

# Beyond Objectivity: Examining the Effects of Incorporating Civic Engagement into Higher Education Journalism Courses

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines a case study comparing students in civic engagement-enhanced journalism classes with those in which civic engagement was not emphasized in a medium-sized Mid-Atlantic university. Students completed surveys at the conclusion of the spring 2017 semester assessing their attitudes toward professional journalism roles. Students in courses containing civic engagement work prized contextual roles and were more open to non-traditional forms of community engagement journalism than their counterparts, who focused more on interpretive/disseminator roles.

*Keywords:* contextualist, interpretive, disseminator, journalist roles

Journalism educators teach students the concept of objectivity early in their college career. Objectivity is central to their field; it is a professional norm that “guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts” (Schudson, 2001, p. 2). Beginning students must comply by reporting information from sources, and keeping their opinion out of the story.

The concept of journalistic objectivity dates back to the 19th century when newspapers sought to untangle themselves from partisan politics and work independent of influence (Mindich, 1998). Recently, practitioners and analysts are calling upon journalists to revise their definitions of objectivity, arguing in favor of seeking truth and deeper analysis over blind neutralization. Media experts Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2007) went so far as to say, “The concept of objectivity has been so mangled it now is usually used to describe the very problem it was conceived to correct” (p. 6). To achieve greater truth, journalists are encouraged to seek and add context to their stories using reporting methods that go beyond official source reports.

This professional shift away from overly simplistic interpretations of objectiv-

ity demands attention from journalism teachers in higher education. One way to encourage students to grow beyond basic objectivity may be the incorporation of civic engagement into courses. By encouraging students to engage with citizens in their reporting process rather than simply working independently, students may be compelled to revisit traditional journalism roles and embrace those that more firmly ensconce reporters in the communities on which they report.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have identified core values of journalism that help examine practitioners’ attitudes regarding their professional roles. In an early study, Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman (1972) categorized journalists into two groups: neutrals, who favored independence from community ties, and participants, who preferred an investigative approach to reporting. Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, and Wilhoit (2007) expanded on the previous study, adding new categories: disseminator, adversarial, interpretative, and populist mobilizer. Disseminator replaced the neutrals

category, and interpretive replaced the participant category. The adversarial role reflects an antagonistic approach, challenging business and government sources. Populist mobilizers encourage journalists to help citizens get involved and express themselves.

More recently, researchers sought to examine how journalists regard their role as responsible stewards of societal needs. McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour (2016) added a contextualist role to account for spikes in stories that better assist audiences in understanding complex and sometimes contentious issues that go beyond simple accounts of news events (Fink & Schudson, 2013). Fink and Schudson (2013) argued contextualist journalism encourages practitioners to take a more active role in ensuring society's well-being by ensuring citizens have the information they need to make informed decisions. McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour (2016) also amended Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, and Wilhoit's (2007) previous categories, combining disseminator and interpretive into one category and shifting four of the existing measures into a new category called advocate/entertainer, which reflected a focus on wider audiences, entertainment, pointing to possible solutions, and setting the political agenda.

Additionally, McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour (2016) studied journalists' attitudes toward three emerging news forms that embody the contextualist function: solutions journalism, constructive journalism, and restorative narrative. Solutions journalism is "rigorous and fact-driven news stories of credible solutions to social problems." Constructive journalism is "news stories that are produced in a way that intends to engage and empower audiences and ultimately improve society." Restorative narrative is "news stories that focus on recovery, restoration and resilience in the aftermath, or in the midst of, difficult times."

### **Civic Engagement and Journalism**

In the academic sense, civic engagement is defined as "the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 236). The traditional reporting process runs counter to this, with journalists generating ideas for stories by observing issues and reporting them. However, the interactivity of the Internet forced news organizations to adapt to a relationship in which reporters and citizens are engaged in a constant flow of communication (Singer et al., 2011). Hearken is one start-up company of journalists working with news organizations throughout the world to encourage civic engagement in the news process. Their model flips the traditional method of journalists generating their own stories and provides strategies for soliciting story ideas from community members and taking them along on the reporting process (Jolly, 2016). Other newsrooms have developed strategies for involving community members in their processes, from hosting town gatherings and soliciting online feedback to allowing citizens to contribute and publish content themselves (Outing, 2005).

Stories that are transforming news consumers from recipients of a product to participants in its creation align with civic engagement goals and appear to benefit news organizations in many ways. Hearken CEO Jennifer Brandel reported content generated on Chicago's public radio station, WBEZ, using her organization's model comprised only 2% of the network's total stories but accounted for about 50% of the top stories in 2017 (personal communication, December 15, 2017). Other studies have also revealed positive outcomes when incorporating citizens into the reporting process. One study analyzing social media interactions between a journalist and his online followers showed how he used community members to gather and verify information, build trust, and distribute news (García De Torres, 2017). Another study

showed content geared to localized audiences and focused on community-building were effective in fostering relationships between the organization and citizens, enhancing trust, and strengthening both the publication and the community (Harte, Williams, & Turner, 2017).

In spite of these steps toward civic engagement in the newsroom, many journalists have hesitated in relinquishing their gatekeeping control. Author Michael Schudson (2013) called journalists “reluctant stewards of democracy” (p. 159). He said ethical boundaries that dissuade reporters from getting too involved with their sources and being promotional can prompt journalists to act more as information liaisons, distributing news to the public and allowing them to make their own democratic decisions. In the study conducted by McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour (2016), journalists valued contextualist roles, but many still appeared to be reluctant to fully embrace civic engagement opportunities. The contextualist and populist mobilizer roles represent the two most closely aligned with civic engagement goals, and neither was as highly valued as the more traditional interpretive/disseminator role. Less than one-third of respondents strongly agreed with the mobilizer roles encouraging ordinary people to get involved.

### Research Questions

College students studying journalism represent the next generation of reporters. Their attitudes toward the evolving incorporation of civic engagement into journalistic processes can offer insight into what American newsrooms will look like in the near future.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to compare attitudes toward professional roles among journalism students in courses enhanced with civic engagement activities and instruction with those in introductory courses that did not include those elements.

RQ1: How do the role functions valued and prioritized by journalism students in courses where civic engagement instruction is included compare with those in courses without the incorporation of civic engagement?

RQ2: How do attitudes toward contextual reporting (constructive journalism, solutions journalism, and restorative journalism) in courses where civic engagement instruction is included compare with those in courses without the incorporation of civic engagement?

### METHODOLOGY

Students in five journalism classes at a medium-sized, Mid-Atlantic public university completed online surveys during the last week of the spring 2017 semester. Two of the upper-level courses were enhanced with civic engagement activities aimed at getting students into the local community to solicit story ideas, engage in community projects while reporting, and recognize/report community issues. Some of these efforts included participating in Habitat for Humanity builds, volunteering with local nonprofit organizations, identifying and reporting trends and issues related to the local community, and going on ride-alongs with local officials to better understand their work routines and hear their stories. Three of the introductory/ intermediate courses did not include civic engagement enhancements taking them into the community and involved writing and reporting assignments based on prompts or campus events.

The survey administered was adapted from McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour's (2016) study. The first set of questions consisted of 20 statements used to describe the six journalistic roles: adversarial, advocate/entertainer, contextualist, intellectual, interpretive/disseminator, and populist mobilizer. Students evaluated the extent to which they agreed that each of the statements is a core function of journalism using a five-point Likert scale. Next, respondents selected which five of the statements they

valued most. Students were given McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour's (2016) definitions of contextualist reporting styles: solutions journalism, constructive journalism, and restorative narrative. Based on those definitions, respondents used a 6-point matrix table to gauge their attitudes toward each journalism type.

## RESULTS

A total of 44 students completed the surveys, a response rate of 73.33%. There were 19 respondents from the civically engaged classes (43.18%) and 25 students in non-civically engaged classes (56.82%). The respondents' genders split evenly, with 50.00% identifying as male, and 47.73% identifying as female. The majority of students ranged in age from 18-24 (95.45%). Most were college seniors (47.73%) or juniors (38.64%).

## Comparing Journalists' Role Functions

Overall, respondents highly valued the contextualist functions, with 63.64% strongly agreeing that "act in a socially responsible way" and 56.82% strongly agreeing that "contribute to society's well-being" are core functions of journalism. The mean score for the six contextualist function statements ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = .78$ ) was significantly higher compared with all other roles,  $t(84) = 3.14$ ,  $p < .01$ . Respondents also valued the interpretive/disseminator role, giving those statements a mean score of 4.18.

Students in both types of courses valued the same five statements above all others (as shown in Table 1). However, the statements prioritized most frequently by students in courses enhanced with civic engagement varied from those in non-enhanced classes. Students in civic engagement courses made "act in a socially re-

**Table 1.** Percentage of respondents who prioritized each role as a core function of journalism.

Professional role	Civically engaged classes (n = 19)	Non-civically engaged classes (n = 25)
Get information to the public quickly	57.89%	76.00%
Act in a socially responsible way	84.21%**	44.00%**
Contribute to society's well being	68.42%*	32.00%*
Accurately portray the world	36.84%	40.00%
Alert the public of potential threats	42.11%	36.00%
Avoid stories with unverified content	42.11%	28.00%
Investigate government claims	26.32%	28.00%
Develop intellectual/cultural interests	21.05%	24.00%
Provide analysis of complex problems	26.32%	16.00%
Point to possible solutions	15.79%	32.00%
Provide entertainment	15.79%	20.00%
Alert the public of potential opportunities	5.26%	24.00%
Motivate ordinary people to get involved	21.05%	8.00%
Let ordinary people express views	5.26%	16.00%
Serve as an adversary of business	0.00%	16.00%
Concentrate on the widest audience	15.79%	4.00%
Discuss international policy	0.00%	12.00%
Discuss national policy	0.00%	12.00%
Serve as an adversary of government	5.26%	4.00%
Set the political agenda	10.53%	0.00%

\*\*Differences are significant at the  $p < .01$  level.

\*Differences are significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

sponsible way” their top priority (84.21%), differing significantly with students in non-civic engagement classes (44.00%),  $\chi^2(1, n = 44) = 7.36, p < .01$ . While both groups made “contribute to society’s well-being” their second-ranked priority, significantly more students in civic engaged courses (68.42%) prioritized the statement than those in non-civic engagement classes (32.00%),  $\chi^2(1, n = 44) = 5.74, p < .05$ . Both of these statements civic engagement students prioritized most are considered contextualist functions.

Students in non-civically engaged classes made the interpreter/disseminator statement “get information to the public quickly” their top priority (76.00%), whereas students in civic engagement classes ranked it third among their priorities (57.89%). Students in civic engagement courses also marked “avoid stories with unverified content” as a priority (42.11%, tied for fourth), whereas those in non-civic engaged courses did not include it in their top five priorities (28.00%). Conversely, those in non-civic engaged courses marked “point to possible solutions” as a priority (32.00%,

tied for fifth), and those in civically engaged classes did not (15.79%).

Overall, students in the non-civically engaged courses valued statements describing each of the roles higher than those in civically engaged classes, although none of the differences were statistically significant (as shown in Table 2). All of the mean scores for role statements were higher among non-civically engaged courses, except for “avoid stories with unverified content.”

More pronounced differences in disagreement levels occurred between the two groups. Students in classes enhanced with civic engagement either disagreed or strongly disagreed at a higher rate than non-engaged students on the six least-prioritized role statements. Those statements included serving as an adversary of business (21.05% versus 8.00%), concentrating on widest audience (36.84% versus 16.00%), discussing international policy (10.53% versus 8.00%), discussing national policy (10.53% versus 8.00%), serving as an adversary of government (26.32% versus 24.00%), and setting the political agenda (42.11% versus 24.00%).

**Table 2.** Summed mean scores for the six role functions in civically engaged versus non-civically engaged courses.

Role function	Civic engagement mean	Standard deviation	Non-civic engagement mean	Standard deviation
Contextualist	4.25	.85	4.44	.71
Interpretive/Disseminator	4.11	.93	4.23	.87
Intellectual	3.75	.84	4.23	.81
Populist Mobilizer	3.76	.94	4.14	.94
Advocate/Entertainer	3.26	1.03	3.62	.99
Adversarial	3.14	1.04	3.36	.98

**Table 3.** Summed mean scores for the three contextualist journalism styles in civically engaged versus non-civically engaged courses.

Contextualist journalism type	Civic engagement mean	Standard deviation	Non-civic engagement mean	Standard deviation
Solutions journalism	4.20	.74	4.03	.82
Constructive journalism	4.24	.82	4.05	.88
Restorative narrative	4.30	.74	4.23	.89

### Comparing Contextualist Reporting Types

Respondents viewed definitions for three types of contextualist reporting. Overall, students appeared to value each. However, students in civic engagement-enhanced courses valued them more than their counterparts in classes without civic engagement (as shown in Table 3).

Differences between the two groups were also notable regarding their attitudes toward bias in these contextual reporting styles. Students in civic engagement classes viewed the journalism types to be less biased than those in non-engaged classes (as shown in Table 4).

### DISCUSSION

The students in this study embraced the idea of contextualist roles as core functions of reporters’ jobs. In McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour’s (2016) study, journalists highly valued both the contextualist function and the interpretive/disseminator function. Both respondents in that study and this one valued the nine statements corresponding with those roles over all others. Although students in courses with and without civic engagement favored both of those roles, those in classes with engagement activities placed a higher priority on contextualist statements.

Jacoby (2009) wrote civic engagement is defined as “acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one’s communities” including “developing civic sensitivity, participation in building civil society, and benefiting the common good” (p. 9). These goals are consistent with those of contextual reporting “that report beyond the

immediacy of news in an effort to contribute to society’s well-being” (McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour, 2016, p. 2). Students in classes enhanced with civic engagement showed a significantly stronger commitment to these ideals, prioritizing the two contextualist statements above any others. Contextual reporting suggests a deviation from the journalistic concept of objectivity. This change is most notable within the statements “act in a socially responsible way” and “contribute to society’s well-being,” because both suggest the reporter play an active role in the community rather than function as a passive observer. The incorporation of civic engagement into their curriculum may help students embrace new community-building strategies for reporting. Notably, fewer than half of respondents in the classes without civic engagement prioritized these roles, whereas more than two-thirds of those in engaged classes marked them in their top five most important roles.

Conversely, the interpretive/disseminator function suggests a more traditional journalism approach, focusing on the dissemination of speedy information. While it is an important part of the reporting process, it does little to reimagine journalistic practices that urge community connection. Therefore, it makes sense students in introductory/intermediate classes without civic engagement activities placed greater emphasis on the more traditional statement “get information to the public quickly,” as it advises one-way communication often associated with objectivity.

In spite of these notable differences, students in courses without civic engagement generated higher mean scores for almost all statements regarding journalism

**Table 4.** Summed mean scores measuring bias for the three contextualist journalism styles in civically engaged versus non-civically engaged courses.

Contextualist journalism type	Civic engagement mean	Standard deviation	Non-civic engagement mean	Standard deviation
Solutions journalism	3.68	1.15	3.32	1.20
Constructive journalism	3.74	1.23	3.08	1.02
Restorative narrative	3.95	1.15	3.48	1.17

functions than their engaged counterparts. A possible explanation for this may be found within the definition of civic engagement, as a goal of its incorporation is to facilitate higher levels of critical thinking (Cress, Burack, Giles, Elkins, & Stevens, 2010). Students in civically engaged courses may have grown more analytical in their thinking about journalistic roles as a result of their enhanced experience, leading to more cautious, neutral responses on the Likert scale portions of the survey.

One area where few differences manifested was among the populist mobilizer statements. The statements describing that function—"motivate ordinary people" and "let ordinary people express views"—fit in best with the goals of civic engagement. However, neither group prioritized the function. The lack of interest suggests student journalists, like their professional counterparts, may still feel tethered to the traditional gatekeeper mentality, emphasizing the one-way flow of communication. Given the success of civic engagement efforts in journalism and the many calls from media analysts to embrace citizen involvement in the news process, it may be incumbent on journalism educators to include more of these efforts in their classes. Students who incorporate community members into their process could take these tactics into newsrooms and act as catalysts for changes to the industry. Future efforts to incorporate civic engagement into journalism classes could benefit from Harkenstyle projects prompting students to seek community feedback before and during their reporting.

Given the size of the university and its journalism program, the results of this study are limited in their generalizability. However, the small sample size was somewhat unavoidable, as universities with larger journalism programs often have too many students or lack the resources to implement a civic engagement curriculum.

These civic engagement efforts were new for this curriculum, and this study provides professors with valuable insights on

areas of engagement that need more emphasis in classrooms. Future study could reflect more sophisticated programming related to these efforts. Further research could compare these findings with those in previous works examining professional journalists. More in-depth study of student journalists in programs across the country could also provide an enhanced picture of journalists' attitudes and the effects of civic engagement on them.

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