Sourcing the news: Teaching journalism students different approaches to sourcing practices

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Sourcing the News:
Teaching Journalism Students
Different Approaches to Sourcing Practices

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Abstract

The experiences of a group of Australian university journalism students from diverse backgrounds are explored as they become involved in producing five editions of a new newspaper for the isolated community of Blackall in the Queensland Outback, 1500km north-west of Sydney. During this learning experience, non-traditional journalistic sourcing methods were trialed. This paper documents the exercise, compares the alternative methods with existing practices identified in the literature, and examines the effects and consequences of the exercise.

Introduction

The problems associated with journalistic sourcing practices have been well established by research, which focused mainly on the limited diversity of news sources and the associated problems that under-represented groups face in accessing the public sphere through the news media. Public journalism projects in the United States, New Zealand and Australia have had partial success in facilitating access to the public sphere for those whose voices are locked out of the news by traditional journalistic approaches. The Media and Indigenous Australians project, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training in 1998 (O'Donnell 1999:172; Sheridan Burns and Scott 1998), has produced tertiary education kits for journalism educators. The kits included modules on how to use Indigenous sources to talk about Indigenous issues. Meadows and Ewart (2001) note that Indigenous voices are conspicuously absent from news stories that deal with issues directly affecting them. With an increasing number of Australian journalists possessing tertiary qualifications (Cokley 2004) the issue of how sourcing practices are being taught at university level is critical. However, comparatively little work has been done on changing the sourcing practices of journalists.

That is not to say that the problems associated with traditional sourcing practices in the Australian news media have not been critiqued. Much of this work has focussed on three key areas: quantifying the type and range of sources used by newspapers; identifying the problems caused by traditional journalistic sourcing practices; and examining the factors that contribute to these practices (Ewart and Massey 2004, Romano and de Ponte 2002, Meadows and Ewart 2001, Ewart 1997, Macklin 1995, and Jenkins 1993).

This article identifies an alternative sourcing method developed and implemented during a grounded action learning project at James Cook University, which involved students, their lecturer and other citizens outside the university in producing a community newspaper based in Central Western Queensland. The theoretical foundation and the application of the sourcing method are identified and discussed, incorporating ethnographic records from the lecturer and a key student. The outcome of the students' application of the new sourcing method is evaluated through a content analysis of the first five editions of the newspaper, and interviews with citizens in the town.

Background

In 2001, the only newspaper in the Central Western community of Blackall, the *Blackall Leader*, was closed by its parent company Australian Provincial Newspapers Pty Ltd. That left a situation in which the nearest newspapers were controlled and produced from the towns of Longreach, 200km to the north-west, and Charleville, another 300km to the south-south-east. In the latter part of 2003, a local community group dissatisfied with the situation in Blackall, in conjunction with students and staff at James Cook University, launched "a new community newspaper" -- *The Barcoo Independent*. The aim of the newspaper was to provide local news to residents of Blackall and the surrounding region. The "new" newspaper was a revived version of an historic masthead first published in 1889 as *The Barcoo Independent and Blackall, Tambo and Isisford Observer* (Cripps 2003) which had replaced the town's first

newspaper, *The Western Champion*, (launched in 1879, see Coats 2003). However, after publishing for just short of a century, the offices of *The Barcoo Independent* were destroyed by fire in 1983 and the business closed. Journalism students from James Cook University gathered and wrote most of the articles in the first five editions of the new *Barcoo Independent*. In June 2004, the newspaper committee took full control of the production of the title. The publication has continued and expanded since then on its own merits. The involvement of students in the production of the *Barcoo Independent* allowed them to become involved in gathering and producing news for a non-commercial newspaper located in a small country town, which few of them knew much of before the project. This remoteness and apparent alienation were important factors in the learning experience.

Literature review

Authoritative sources has been identified as a key element in the production of news. They are the main group whom journalists rely on for information and comment (McNair 1998; Ericson et al 1989; Gans 1979; Altheide and Snow 1979; Tuchman 1978; Sigal 1973). Authoritative sources possess certain "qualifications" or "credentials" that allow them to speak to news workers and be quoted in the news. These "qualifications" include the source holding a position of power – whether economic or social – and being a representative of a major societal institution. Journalists typically rely on official authoritative sources such as representatives of government and business (Sigal 1973, Brown et al 1987). Soloski (1989) examined local sources and channels of news appearing in one newspaper during a year and notes that the majority (56 per cent) of sources cited were government or elected officials, while community groups and business leaders accounted for 14.6 per cent of sources used. Tuchman (1978) notes that reporters have a propensity to rely on centralised sources including politicians and bureaucrats:

By identifying centralized sources of information as legitimated social institutions, news organizations and newsworkers wed themselves to specific beats and bureaus. Those sites are then objectified as the appropriate sites at which information should be gathered. Additionally, those sites of news gathering are objectified as the legitimate and legitimating sources of both information and governance. (Tuchman 1978:210)

Altheide and Snow (1979) and Gans (1979) investigate the relationship between sources and journalists, which Gans (1979:117) describes as a tug-of-war. Sources attempt to manage the content and direction of news, and journalists try to get the angle and information needed. He identifies four factors, which influence the level of access to journalists including: incentives, power, supply of suitable information, and geographic and social proximity of the source to the journalist. Gans also notes (1979) that some people are able to overcome their lack of power by providing information which is deemed by journalists to be suitable as news, but they are often constrained by limited resources and skills.

An examination of the ways in which such non-elite sources are used by the news media (Ericson *et al* 1989:1) shows that non-elites are used to "inspire 'fear and loathing' over a tragic event in a news story" and that "they [non-elites] were a small

minority [of sources used] statistically". Such treatment continually reinforces the authority of elites to speak and that of journalists to use this group as news sources.

Key Australian studies include those by Ewart and Massey (2004) which examine source usage in Queensland newspapers, Romano and DePonte (2002) who look at the representation of women in Queensland's major newspaper, Macklin's (1995) examination of the treatment of women as news sources in a rural newspaper, and Jenkins' (1993) study of sources used in metropolitan newspapers.

Ewart and Massey's (2004) comparison of source usage in Queensland newspapers, including one metropolitan and four regional newspapers, notes that as a group the latter news outlets give less voice to elite sources than does the metropolitan newspaper. However, two of the regional newspapers studied used a significant number of elite sources. Ewart and Massey also note that, as a group, regional newspapers prefer to use male sources, as did the metropolitan newspaper. Overall, less than 30 per cent of the sources used by both types of newspapers were females.

Romano and DePonte's (2002:151) examination of representations of women in front page news stories of Queensland's metropolitan newspaper, *The Courier-Mail,* notes that women are consistently under-represented compared to men and tend to be represented in a limited, feminised repertoire of activities. Their study (Romano and DePonte 2002:168), which examined four decades of coverage, suggests that this is related to newsroom culture, but also that it reflects "the imbalances of a gendered workforce and public sphere".

Macklin (1995:292) notes that country or rural newspapers typically use few women sources and present women as "peripheral, as artefacts in the story to tell us something about men … or about the community generally". In examining one newspaper's portrayal of women, Macklin (1995:292) notes the systemic bias which "is reflected in the reporting of local community life and events and how this reinforces patriarchal relations within the community". She suggests that there is a political dimension to the bias, with broader societal gender biases manifested through media representations. Newsgathering and reporting practices are identified as the channels through which these biases operate. The study, which analysed 260 editions of the newspaper, published between January 1989 and April 1991, shows that the newspaper's representation of women reflects existing gender relations in the community. It also reveals that fewer female sources are used than male and that women are represented in trivial ways in stories in which they are talked about.

A wider context for understanding the treatment of women as news sources in the Australian news media is provided by Jenkins (1993). In her examination of the front pages of three metropolitan newspapers, Jenkins notes that in editions published in 1992 these newspapers used men as the dominant character in 78.4 per cent of stories, while women were the dominant characters in only 10.6 per cent of the stories. She concludes (1993:242) that "women face three problems in trying to gain representation in the news media: gaining status in areas considered 'newsworthy'; changing the male-dominated media's view of what makes news; and having women accepted as authorities in their fields without the need for men to 'back them up'."

Theoretical foundation for
a new journalistic sourcing process

When the Blackall newspaper project group told Cokley, then at James Cook University, that they wanted a locally controlled publication, he understood that to mean a paper which would have authenticity for local readers, and one which would treat as "newsworthy" the things they themselves regarded as important, and as newsworthy. A survey had identified a particular need in the community (Capel & Roberts 2002) which was to put its members in touch with each other. The residents had identified through the survey that they needed to know what other community members were doing because many were experiencing a sense of isolation despite the small population of the area. Blackall newspaper committee member Sally Cripps said the main aim of the newspaper was to put community members in touch with what was happening in their town, what their neighbours were doing and reconnecting the people.

Based on an understanding of contemporary sourcing practices as described earlier, and a hypothesis that previous publications in Blackall had been unsuccessful because of those sourcing patterns, the theory of *praxis*, described as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 1972:28) and "self-reflexive, theoretically guided practice" (Huesca 2003:211) was adopted as a working model for the development of such a publication. *Praxis* invites the communicating parties to face each other (Cokley 2004) and work towards producing a mutually beneficial communications outcome. Cokley had employed a similar methodology during his part in the development of a news web site for East Timorese journalists in 2000-2001 (Cokley et al 2000).

The central element of the *praxis* in Freire's teaching is that the teacher must acquire a critical awareness of the situation of the student by becoming interdependent with the student. Freire (1972:28) concludes that "the requirement is seen not in terms of explaining to, but rather entering into a dialogue with … people about their actions" and is "animated by authentic humanist (not humanitarian) generosity". Under Freire's *praxis* orientation, practitioners attempt to close the distance between teacher and student, development agent and client, researcher and researched to enter into a co-learning relationship guided by action and reflection (Huesca 2003:212). While these ideas are "deeply unpopular with the elites" (Servaes 1996:17) Freire's notion of dialogic communication has become a normative theory of participatory communication (Servaes 1996:17).

Cokley brought an implicit approach to the project that he and the university students were the "teachers" and the town community was the "student". Explicitly, he explained that the *Barcoo Independent* project employed constructive alignment: "a design for teaching most calculated to encourage deep engagement" (Biggs 1999:31) and methods proposed by Cohen (1996:240) who notes that "training [for participatory communication] should be participatory" and should "de-emphasize technical competence, permit the sharing of experiences of practise … and should be multi-sectoral and multilevel, inviting community workers as much as possible".

Methodology

Data for this article was collected in two main ways: through the reflections of Cokley, who oversaw the students' collective involvement with *The Barcoo Independent*; and an analysis of the range of sources used in the five editions of the newspaper produced by the students, which included interviews with members of the fledgling newspaper committee in Blackall. Because Cokley was responsible for the two courses in which students were involved in the writing and production of the *Barcoo Independent*, his reflections on his teaching approach and methods were an essential part of this study. Cokley and Coats' reflections were used to provide the data on how sourcing practices were taught during the course and how students reacted to the idea of using non-traditional sources in the gathering and writing of stories for the *Barcoo Independent*.

The types of sources used in the first five editions of the revived *Barcoo Independent* were also analysed. Each edition of the newspaper was eight A4 pages in length. These were published on October 24, 2003; March 12, 2004; March 26; April 23; and May 14. Because of the small number of editions available until the time the study was conducted, all articles in each of those editions were included in the sample. This blanket approach was preferred over the constructed-week method (Riffe, Lacy and Fico 1998) because there was insufficient data.

Almost all stories were written by journalism students from the university, with the exception of five stories, two of which were clearly labelled as being media releases, two were written by Sally Cripps, the freelance journalist/resident of Blackall who worked on the paper as a volunteer and committee member, and one was authored by newspaper committee leader and resident, Kirstie Davison. Those stories were included in the analysis because they quoted sources and were written in a journalistic style.

Sources were defined as those individuals who were named and referred to by personal pronouns, such as "he" or "she". They were categorised as being elite or non-elite according to the published "qualifications" for speaking which included job titles and descriptions of their role and reason for speaking. Of particular note was the fact that some sources spoke in different roles in different stories, in or across editions. This is explained by the small population of the town and region, and the practice of some residents volunteering for and representing community groups as well as working in professional, business and governmental roles. Elite sources included officials from law enforcement and government agencies, professionals and experts, civic leaders and those who spoke on behalf of major societal groups. Non-elites included unaffiliated citizens who were not speaking on behalf of any organisation or business, small business owners, representatives of non-governmental bodies including festival organisations and sporting club officials, and rank-and-file public servants. These definitions were similar to those used in a project by Ewart and Massey (2004), which were adapted from the literature on news-story sourcing (see Sigal 1973; Gans 1979; Brown et al 1987; Hallin, et al 1993; Massey 1998).

Gender of sources was determined from their first names, where the name was gender specific, or honorifics attached to their names such as Ms, Mrs, Mr, etc. As well, personal pronouns such as "he" or "she" assisted in determining the source's gender. Those sources where gender was non-identifiable (such as a business) were

categorised as such. Percentages of elite and non-elite sources in all news stories were analysed along with the average number of each source type used per story. Source prominence was determined from the number of paragraphs in each story in which a source's voice was heard through quotations or paraphrases or both.

The position in a story (i.e. which paragraph block) in which a source was first named was also included in the data. Paragraph blocks were created by dividing stories into three blocks of five paragraphs each. Any paragraphs appearing after the 15th were counted as belonging to the fourth paragraph block. The methodology was adapted from similar approaches by Stempel and Culbertson (1984), Massey (1998), Ewart and Massey (2004). One of the authors of this paper coded all articles and a coding reliability check was performed by another who coded 10 articles. The check revealed an agreement rate of 82 per cent on all variables used in our study.

Implementation

Cokley created the slogan "no sausage sizzle is too small" to illustrate that it was the community-defined nature of the news published in the *Barcoo Independent* which would make it newsworthy. People in small communities – whether a country town, a city neighbourhood or an aged people's home – spend an apparently inordinate amount of time conceiving, planning, organising and conducting apparently "unimportant" events such as sausage sizzles, cake drives, bottle collections and working-bees. But for the amount of time and effort devoted to these events, journalists typically "reward" these community members by ignoring them, or by faint praise with a few cursory lines in the briefs on a slow-news day. Cokley encouraged the students to focus on ordinary people as news sources, rather than the standard elite sources. In particular, the news value of conflict or "disagreement" (Masterton 1998:91) was played down – even removed – from the news process. This aspect is discussed in greater detail later in this article.

Most of the James Cook University students involved in the project were in their first year of studying journalism and had been exposed only to the standard sourcing practices described earlier. One third-year student, Coats, joined the project to fulfill the leadership role of chief-of-staff, assigning stories or a contact to each first-year student. These contacts were provided by the Blackall newspaper committee after a request from Cokley, including a request for a list of story ideas. Students were encouraged to spend additional time familiarising themselves with the community of Blackall.

Students were required to be responsive to the needs of the Blackall community and in doing so they developed their practices to meet those needs. Once allocated a contact or story idea, students were responsible for deciding how relevant the story idea was to the community. They did this through consultation, group discussion and reflection. They then followed the usual practices of making contact with the source, undertaking an interview and supplying a written article to the editors.

When Coats assigned a story or a contact to a first-year student, that student had to (after listening to lecture content) work out how to research the relevant issue, make contact with the source, conduct the interview and supply a written article to the editors. Coats' experience in her role as chief-of-staff of the newspaper suggests

that many of the above tasks were carried out collaboratively among students. She reported that students made such comments to each other as: "what story are you doing?", "how do I get this done?" "where did you make your phone call from?", especially among students living on campus. This demonstrates the simple definition of problem-based learning as an instructional method that challenges students to 'learn to learn', working cooperatively in groups to seek solutions to real world problems. These problems are used to engage students' curiosity and initiate learning the subject matter" (Dutch 2004).

An unusual aspect of the project was that the students were based in Townsville which is 735km north-east of Blackall and this meant considerable logistical issues in familiarising the students with the community. Many of the students at the university had never traveled to anywhere in the Australian Outback and knew very little of the Blackall environment. Initially they exhibited little curiosity about the town and its citizens.

To overcome this, Coats undertook to travel there over Christmas 2004 and brought back experiences which she was able to relay to the other novice journalists. Another student, Amanda Batt, had grown up on a cattle property in that region of Queensland and her experiences also proved valuable. Coats said:

I had never been out there before so it was good because I got to see what the town was really like rather than what I thought it was like. And it wasn't that much of a different experience because I'm from somewhere similar but less isolated. I had some experience in an isolated town so it wasn't dramatically new.

There was some difficulty convincing some students of the importance of the project. Cokley explained:

Some of the students told Coats they rang people and "they didn't know anything" and the same students requested that they be able to write news that was a bit bigger than the "little" community stories we were focusing on.

Students were reminded that even a little hockey story was worth submitting for an assignment but many students found this difficult to believe … they wanted bigger, "hard-hitting" news assignments. Some students were worried that short "real" stories were not long enough for university assignments. They were reassured that not only would these be accepted for assessment, but that many reporters on "real" newspapers spent years writing brief stories for publication.

To ensure that the community got information about what was going on, Coats devised and allocated a series of story "rounds" to students: schools; emergency services (police, ambulance and fire/ SES); the hospital; sports (where four or five reporters were each assigned two or three events to cover each edition); clubs and associations; 60s and Better aged group; the town's Tourist Information Centre; the Barcoo Family Care; and the Blackall Shire Council, particularly its economic development officer. As well, a regular section which contained resident profiles was established as a means of introducing new residents to the wider community and featuring those who had lived in the area for some time.

Responses from sources varied: some residents were keen to assist the students with their stories through the provision of information; others were more difficult

to contact. Students had to work hard at tracking sources down because contact information was not always reliable. The project challenged the journalism students' preconceived ideas about who they should use as sources in news stories. Cokley explained:

For their assignments, first-year students tend to use sources that they already know or are close to. The Barcoo project required them to phone/approach people that they didn't know in a place they'd never heard of before. This put some of them out of their comfort zone, at least initially.

Coats recalled:

One student asked in class "what news could there be out there?", appearing to imply that he would be looking for police, court and other "conflict" stories, as previous training had indicated.

As a result of the above comment Coats assigned this student several Shire Council stories to make him aware of the many approaches which could be taken to news and the variety of places and people from which news came.

Cokley deliberately played down conflict when discussing news values for *The Barcoo Independent*. He did this on the basis of research which indicated that just as "human interest" is important as a news value, so is sensitivity to "local interests" (Conley 1997:275): "The media have a responsibility to help build positive images for people in a range of circumstances." While the "watchdog role" of the press innately promotes the conflict news value ("bad news") and the journalist's adage "good news doesn't sell" reflects practitioners' entrenched attachment to profit as a motive for reporting and publishing news, the model introduced in this article challenges the validity of these traditional dictums. Among all the "universal criteria of news" (Masterton 1998) "conflict" alone has duel ethical effects: overt inclusion of conflict in news benefits individual or corporate publishers motivated by improvement in financial profit, but damages community publishers motivated by improvement in social capital and community cohesiveness.

It was determined that a community decision to determine local newsworthiness criteria would be beneficial, and so the usual news values were discussed within the framework of what was called the "lens of the community". Instead of asking "what is going on here that is newsworthy" (Granato 1991:64) the students were urged to ask "what is happening here that the locals think is newsworthy?" This was the key to gathering news for this community newspaper. It is noteworthy that members of the Blackall community needed no such admonition: they instinctively understood what they knew was newsworthy. Newspaper committee members were also briefed on reducing or eliminating conflict for another reason: the possibility of defamation. Since *The Barcoo Independent* was truly a locally-owned community newspaper, it could not afford expensive legal advice or defamation insurance. Both students and residents were reminded that while "argument and conflict certainly has a place in every community and no doubt will appear in your newspaper" it was important to learn how to write accurate and fair reports, to avoid the risk of defaming people. Cokley said:

Defamation can cost you dearly, both in terms of the personal destruction it causes to individuals, within families and communities, and in terms of the enormous financial

penalties it can place on journalists and newspapers. Truth alone, while essential, is not a sufficient defence for defamation in Queensland.

Statistical outcomes

The analysis of the first five editions of the new *Barcoo Independent* revealed that a total of 349 people were named, of whom 51 appeared more than once. Eight stories were not attributed to, and did not name, any sources. Non-elites dominated the voices appearing in the news, at just under 80 per cent (279), while elites accounted for a little more than 20 per cent (70) of the sources appearances. Among the non-elite sources (279) female voices (144) were heard more often than males (112), while among elite sources, women's voices significantly outweighed those of men. Female sources dominated the voices in the news stories, at just over 54 per cent, while males accounted for just under 38 per cent of sources used. Of the total source appearances, 7 per cent were not identifiable by gender. The data revealed that non-elite sources were given more prominence within the newspaper than elites: slightly more than 78 per cent of the sources appearing in the first paragraph block of stories were non-elites, and the remaining 21.7 per cent were elites. In combination with the previous data, this is significant because it shows that non-elites were both more prominent and dominant within the news stories in the *Barcoo Independent*. It is also worth noting that there was little difference in the way elites and non-elites were treated in relation to the number of speaking role mentions they were given. This is significant because mainstream media generally gives elites more speaking role mentions or, in other words, they get to speak more frequently through direct and partial quotes and paraphrases.

Speaking-role mentions were also consistent across both male and female categories: males and females were given approximately the same number of speaking-role mentions. Also of note was that there was no significant difference in the treatment of elite and non-elites as sources, actors or both. Of the 279 non-elite voices heard, 56 (20.1 per cent) were used in source roles, 204 (73.1 per cent) were categorised as actors and 19 (6.8 per cent) were both sources and actors. Of the 70 elite voices heard, 19 (27.1 per cent) were treated as sources, 45 (64.3 per cent) were treated as actors and 6 (8.6) per cent were used as both sources and actors.

Discussion and conclusion

The two sets of data show that the attempt to introduce journalism students to new approaches to sourcing practices had some degree of success. This has been attributed, at least partially, to the teaching approach and the uniqueness of this project. This experience has shown that it is possible to bring a different focus to the teaching of journalistic sourcing practices by reinforcing the value of ordinary people and their ability to contribute to newsworthy stories. The quantitative data indicates the *Barcoo Independent* used a significant number of non-elite sources compared to the findings of similar studies.

By way of possible explanation for the outcome it is suggested that the fact that those involved were, for the most part, in their first and second year of university study meant they had little if any exposure to the habits journalists form in relation

to sourcing practices. While it is self-evident that these students would have seen the outcomes of journalistic sourcing practices through stories in the news media, they had not fully established the sourcing routines and habits common to many journalists, therefore making it easier to introduce them to a different, non-traditional approach to sourcing. Not only was this evident in the statistical outcomes where data revealed significant use of non-elites and women as news sources -- two groups typically shown to be under-represented in the news media -- but the comments of Cokley and Coats provided further evidence of the different approach to journalistic practices.

This article has explored a different approach to changing journalistic sourcing practices. Other approaches to addressing this issue at the university level might involve students in self-reflection via diary keeping and longitudinal studies with those involved in this project to determine whether it has any lasting impact on the practices of those students who work as journalists. Approaches to teaching that challenge established journalistic practices need to focus on the theory that underpins these behaviours and the practicalities of using non-traditional practices. This project involved students in discussion and reflection on their assumptions about journalistic practices, while enabling them to challenge the typical sourcing practices of journalists. In this way students were exposed to theories that underpin the field, while having to consider in practical ways how to avoid the usual pitfalls associated with sourcing routines. University journalism programs should pay attention to the teaching of community journalism because many journalism students will spend part of their working lives in small community newspapers. It is hoped that the reflections in this article provide impetus for other journalism educators to experiment with different ways of teaching and critiquing journalistic sourcing practices.

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