

# Campus–Newsroom Collaborations

## Building Bridges for Investigative Journalism

Patricia W. Elliott

Quality investigative journalism is incredibly difficult to produce and, these days, it is almost always a team effort. In a time of declining newsroom resources, success often hinges on how many researchers and reporting contributors can be pooled together. As a journalism educator, my classroom increasingly mirrors this collaborative environment. I teach at the University of Regina School of Journalism in Saskatchewan, Canada. We are an undergraduate and graduate professional school specializing in long-form documentary and investigative journalism, as well as newsroom reporting. Since 2014, I've been a Project Censored collaborator and have had good results using the Validated Independent News (VIN) process in assignments for my undergraduate investigative journalism course. Going to alternative sources for underreported news improves my students' ability to recognize good reporting in practice. More elementally, the assignment familiarizes students with what James C. Scott calls "hidden social transcripts,"<sup>1</sup> exposing them to undercurrents of resistance and change brewing beneath the dominant order. Students enjoy the assignment, and offer positive feedback similar to the many testimonials received by Project Censored:

Time and again . . . we hear from our colleagues about how excited students are to work on a project that may result in contributing to some greater social good. The prospect of sharing their work—on the Internet and potentially through the Project Censored yearbooks—motivates students to do their best on the assignment.<sup>2</sup>

I am proud to say students from our small (but mighty) prairie institution have found their way into the pages of the annual Project Censored yearbooks, and contributed Validated Independent News articles to the Project Censored website. Yet it's fair to say the work of Project Censored is at times an uncomfortable fit in my classroom. Every year, when it comes time to play "that video" to introduce the assignment, I wince inwardly. *Project Censored The Movie* contains a scathing critique of the corporate news media.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, our students are well steeped in propaganda theory, framing, and the media's place within capitalist, racist, colonial power structures. Fostering social and political understanding, along with empathy for society's underdogs, is as important to our curriculum as learning to edit a video file; indeed, to teach one without the other is a dangerous prospect. In addition, our students spend time exploring cooperative, nonprofit, Indigenous, and independent media models as worthy avenues for their future journalism work. In short, they are no strangers to either the critiques of corporate media or its alternatives. Nonetheless, one can't ignore that the majority of our undergraduates enter our doors in search of career inroads into the world of corporate newsrooms, and that our bachelor's program is designed to provide just that. The majority of our teaching faculty, myself included, retain a foothold in that world. Watching the video, though, it's clear our romantic vision of the hero reporter is dogged by external criticism and fraught with internal contradictions. Thus, beyond broadening students' lists of sources, the assignment works to "break the frame" of our journalism world, as the project's founders intended.<sup>4</sup> So, yes, engaging in Project Censored is unsettling. As it should be.

Unsettlement goes both ways, though. I believe the presence of journalism schools within the Project Censored network naturally unsettles the framework of professional journalists as lock-step participants in corporate censorship. Indeed, Project Censored itself recognizes that the boundaries of corporate media are blurred, as it's had a long history of successful collaborations with journalists working in corporate media environments. Throughout my working life, I have slipped back and forth between the worlds of the academy, alternative media, and corporate media. From these multiple vantage points, one sees that the unassailable iron system of media oppres-

sion envisioned by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno is filled with fissures and cracks.<sup>5</sup> These cracks are widening each day that the free market fails to adequately support the guiding directive of every journalism grad: to go forth and hold power to account. In recent years we have also seen a variety of emergent collaborations between establishment journalists, alternative journalists, universities, nonprofit foundations, and progressive research centers. This chapter considers such instances of collaboration, where common ground has been found between various independent and institutional sources to promote quality investigative journalism capable of supporting democratic accountability.

## **CAMPUS–COMMUNITY MEDIA COLLABORATIONS**

Campus–community media collaborations are nothing new. Historically, however, they have been mainly embedded in community-based “voice for the voiceless” projects rather than investigative journalism initiatives. This is an incredibly valuable foundation for democratic collaboration. Beyond serving mutual communications needs, such collaborations, according to Isobel Findlay and Len Findlay, engender solidarity among community-based media practitioners, which the Findlays view as one of many potential steps toward the decolonization of universities and toward the development of a co-creative class.<sup>6</sup> A good example of campus–community media collaboration is the University of the Western Cape (UWC)’s role in sparking the development of South Africa’s Bush Radio in the early 1990s, described by community radio activist Zane Ibrahim as “a new media model for South Africa” that was “in line with UWC’s transformation programme, intended to ensure community participation in university life.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the University of Hyderabad in India helped establish Bol Hyderabad 90.4 FM, a radio station administered by a board of campus and community representatives, under a mandate that includes “the development of a culture of critical and constructive debate . . . to ensure that all sectors of this community get a fair opportunity to state their views and concerns on air.”<sup>8</sup>

There are numerous further examples of collaborative institutions throughout North America, such as the Center for Community

Media housed at Worcester State University in Massachusetts,<sup>9</sup> as well as participatory media initiatives such as the Mapping Memories project, a five-year multimedia collaboration with refugee youth supported by researchers at Concordia University in Montreal.<sup>10</sup> “Community media work has always been hard to fund, and it’s only getting tougher with today’s economy. Meanwhile, universities are looking for creative ways to reach out to the communities that surround them and have the resources to do it,” explained Jesika Maria Ross, founder of the Art of Regional Change media project at the University of California, Davis, a project that brought members of the university and community together to make digital media art.<sup>11</sup>

In recent years, partnerships with newsrooms have begun to grow from this foundation, similarly motivated by the prospect of pooling resources and sharing peoples’ stories and public concerns. Previously, interactions with commercial media outlets and state broadcasters were largely siloed within schools of journalism, and often limited to unpaid or marginally-paid internship programs. That model is now changing, with the emergence of co-productions that draw on universities’ capacity for interdisciplinary research, with journalism schools helping to build inroads and linking to the research capacity of other faculties and departments. The movement is spurred to no small extent by the gutting of local newsrooms by rapacious, indebted media conglomerates. To Robert W. McChesney, this constitutes an important moment for media reform activists and scholars:

What is striking about the current critical juncture is how strongly journalists and media workers feel alienated from the corporate system. I believe it is crucial that we establish and maintain close ties to the media professions and draw their perspectives into our work.<sup>12</sup>

Another significant “fit” is the indelible link between press freedom and academic freedom, particularly appropriate in that academic freedom and public university funding are also under considerable stress throughout the world today.<sup>13</sup>

For academics, though, the fit is not always obvious. As Christopher Anderson has noted, there is much critique of journalistic prac-

tice, offered equally by the political Left and the Right, but very few critics seek a more complete understanding of how journalists actually do their work or what drives them to remain in increasingly punishing working conditions.<sup>14</sup> Although often obscured by the heat and noise of North American-style infotainment, there are established methods of journalistic research that lend themselves to the furtherance of progressive social change, not to mention journalists around the world who risk their lives to expose state corruption and oppression. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that no less than forty-six journalists were killed while doing their jobs in 2017.<sup>15</sup>

James L. Aucoin identified investigative journalism as a social practice,<sup>16</sup> one that Brant Houston further described as “analyzing and revealing the breakdown of social or justice systems and documenting the consequences.”<sup>17</sup> Robert Cribb, Dean Jobb, David McKie, and Fred Vallance-Jones add that the desired outcome is “a real opportunity to foster change.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, though entrapped in corporate structures, investigative journalists align their work as social/political projects aimed at righting power imbalances and achieving social justice.<sup>19</sup> This is reflected in the codes of conduct laid out by professional associations, such as the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ)’s Ethics Guidelines:

We serve democracy and the public interest by reporting the truth. This sometimes conflicts with various public and private interests, including those of sources, governments, advertisers and, *on occasion, with our duty and obligation to an employer* [emphasis added]. Defending the public’s interest includes promoting the free flow of information, exposing crime or wrongdoing, protecting public health and safety, and preventing the public from being misled.<sup>20</sup>

Around the world, journalists form and join labor unions that actively challenge the status quo of their workplaces, as members of the Washington-Baltimore News Guild did in June 2017, after management at the *Washington Post* implemented a new social-media policy that banned employees from using their own social media accounts to criticize the newspaper’s advertisers, vendors, or partners.<sup>21</sup> Journalists also form grassroots professional networks, such as

Investigative Reporters and Editors, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the Native American Journalists Association, the Canadian Association of Aboriginal Broadcasters, and myriad others dedicated to improving the quality and diversity of newsrooms. This organizing activity among journalists indicates a far more nuanced picture of life inside the machine. For journalists who feel constrained by understaffing and the right-wing or, at best, timid editorial positions of their employers, the opportunity to collaborate with university researchers offers a promise of greater research resources and an important validation of their work's credibility. For university researchers, it is an opportunity to move their work from the ivory tower to a mass audience. For educators, it's a chance to give students real-life, socially impactful learning experiences, much as the Project Censored VIN assignment accomplishes.

Along these lines, in 2005 the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University became the launch pad for News21, a Carnegie-Knight-funded initiative designed to spur collaborations. To date, 500 students and their professors have participated in News21 collaborations, diving into topics ranging from environmental issues to incarceration rates.<sup>22</sup> A 2011 *Washington Post*-led News21 collaboration, for example, saw 27 students help produce “dozens of stories, interactive graphics, photo galleries, videos and searchable databases showing how the nation's fragmented, underfunded and overwhelmed food safety system fails to prevent food-borne illnesses from striking tens of millions of Americans each year, killing thousands and hospitalizing hundreds of thousands more.”<sup>23</sup> Supervising editor Leonard Downie Jr. wrote, “What was most exciting for me was the fire in their belly. They really wanted to do accountability journalism, and they understood its importance for our society.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, two of the *Washington Post* investigative interns had the opportunity to travel to Guatemala to trace cantaloupes from their source to the consumers.

When it comes to international reporting, the Global Reporting Centre at the University of British Columbia (UBC) emphasizes building links with journalists in the countries reported on. The Centre emerged out of the UBC School of Journalism's International Reporting Program in 2008 as a means to address declining

international news coverage, and within one year produced its first Emmy-winning documentary. Under the leadership of former *60 Minutes* producer Peter W. Klein, the Centre combines the forces of academics, student researchers, and news reporters, and publishes with both establishment and alternative media outlets.<sup>25</sup>

On the heels of these early successes, other collaborations have followed. In 2010, for example, the US-based Center for Investigative Reporting, the University of Southern California (USC) Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, newspapers, and radio and television stations throughout California collaborated on a multimedia investigation, “Hunger in the Golden State.” The investigation revealed, among other things, that nearly one in 11 Californians were receiving food stamps while many other undernourished residents remained outside the system, with just 48 percent of eligible recipients registered for the program.<sup>26</sup> According to Russ Stanton, editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, “The combined effort sheds light on a significant public policy issue facing the state. At the same time, the team reporting approach has allowed us to help in training . . . the next generation of California journalists.”<sup>27</sup> An Annenberg School media statement added, “With the weight of [Center for Investigative Reporting] professionals behind them, the walls between academic work and real-world journalism broke down.”<sup>28</sup>

One of the first university–newsroom partnerships to draw significant national attention in Canada was “Code Red,” a 2010 investigative collaboration between Steve Buist, an investigative reporter with the *Hamilton Spectator*; Neil Johnston, a researcher at McMaster University’s faculty of medicine; and Patrick DeLuca, a spatial analyst at McMaster’s school of geography and earth sciences.<sup>29</sup> Through the collaboration, Buist melded the university-based researchers’ data-gathering work on the social determinants of health with a journalist’s shoe-leather work of knocking on doors for human interest stories and confronting political leaders. Their combined efforts drew a clear link between poor health and poverty in Hamilton, and garnered a Hillman Prize, a major annual award founded by labor activist Sidney Hillman for “journalists who pursue investigative reporting and deep storytelling in service of the common good.”<sup>30</sup>

## THE NATIONAL STUDENT INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING NETWORK

The common good underpins a collaborative investigative project I am currently involved in, via a partnership between Canada's nascent National Student Investigative Reporting Network (NSIRN) and the Corporate Mapping Project (CMP), a Canada-wide network of researchers exploring the power structures behind carbon extractive industries. The project was sparked when the CMP was contacted by the recipient of an academic fellowship for working journalists, 2016 Michener-Deacon Fellow Patti Sonntag, who has since become head of the newly-created Institute for Investigative Journalism at Concordia University in Montreal. NSIRN's pilot project, launched in 2017, grew to include a wide constellation of participants: the National Observer, an environment-focused independent online publication; Global TV, a mainstream corporate broadcaster; the *Toronto Star*, a national newspaper; the Corporate Mapping Project and its partners, including the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the Parkland Institute, two progressive think tanks; and four Canadian journalism schools (University of British Columbia, University of Regina, Concordia University, and Ryerson University), with financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, a federal research funding agency, and the Michener Foundation.

Through the collaboration, University of Regina journalism students in our Investigative Journalism and Intermediate Broadcast Journalism courses were able to bring local voices—namely, rural and Indigenous people suffering from the health and environmental impacts of Saskatchewan's poorly regulated oil and gas industries—to national attention. Their coursework included producing a student documentary, *Crude Power: An Investigation into Oil, Money and Influence in Saskatchewan* (see [www.crudepower.jschool.ca](http://www.crudepower.jschool.ca)), and research toward an ongoing investigative series carried out by all the project partners, called *The Price of Oil*.<sup>31</sup>

The researchers found, among other things, that the Saskatchewan government had not fined any oil companies in the past ten years, despite multiple safety infractions, thousands of spills and pipeline breaches, and the ongoing flaring and venting of lethally



dangerous gas byproducts.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, the project broke a long-held code of silence among rural and Indigenous communities that are economically dependent on the industry. “Just to see universities across Canada come together and put all of their efforts into this one project, this one issue in Saskatchewan has really been something,” said student Janelle Blakley, adding that it was an opportunity to gain a range of skills, from data mining to interviewing.<sup>33</sup>

For students in their first year of journalism school, it was challenging work on many levels. Faculty advisor and broadcast lecturer Trevor Grant observed,

Over and above the challenge for the university instructors in managing this complex project there was the reality that the students would be going into the field to film and conduct interviews. A primary challenge was to ensure our students were prepared, editorially and emotionally, to conduct face-to-face interviews with people who had suffered emotional devastation and also to conduct accountability interviews. There was concern about this step, but the accountability interviews were often insightful, informative and engaging.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, students at Ryerson and Concordia Universities investigated emissions in what is known as Chemical Valley, a collection of industrial refineries bordering the Aamjiwnaang First Nation reserve and the city of Sarnia, Ontario. In addition, Ryerson, Concordia, and UBC students together tackled the intricate networks of government subsidies and banking cross-ownership that prop up Canada’s oil industry at great expense to the public purse. “We aggregated and analyzed data, populating spreadsheets and ledgers—more specifically, we mapped oil wells in Saskatchewan, discovering which ones got tax breaks,” said Concordia University student Matt Gilmour. “Everyone’s work fed into the bigger picture. We learned so much alongside veteran reporters and professionals.”<sup>35</sup> All told, 34 students helped gather thousands of background files, made nearly 400 interview requests, and assisted with 118 freedom of information requests.<sup>36</sup>

Partnerships aren’t easy, especially the first time out. The collaborators operate in different arenas and platforms; there are various

academic protocols to navigate, and each media partner has its own reporting style and guidelines. Then there is the matter of a mutually agreeable release date, with different media outlets having different peak-audience days. For our collaboration, all of this involved many late-night phone conversations and hundreds of emails. As journalists, we were working within what, to us, was an incredibly short turnaround time. Without a large collaboration, investigations of this scope normally take years to publish. Students on their first investigative outing, however, were doubtless frustrated that the final “reveal” they’d hoped for in April was not scheduled until October, with professional journalists and paid student assistants working over the summer to polish and add to the reporting.

When the long-awaited moment arrives, “Everyone hits the ‘publish’ button at the agreed upon time, then a social media frenzy ensues. We stay in communication to share feedback we’ve received on the work, craft follow-up pieces collaboratively and move on to the next chapter,” explained Elizabeth McSheffrey, a journalist from the National Observer team.<sup>37</sup>

For the most part, any lost sleep was soon eclipsed by the success of the series. Within the first month of publication, the articles, television broadcasts, and student documentary had garnered a combined audience of three million viewers, or one in 12 Canadians.<sup>38</sup> Among numerous awards and accolades, the project as a whole received a Hillman honorable mention and was short-listed for a Canadian Journalism Foundation award. *Canada’s Toxic Secret*, a *Price of Oil* documentary on Chemical Valley, earned a New York Festivals silver award for Best Investigative Report, while the University of Regina students’ *Crude Power* documentary won 2017’s Investigative Reporters and Editors award for a large student production. More importantly, Saskatchewan’s provincial government was forced to answer publicly for years of complacency in the face of industry negligence. Rural dwellers and oil workers who had long held their silence felt empowered to come forward with further stories of the harmful impacts of a loosely regulated industry. In Ontario, residents living in the shadow of Chemical Valley finally saw some action.<sup>39</sup> Citing the qualities that earned the project an honorable mention, the Hillman Foundation noted,

As a result of this reporting, the Ontario government committed to funding a study examining the health impacts of industrial pollution in the region—a study the community had requested in vain for 10 years. The series drove two weeks of debate in Ontario’s legislature, marked by calls for action and declarations of environmental racism as the Aamjiwnaang suffered. Long-demanded regulations for sulphur dioxide—which hadn’t been updated in 43 years—were introduced and, after an eight-year delay, the government announced it would finally regulate the cumulative effects of air pollution in Sarnia’s “Chemical Valley.”<sup>40</sup>

There were also impacts for Canadian journalism, as described by Peter W. Klein, a faculty advisor who worked with the UBC student journalists:

Journalism schools have a responsibility and an opportunity here. We’re seeing more and more excellent reporting coming out of universities, often integrating scholars who have substantive knowledge about issues in which reporters are interested. While training and offering mentorship to students, universities can also fill the growing void in high-level journalism throughout the country.<sup>41</sup>

Though still in development, the National Student Investigative Reporting Network has already provided numerous students with hands-on training alongside working professionals, and this collaboration has resulted in both awards and meaningful social change. The program offers a model that university faculty and journalists from other institutions could follow, broadening the potential for cross-border partnerships.

## **CONCLUSION: “TIME TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE”**

In conclusion, campus–media collaborations offer an important counterpoint to the “obnoxious media frames” identified and opposed by Project Censored.<sup>42</sup> In an echo of Project Censored’s mandate to expose

missing news stories, *Price of Oil* series producer Patti Sonntag stated that campus–newsroom collaboration constitutes “excellent work experience for the students, and it serves the community by pursuing underreported stories.”<sup>43</sup> Collaboration with working investigative journalists can serve to bring censored and underreported stories to a mass audience, at a time when journalism is struggling to redefine itself as a public good.

To be sure, this model would not be worth pursuing if it served only to prop up shaky corporate media models beyond their sell-by date. My participation is guided by a belief that the process offers long-term transformative potential toward a more democratic future. As media models of the past few centuries begin to collapse upon themselves, new networks linked to the public sphere are building capacity to pick up the shards. To some extent this process mirrors the trajectory of a networked mediascape described by Yochai Benkler as “several intersecting models of production, whose operations to some extent complement and to some extent compete with one another.”<sup>44</sup> Leonard Downie Jr., whose career has migrated from the newsroom to the academy, sees a broadened potential for this type of collaborative work, one that involves alternative nonprofit media, small local projects, and larger-scale investigations housed in public institutions, using public platforms:

Universities, despite their own financial challenges, can help provide nonprofit sustainability and produce professional-level journalism and digital news innovation. They can collaborate with both for-profit and nonprofit news media. Those that hold public broadcasting licenses, as many do, can steadily transform their public radio and television stations into platforms for local news. Journalism schools, too many of which have retreated into academic isolation, can play the same productive and developmental role in news coverage as other professional schools do in medicine, business, law, engineering, science and technology. This is their time to make a difference.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, the opportunity to make a difference is what draws collaborators to venture out of their disparate spheres and come together

to create something new. Campus–newsroom collaborations offer a step toward a reimagined media ecology that serves the needs of people rather the profits of corporations.

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# **CENSORED 2019**

**FIGHTING THE FAKE NEWS INVASION**

The Top Censored Stories and Media Analysis of 2017–18

**Mickey Huff** and **Andy Lee Roth**  
with **Project Censored**

Foreword by  
**Abby Martin**

Cartoons by  
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