



**Into the Breach:  
Should Student Journalists Save Local Political Reporting?  
Teaching Note**

**Case Summary**

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, American journalism was in the throes of an historic realignment as news organizations across the country shrank. Newspapers, the nation's chief providers of independent state and city reporting, were the hardest hit, leaving fewer reporters to gather less local news. As media attention to legislatures and statehouses across the country waned, experts worried about the watchdog function of journalism. How would citizens monitor lawmakers? Who would hold politicians to account? One proposed solution: encourage university journalism programs to take up the slack and assign students to cover government. The idea had been tested on a limited scale at a few top-ranked journalism schools. But a question remained open: could journalism schools at large play a primary role in shining light on the daily workings of government?

Beth Barnes, director of the School of Journalism and Telecommunications at the University of Kentucky (UK) and James Chapman, provost of Kentucky State University (KSU), decided to test that question in 2009 as they explored whether the two schools should join forces to establish a student-run political news bureau in the state capital, Frankfort. From a highpoint of 30 (during the legislative session) in the 1990s, fulltime journalists covering the statehouse had shrunk to seven by 2009. Meanwhile the *Associated Press*, a main provider of daily political news to all Kentuckians and the lifeblood of coverage for its rural counties, had drastically cut its presence in the state.

The University of Kentucky had some experience with a Frankfort-based political reporting seminar. But it was expensive and a strain on faculty and students alike. When KSU, a small, historically black school in Frankfort, decided to create an accredited journalism program, it opened the door to a possible partnership with UK. Perhaps the two schools could collaborate on a capitol news bureau which would distribute news to local media along the lines of a wire service. KSU had the facilities and ambition; UK had the journalistic expertise and respect of the media community. Chapman asked Barnes to head a steering committee to offer KSU formal guidance on both the proposed department and the bureau. The committee's first meeting was scheduled for November 17, 2009.

Even in the concept stage, there were problems. What would the governance structure be? Who would staff the bureau when school was not in session? Would the enterprise exploit students unfairly to benefit news organizations? Should it charge for its product? Influential faculty at UK felt the responsible route was for UK to run the program; Barnes knew UK did not have the resources to do so, but would a partnership work?

The case leaves Barnes debating whether she should exert additional pressure on KSU to get a bureau up and running or whether she should back away from the project in the hope that UK could eventually host its own bureau. As she prepares to leave for her committee's first meeting, she learns that the AP has cut its Frankfort presence to one reporter. The need is pressing for some institution to take responsibility for local news.

### Teaching Objectives

The case allows students to consider the societal debate over the business models for future journalism, whether universities have a role to play, and whether good journalism is a civic obligation. Specifically, the case examines whether and how journalism schools should address the problem of shrinking news organizations. The question is particularly germane for nonmetropolitan areas like Kentucky, where a university contribution would not merely complement, but substitute for local news coverage.

Several journalism schools—among them UC Berkeley, University of Missouri, and New York University—have launched projects intended to augment local news reporting.<sup>1</sup> Some universities partner with local media organizations. Some of the publications are online, others are print. The reasoning is that students learn best from doing. So journalism students are sent into the streets to “report on neighborhoods and communities—and the results are published, usually after aggressive editing by faculty. It seems to be a win-win situation: the students get clips; the communities get public attention and accountability. But is this true?

*Strategic.* This case raises for discussion whether student-run news organizations in general, and the proposed UK/KSU bureau in particular, are likely to succeed. Ask students to consider whether the UK/KSU situation is additionally challenging because the students will cover politics—a notoriously complex subject. Based on the experience UK had with Richard Wilson's course (labor intensive, low enrollment), can a student-run news operation reliably obtain and chronicle political news? Are its stories likely to be balanced and nuanced? Will the community benefit from the coverage, even if not perfectly executed, or is the risk of mistakes or misreporting too high? Does this provide a reliable substitute for the Associated Press, or is it grasping at straws? Finally, students should discuss whether a university news service benefits or poses unfair competition to existing news organizations.

---

<sup>1</sup> Other schools with news operations include Florida International University, Youngstown State University, the University of Maryland, City University of New York, American University, Northeastern University, Arizona State, Columbia University, and Boston University. No doubt there are others we've missed, or that are launching now.

There are related issues for the producers and consumers of the bureau's news. Is it fair to ask students to perform like professionals at a time when they are still developing skills? Does it take advantage of them to produce journalism at a fraction of the cost it would take to pay career journalists? Alternatively, is it fair to the readers? Can students perform the kind of watchdog function typically carried out by seasoned beat reporters with local knowledge, good sources, and an advanced understanding of the political process? Students should discuss whether the proposed UK/KSU news bureau is capable of simultaneously serving the educational mission of a journalism school and the civic mission of a news service.

*Operational.* Then there is the question of how best to structure a student news operation. Barnes believes that the bureau must be run by an experienced journalist. Is she right? Students should discuss the role and qualifications of the director. To what degree does it matter whether the candidate comes from a predominantly academic or journalistic background? How independent should or could the bureau be from its university parents? Students should examine the tensions that might emerge in the administration of a news service that attempts to straddle the line between professional media company and educational enterprise.

How will the bureau fit into UK and KSU's academic curriculum? For instance, Barnes and Al Cross believe that students would need to serve a full term in the bureau in order for it to succeed. What should the eligibility requirements be for student participation? Cross wants to accept only outstanding upper division students. Is that right? Must student reporters be required to take preparatory courses in wire reporting or government? Should student newspaper experience be a prerequisite? Finally, what kinds of stories should student reporters in the bureau produce? Spot news? Features? Editorials? Investigative stories? All of the above?

Finally, students should debate who is ultimately responsible for the editorial product. Is it the individual student reporters? The director? The two universities? What about liability issues? Who would pay in a libel suit? Likewise, whose job is it to fund the bureau? Given that both UK and KSU are public universities using taxpayer dollars, does the use of their students constitute a hidden public subsidy to the press? Would it make a material difference in the tone, quality, and credibility of the bureau if it was funded by federal land grant monies, KSU, UK, or subscribing news organizations? If the bureau adopts a membership model, should it charge the members fees? Should students be paid for their work? Ask students to advise Barnes on how best to proceed.

## **Class Plan**

Use this case in a course on local journalism, student journalism, political reporting, or media and government.

*Pre-class question.* Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question. You might also consider assigning one or more of the Suggested Readings to give students context about efforts at other universities to operate student news services.

1) Does a university have a responsibility to help provide news coverage of the community of which it is part?

We find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to these questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The posts highlight talking points ahead of class and help identify specific students to call on during the discussion.

*In-class questions.* The instructor may find it useful to pose some of the following questions to facilitate discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth over an 80 to 90-minute period is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) Before class begins, write two column headings on the board: Arguments For establishing a student-run bureau in Frankfort, KY, and Arguments Against.

Ask students to provide items for each list. These could include: Pro—hands-on experience for students; civic service; fills gap in local reporting; gives universities good PR in community. Con—expensive; editorial liability issues complex; governance unclear; labor intensive; academic integration a challenge. Leave the list on the board.

b) Which list is most urgent—to resolve the cons or to promote the pros?

c) How might you mitigate the cons? Be specific. For example, establish clear legal context by cooperative work between the two university General Counsels' offices before starting operation; establish clear financing model with specific dollar amounts; establish clear lines of authority/responsibility from each university to bureau director, etc.

d) What practical measures could strengthen the pros? Be specific. For example, hire as director a former state capitol reporter; assign two editing layers (faculty or senior students) for each piece that goes online; plan a PR campaign for the effort, approach news organizations early to ensure outlets for the product, etc.

e) Stepping back from this example for a moment, does the dilemma the two universities face have anything to do with democracy? Why?

f) Len Downie, Jr. and Michael Schudson, among others, recommend that universities step into the gap created by reduced local reporting. Does the proposed UK/KSU project reinforce that recommendation or undermine it?

g) Going back to the lists on the board, what would a successful collaboration look like?

## Suggested Readings

Michael Schudson and Leonard Downie, Jr., "The Reconstruction of American Journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 9, 2009.

SYNOPSIS: Sociologist Michael Schudson and former *Washington Post* Executive Editor Leonard Downie, Jr. deliver a comprehensive report on the transformation of American journalism at a moment when newspapers are giving way to online or hybrid newsgathering and distribution models. The authors offer a wide appraisal of the media landscape. In the center of the report they pay particular attention to efforts by university journalism schools—including Columbia, Missouri, and University of Southern California—to fill the reporting gap.

[http://www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the\\_reconstruction\\_of\\_american.php?page=all](http://www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_reconstruction_of_american.php?page=all)

-----

Michael Schudson and Leonard Downie, Jr., "University-based Reporting Could Keep Journalism Alive," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 15, 2009.

SYNOPSIS: In this piece, which came out shortly after the report cited above, Schudson and Downie explore what a handful of universities have done across the country in terms of student-contributed reporting. They find that there is no template, no "handbook of best practices," but many intriguing models. Assign this reading so that students have a framework to consider the pros and cons of what is being proposed at the University of Kentucky/Kentucky State.

<http://chronicle.com/article/University-Based-Reporting/49113/>

-----

Richard Pérez-Peña, "In San Francisco, Plans to Start News Web Site," *New York Times*, September 25, 2009.

SYNOPSIS: Richard Pérez-Peña reports on the University of California Graduate School of Journalism's plans to launch a local news site that will fill the vacuum created by the contraction of the region's newspaper industry. The project is funded by a \$5 million gift from the philanthropist F. Walter Hellman. One of the questions Peña explores is whether the project will hasten the demise of regional papers such as the San Francisco *Chronicle* and the San Jose *Mercury News*.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/25/business/media/25bay.html>

-----

Chris Roush, "Moving the Classroom Into the Newsroom," *American Journalism Review*, February/March 2009.

SYNOPSIS: This article by a business journalism faculty member at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill describes a collaboration between the University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa) and the Anniston *Star*, which brings master's students to the newspaper for classes and to produce published work. The program, which launched in 2006, has experienced success (published special reports) but also challenges, including how to sustain funding. The article provides good context and details for discussing and assessing the situation described in the case study.

<http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=4691>

-----

Sam Schulhofer-Wohl and Miguel Garrido, "Do Newspapers Matter? Evidence from the Closure of The Cincinnati Post," Discussion Paper #236, *Discussion Papers in Economics*, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, March 2009.

SYNOPSIS: Princeton economist Sam Schulhofer-Wohl examines the political ramifications of the 2007 closing of the Cincinnati *Post* on the city's Kentucky suburbs. Schulhofer-Wohl found that the following year fewer candidates ran for office, voters turned out in lower numbers, and incumbents were more likely to win re-election. "Although our findings are statistically imprecise," Schulhofer-Wohl wrote, "they demonstrate that newspapers, even underdogs such as the *Post*, which had a circulation of just 27,000 when it closed, can have a substantial and measurable impact on public life."

<http://www.nber.org/papers/w14817>