity and made the most of it were likely to be those students who were already the most committed to a career in journalism and those most willing to commit to undertake work beyond their coursework. Caution must also be exercised in drawing overly-emphatic conclusions about the project's enhancement of employability – those who took part were likely to be among the best candidates for jobs in the first place. Nevertheless, there is strong evidence from the accounts upon which this study is based that employers did find the candidates' experience with Jesmond Local to be relevant to their needs, and particularly so at a time when journalism was (and remains) in flux. The experimental nature of the project, Mensing's 'laboratory of inquiry' also offered employers the promise of candidates who had traditional knowledge and skill sets, but were also innovative and creative. Furthermore, the entrepreneurial nature of the project offered students opportunities to consider journalism as an activity which was not confined to traditional industrial media roles.

The project was also a space in which educators, practitioners and the community collaborated critically to produce processes of journalism which were embedded within the civic and social life of a real community, rather than the commercial socializations of the industry. There is evidence that this was found to have a recognised value within that community, and that it encouraged practices that are valued by the community served now by SG on her newspaper and KP on his – hosting, curating and amplifying society's conversation with itself.

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