



NEW FINDINGS FROM THE CENTER FOR COMMUNITY NEWS:

University-led student reporting is substantive, in-depth and meeting critical information needs in communities

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A pilot study at the Center for Community News analyzed a random sample of stories produced by student reporters at 38 news-academic programs to provide a snapshot of the news content these programs make available to communities across the country. The analysis found that student-reported stories were often more in-depth and complex than the coverage produced by professional journalists at other local news outlets and that they were meeting critical information needs in their communities. This study was conducted by Kent State University assistant professor Andrea Lorenz, under the guidance of Director Richard Watts.

KEY FINDINGS

- The vast majority of stories (93%) focused on local or statewide issues. Those that did not were typically focused on a diaspora or identity community.
- A majority of stories (88%) also filled one of eight critical information needs¹, with many addressing more than one identified need. Political life (33%), environment/planning (16%), and emergencies/risks (15%) were the most common local information needs addressed by stories.
- Stories exhibited levels of depth that surpass previous content analyses of local broadcast TV news and “ghost papers” through variation in types of sources, the number of voices included, and additional context. Stories, on average, were 23 paragraphs long, with a median length of 18.5 paragraphs. Most included at least three sources, with 24% including three sources and 34% including four or more. Furthermore, 80% of stories included additional historical, geographic, or other context to add to the depth of information.
- Coverage was mostly thematic, not episodic, by nature, suggesting that students are engaging in enterprise reporting rather than covering one-off events such as meetings or crime reports.
- There was evidence of programs attempting to play accountability/watchdog roles and connect people in the community, two roles of local news media found to be important to democracy. In measuring potential functions the stories could provide communities, 38% of stories were considered have the potential to play a role in connecting people in the community to one

¹ Critical information needs (briefly, emergencies and risks, health and welfare, education, transportation, economic opportunities, the environment, civic information, and political life) as identified in Friedland, L. A. (2023). Taking It to the States: The Origins of Critical Information Needs. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 707(1), 21–28.

another through coverage. These stories highlighted community voices, often through focusing on local events, programs, or businesses. A smaller proportion, 16% of stories, resembled watchdog coverage, playing an accountability role of powerholders in the community. These stories often used data analysis and public records, with robust sourcing and research.

METHODOLOGY

For this content analysis, CCN focused on 38² university-led community reporting programs that had posted student work during the 2023-24 academic year on external sites. Based on the organization of most university-led programs within an academic semester production schedule, CCN used a sampling period of nine months, from September 2023 through May 2024, to account for the cyclical nature of student-produced content, in which new journalists start at the beginning of each semester and improve as the semester progresses. CCN randomly selected one article per outlet from each month, yielding 281 stories, as outlets did not all publish at least one article per month.

As this study is exploratory, CCN selected a subsample of these articles, randomly choosing two articles per outlet, for a total of 76 stories.

This first systemic analysis of professional local news content produced by university students focused on the following questions:

- What is the quality and depth of student reporting in university-led community news programs?
- How well are these programs addressing critical information needs of local communities?

The quality of news content is subjective, depending on the perspective and focus of the beholder. For this study, we were primarily concerned with the depth and breadth of news content produced by student reporting programs to understand the “richness” of reporting, and “a sense of the effort put into the work.”³

As such, this study used consistent markers of the quality of news reporting to measure sources, topics of coverage, and the style of presentation. Depth is commonly measured by the level of effort put into the story, which this study measured through the impetus behind the story, the use of episodic or thematic framing, and the incorporation of multiple viewpoints and context⁴.

University-led community news programs seek to fill gaps in professional local news coverage, and as such, we sought to understand whether and how well student coverage addressed community information needs⁵, whether stories include watchdog reporting with the purpose of holding local power accountable engages audiences to connect with their communities.

² Arizona State University, Arkansas State University, Boston University, Chapman University, Denison University, Duke University, Florida Atlantic University, Franklin College, Howard University, Indiana University, Kennesaw State University, Kent State University, Miami University, Michigan State University, Rowan University, Salt Lake Community College, SUNY Buffalo, SUNY New Paltz, Temple University, Texas State University, UC Berkeley, University of Georgia-Athens, University of Hawaii, University of Illinois (two outlets), University of Minnesota-Duluth, University of Nebraska, University of Nevada-Reno (two outlets), University of New Mexico, University of Oklahoma, University of Richmond, University of Southern California, University of Texas at Austin, University of Vermont, University of Texas-El Paso, Virginia Commonwealth University

³ (p. 58) Lacy, S., & Rosenstiel, T. (2015). *Defining and measuring quality journalism*. Rutgers School of Communication and Information New Brunswick, NJ.

⁴ See Lacy & Rosenstiel (2015)

⁵ Friedland (2023); Mahone, J., Wang, Q., Napoli, P. M., Weber, M., & Mccollough, K. (2019). *Who's Producing Local Journalism? Assessing Journalistic Output Across Different Outlet Types* (News Measures Research Project).