

My first audience-centric reporting and where the engagement went

By Joanna Lin Su, 2019 Fall

This is part of the summaries about my first semester at Studio20. In this piece, I want to talk about "audience engagement" and "audience-centric reporting".

Honestly speaking, I have never come across the phrase "audience-centric reporting" before getting started my master's study here. Back in my home country China, which has more than 8 billion internet users, media outlets are working as a broadcasting way about delivering content, rather than a two-way conversation which includes engaging with users. Editors and journalists are listening to their gut feelings instead of audience behavior data or comments. The monopoly of "I think this is newsy to my audience" needs to be changed by asking "what my audience wants to know about this" and "what knowledge my audience could share about this".

For me, the learning process was quite a culture shock, but I gradually digested it during my *Writing, Researching and Reporting* course called "Audience-Centric Reporting".

It was one of my core courses from my digital journalism program. This time, we partnered with the *Talking Points Memo*, a web-based political journalism news outlet accompanied by a member-only forum called "HIVE". The process was divided into three parts: pre-reporting, reporting, and post-reporting. All of them include interactions with HIVE members. For us who are not familiar with this media, we took half a month in observing the HIVE- their tone, highly engaged topics, and expertise. We made our first debut by posting our self-introductions in the forum for inviting them to talk with us.

At the very beginning, it went well. The HIVE welcomed us with long and detailed replies to our introductions: which included their questions, experiences, and opinions. In my post, I shared my experience of reporting tech and business industries, but it was clear that they were more interested in the cultural and political aspect of me: an international student /journalist from China. One HIVE

member asked me about “why Chinese international students seldom talk about politics but food?” My classmate from Chile received replies showing interests in political satires across American continents.

Crowdsourcing via forum

We then divided into groups for discussing the pitches. Unlike usual, we didn’t only include the so-called “editors’ interests”, but also “questions and opinions” from our audience. Started from the thread, we then looked into other threads on the HIVE and spotted several topics that TPM audience were specifically interested: misinformation, political satire, conspiracy theory and so on. Based on our group’s interest, we decided to dig in the Lyme thread which talks about bioweapon theory and health-related misinformation.

After getting the green light from TPM’s major editors at the pitch meeting, we reported our general ideas to the HIVE. Then we asked for their knowledge on this topic because we wanted to spot any potential experts from our members in this process. Also, we asked for questions related to these topics.

At first, the discussion went smoothly- some members posted their personal experience with this disease, some share thoughts on the book (The Bitten), and some suggested other experts for us to look for. A member even told us that there would be a conference called “LymeMind” holding exactly that weekend in NYC.

Reporting progress to the audience while doing interviews

Based on this information, we readapted our investigation schedule and signed up for the conference to interview policymakers, researchers, non-profit organizers, investigative reporters, and others who cared about Lyme disease. During the conference, we gathered answers for our members, followed up the questions, and even met the “revealer” member in person.

During the same time, we spotted another forum on Reddit was also constantly talking about this conference. After joined the online discussion, we found more sources from the patients’ perspectives. Then, we posted our findings and thoughts on the thread after we attended the forum.

When the discussion gradually went out of control

As the interviews went on, members on HIVE kept discussing the topic. They posted opinions with further materials. As time went by, the discussion gradually became a debate among a few people. Some members went mad when others had different opinions. At this time, we decided to step back and focused on our reporting.

When we looked back at the whole production process, we realized that it would be better for us to make a stricter “guideline” and interfere the discussion when it was necessary. It is hard to say that this audience-centric Lyme story was a successful one, but what we are all clear about now is adapting the role of journalists from “one-way communicator” to “a bridge for both sides”.