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# Pop-Up Newsroom: “We Are Where You Are”

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Journalism continues to be closely tied to the health of civic life, but do journalists still need permanent spaces to do their work? Retreating to physical newsrooms has tended to isolate rather than connect them with the public and the topics they cover. Yet today, such boundaries are increasingly contrary to the ways digitized news blurs producers and consumers of information to create networked journalism (Bruns 2008; Heinrich 2011; Russell 2011).

Our student journalism project, the Pop-Up Newsroom, challenges the idea that all news outlets need permanent physical newsrooms. It creates temporary, virtual news spaces to encourage participants to break free of traditional news norms and socialization to get closer to local communities. Pop-Up Newsroom denizens report for limited time periods, disseminating participants’ stories instantaneously with their own cell phones and personal social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, etc. A shared hashtag networks their reporting. Rather than trying to drive audiences to a single organizational website, the project creates information surges via social media. As one student participant has noted: “Every individual who is able to use a smart phone can be self-media.”

The students’ work is further distributed by temporary “Command Centers” usually consisting of students with laptops often located in public spaces such as coffee shops. These curators monitor students’ and the general public’s social media posts about the same topic, selecting content to redistribute via Pop-Up Newsroom social media accounts. Often, the curation is physically done in the communities from which the reporting is taking place. Producing news on the scene makes the processes of production more transparent and de-emphasizes journalist-source disparities. Student reporters say this allows them to “reach those areas which the mainstream media prefers not to.”

Taking away the physical newsroom has helped enable the creation of a much larger, global news operation. Initially a Los Angeles-based project, Pop-Up Newsroom has grown to include more than 200 students from universities and journalism training programs in seven countries (Armenia, Brazil, India, Netherlands, Taiwan, UK and USA) who have collaboratively covered topics such as poverty, International Women’s Day, etc. Participants produce live mobile coverage about their local situation while sharing global curation responsibilities over a 24-hour period. Their coverage offers the public a mobile form of youth-produced news on the issues being covered. Mainstream media organizations such as The Hindu, The New Indian Express, the UK journalism forum

[journalism.co.uk](http://journalism.co.uk) and the social media platform [RebelMouse](#) have highlighted the project.

Freeing students from the structured newsroom encourages them to challenge traditional news conventions such as reliance on elite sources, which industrial news spaces have been designed to accommodate. Participants conceptualize their journalism roles less as “speaking for” citizens and, instead, “speaking with” them (Blumler and Coleman 2013, 183). Thus, students connect with a broader range of voices, rather than simply privileging traditional go-to sources. They amplify the personal stories recounted to them by ordinary citizens and members of traditionally marginalized groups. For example, Indian students covering poverty interviewed slum-dwellers, transgender people, and those forced into poverty due to caste discrimination. In the absence of bulky and intrusive media devices, these nontraditional sources opened up, allowing Pop-Up Newsroom to highlight stories typically invisible in mainstream news coverage. “Never before have I spent so much time listening to their stories,” one student said about her reporting. “The questions that came to my mind were, ‘What the hell have I done for my society? How am I going to bring about change to the current situation?’ ” These experiences further spurred some students to take a broader look at their work by creating multimedia reflections on their roles as journalists.

Working with Pop-Up Newsroom, students come to understand the power of communication networks to generate new ways of interacting with audiences as the text, video and photos they post on their social media accounts are reposted, favorited, etc. by others including members of the communities they were reporting on. These interactions have ranged from the United Nations reposting students’ Tweets from Chennai, to a low-income health clinic in Los Angeles and the students promoting each other on their Twitter accounts. Reflecting on this sort of engagement, a student said that before her Pop-Up experience, she had never reported with this “amount of involvement with the public. I both engaged communities and organizations.”

The networked structure also meant students became connected to other Pop-Up Newsroom participants, which included anyone using the designated hashtag or sharing Pop-Up content, around the world. According to TweetReach, the hashtag #livepoverty reached 54,590 Twitter accounts over 48 hours; #IWDpopup reached 187,295 accounts.<sup>1</sup> This shows that the project brought many more people into the conversation than the students themselves.

Commenting on and reposting content from other regions revealed how easily students could become part of a global conversation about shared social issues such as women’s rights. Thus, students began to conceptualize their work as engaging networks rather than simply collecting and posting information.

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<sup>1</sup> These figures do not take account of the other hashtags that were being used on the days in question.

Students also reported that their views of the issues were broadened by seeing students in other countries covering the same topic. For example, an Indian student reporting on poverty in slums around Chennai was taken aback by a Tweet from the United States about a woman who was considered deprived because she couldn't afford a wedding dress. The Indian student compared this with the Chennai's poor struggling to afford two meals a day. Many American students had never heard of International Women's Day and were surprised to see the event was so well known in other parts of the world that Dutch students posted about demonstrations spurred by the global day in their local community.

### **Conclusion**

Operating outside the usual boundaries of journalism, particularly those of a physically permanent newsroom, helped students exercise greater levels of independence and forced them to rely more on engagement with the communities they were reporting on to do their work. Embracing the power of networked communication helped them see their roles in civic life as interconnected with their sources and, at the same time, revealed the possibilities of global teamwork. Ultimately, Pop-Up Newsroom demonstrates ways even non-journalistic groups could create a social media powered pop-up project to both emancipate themselves as well as engage publics around important social issues. As one student participant said, "Anyone with a smartphone can bring forth the condition of our society to public eyes."

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