

Our Community

The Community Journalism Interest Group Newsletter

Winter 2023

COMJIG mulls PJIG union

By Dr. Burton Speakman
Head Chair

This year is going to be one of planning for our future as the Community Journalism Interest Group. With AEJMC considering its future, our group needs to decide ours as well. Over the past year, I have been in discussions about potentially merging with the Participatory Journalism Interest Group.

These changes may have seemed shocking at first, but after the presentations at the AEJMC conference where future visions of the organization were presented, I received considerably more feedback about the idea. In the next few months, you as a member should receive a type of informal straw poll about the idea. I think that Participatory Journalism as a group is the best fit. The groups were joined at one time and the commonalities between the group as researchers are by far more than the differences. Participatory Journalism has been a group partner for us and every year we team up for something at the conference and this year will be no different.

I believe the change makes both groups stronger going forward and

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Preparations made for AEJMC conference

By Dr. Aaron Atkins
Program Chair

Another year, another successful round of high-quality panel pitches, bids, negotiations, and chip allotment for COMJIG. It was interesting to me to see the amount of overlap between our proposed panel sessions and those from other DiGs – this demonstrates to me that the areas of community-oriented research and discussion are strong, not only within our own group but within others. This will not only help with the visibility of the excellent work our own members are putting out there but highlight the continued necessity of community-oriented media research.

As for how our programming is ironing out for August:

On top of our traditional top paper session we will host a high density paper session, and reserve a poster session to accommodate the inclusion of additional high-quality, community-oriented research.

Our executive meeting (business) will take place over Zoom at some point between July 31 and Aug. 4 – I have requested it to take place Aug. 1 at 3 p.m. MST (5 p.m. EST) but have not gotten confirmation by press time. We will share that confirmation (and the meeting link) once it's official.

We are working with the Participatory Journalism Interest Group's vice chair, Andrea Wenzel, to create a co-sponsored off-site preconference session with the intent of bringing



together journalism professionals, educators, researchers, and stakeholders to, as Andrea put it in an email, “reimagine a journalism education system to support more equitable journalism” and focus on helping teachers, professionals, and students navigate and help repair systemic issues. This will be a collaboration with the American Press Institute and the Engaged Journalism Exchange. I am particularly looking forward to this one – it gives us the opportunity to engage with researchers and practitioners on their own turf outside the confines of the traditional conference session format.

Last year COMJIG focused primarily on PF&R and teaching in its

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AEJMC 2023 calls for research submissions

By Dr. Joy Jenkins
Research Chair

As the spring semester kicks off, it's time to start thinking about research submissions for the 2023 AEJMC annual conference in Washington, D.C. The Community Journalism Interest Group welcomes papers from faculty members and graduate students on a variety of topics related to community journalism, broadly defined. All methods and theoretical and conceptual frameworks are welcomed.

COMJIG encourages scholarship examining "community" in a diversity of ways, including geographic proximity as well as communities united by social relationships, shared backgrounds, and common interests. Submissions can explore the role of journalism in reporting about and informing these communities, as well as broader trends and issues facing journalists and news organizations producing community journalism across platforms.

Potential research topics include but are not limited to:

- How and whether news organizations fulfill a community's critical information needs
- How news organizations build audiences within their communities with or without technologies such as social media
- How community newspapers thrive or struggle to survive in present times and changes, if any, in community journalistic practices in the digital age
- How journalism entrepreneurs juggle advertising and other revenue sources with community news reporting
- The effects of the closure of community news outlets on communities, specifically those in news deserts
- The effects of ownership and consolidation shifts on community journalism practices and content
- Conceptual ideas that push the meaning and our understanding of community in new directions
- Conceptual ideas that explore the meaning and interpretation of "local news" in a global era
- Efforts to make community journalism more accessible and inclusive, particularly among underserved or marginalized groups

COMJIG will award top faculty and student papers. The authors will be invited to publish their manuscripts to COMJIG's official, peer-reviewed publication, *Community Journalism*.

The deadline for paper submissions is April 1.

Stay tuned for the next issue of AEJMC News for specific research submission guidelines or visit www.aejmc.com.

If you have questions about the research competition, contact COMJIG Research Committee Chair Joy Jenkins, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, at jjenkins@utk.edu.

News Desert U conference focuses on community journalism, offers inspiration

By Dr. Nick Mathews
PF&R Chair

News Desert U, a powerhouse conference hosted at the University of Kansas in October, spotlighted academics and practitioners alike, surfaced problems and possible solutions in community journalism and delivered an endless supply of motivation for those in attendance.

It also, in my opinion, offered a picture-perfect example that we, as the Community Journalism Interest Group, can strive to replicate and build on by engaging with and, potentially, co-organizing similar events with AEJMC divisions or interest groups. As our interest group's chair of Professional Freedom and Responsibility, I would love to help facilitate such conversations with colleagues in the History Division, Newspaper and Online News Division, Scholastic Journalism Division or Participatory Journalism Interest Group, to offer a few possibilities.

Ultimately, my goal as PF&R chair is to promote discussions centered around improving public service to our respective communities.

This idea of public service was front and center at the News Desert U conference, which was organized by co-hosts Teri Finneman (University of Kansas) and Meg Heckman (Northeastern University). I made the short drive from Kansas City to Lawrence, Kansas, to attend the hybrid event, on site at the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications and streamed virtually.

The conference crammed an overwhelming amount of information — and inspiration — into a 24-hour span.

The Friday night festivities included a State of News Deserts 2022 keynote by Northwestern University's Penny Abernathy and a discussion of the Future of News Desert Research by University of Tennessee's Joy Jenkins. In a Dean's Panel, Chris Roush, the dean of the School of Communications at Quinnipiac University, implored pro-

grams to look at society and help solve society's problems, including the growing gaps in news coverage and the need for critical news and information.

On Saturday, the conversations shifted to how we can help lead our students to fill those needs and better serve the communities. The second-day panels included discussions about creating syllabi for courses to help cover communities, fund news outlets to fill the news and information gaps and building trust with community residents.

I was inspired, especially, by two comments from the Saturday sessions, both remarks focusing on improving public service to communities.

First, was from Michelle Ferrier, whose work includes pioneering research in media deserts. "Listening is our superpower," Ferrier said. "We have to listen to our communities." Second was from Erica Perel, the director of the University of North Carolina's Center for Innovation/Sustainability. She stressed that we — including teachers and students — must not report about communities but for communities. The distinction, again, highlights the importance of serving our communities.

Speaking of community, I wanted to finish my first PF&R chair column by emphasizing just how much our COMJIG community means to me. At the Toronto 2019 AEJMC conference, this community welcomed me when I had zero idea what I was doing — I had not even begun my PhD program yet. Since that Toronto conference, I started and defended my PhD at the University of Minnesota and accepted my first position at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. I also have served as the secretary and communications (social media) chair and the first newsletter editor for our interest group. And I will be honored to serve our community until the day I retire.

This interest group, our community, is my academic home — and always will be.

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might allow us to apply for division status under the existing rules. I understand that some of you have been with COMJIG longer and remember and might still have feelings about the split. My hope is that you go into the process with an open mind (and talk to some of the members who attended the future presentation) before making any final decisions.

My plan is to invite the members of Participatory Journalism to come to our meetings for the rest of this year. I

want everyone to remember that this change isn't something that will happen immediately and it's a multi-year process. I want to hear from everyone who wants to make their voice heard about this issue. But understand that my goal in this entire process is to ensure the strongest future for those of us in this interest group and make sure that will retain a place within AEJMC for those who research ideas of community.

Habitat for Humanity project provides insight into solutions journalism

By Jennifer Cox
Teaching Chair

Are there any two weeks more useless in the academic calendar than those between Thanksgiving and winter break?

It's hard enough to motivate ourselves as we succumb to the crush of grading, deadlines, general stresses that are a hallmark of the holiday season. Throw in your burned-out college students – many of whom already have an eye toward graduation – and you get a perfect storm of exhausted indifference that makes the crawl toward break seem relentless.

But last semester, I uncovered the antidote: Break. Stuff. Oh, and community journalism. I'll get to that in a minute.

During an early-semester fit of energy, I scheduled a class-building activity for the Tuesday right after the break. My 9:30 a.m. class was scheduled to meet an hour earlier (ugh!) to work on a two-hour Habitat for Humanity service



project in our small city.

Throughout the semester, my Advanced Feature Storytelling students learned about three reporting strategies: immersion, community, and solutions journalism, all of which are outlined in my textbook, "Feature Writing and Reporting: Journalism in the Digital Age." The idea behind the Habitat project was to incorporate all three techniques into one assignment. We would (1) immerse ourselves while reporting a (2) community project, which we would then investigate using a (3) solutions journalism frame.

So, on a chilly late-November morning, with the end of the term so tantalizingly close, we shuffled sleepily onto a bus in shabby construction clothes to try something new. I think what happened to our collective psyches that day – and what continued after – surprised us all.

Our assignment was a choice one – we were to help demolish the interior and exterior of a dilapidated rental property to prepare it for renovation and eventual home ownership. My class of 15 juniors and seniors looked like cartoon minions in our yellow head-to-toe Tyvek suits, protective glasses, heavy-duty masks, and gloves. It was immediately clear – our delicate journalists' hands were getting put to work today.

Within moments, 40 degrees felt like 90 as we swung sledgehammers; wrenched stained, smelly carpet from the floors; busted and shoveled discolored linoleum in the kitchen; ripped vinyl siding from the exterior; and awkwardly hauled and chucked hefty cabinets into a dumpster. If I wasn't already wide awake, having a cabinet crack





dangerously close to my brain and deflecting it with my now-bruised elbow certainly did the trick.

(Side note: Make sure students sign waivers before attempting something like this!)

As the sweat poured down our backs inside our sauna suits, I expected to hear griping and angst. Instead, it sounded more like a college party, with bursts of laughter and supportive cheers resounding all over the house.

We climbed back on the bus exhausted and gross,

but brimming with stories, memories, and energy. The consensus was that breaking stuff was exactly what we all needed at that moment. But I wasn't sure it would last.

Two days later, the same group showed up to class (they showed up!), where a panel of Habitat executives awaited us for a press conference. The students were still reeling from the on-site experience, and their exuberance didn't go to waste.

Their assignment was simple – they were to interview the panel with a goal of eliciting answers aligning with the four rigors of solutions journalism: 1) documenting the organization's response to a problem, 2) providing insight into the solution, 3) demonstrating evidence of the solution's effectiveness, and 4) examining the solution's limitations. They would then write blurbs for each of the rigors based on the panelists' responses.

I have attempted press conferences in class before with mixed results. Often, there are one or two students who will ask some good questions while the others sit mute and bored. Not this time.

Students asked dozens of questions well beyond the parameters of the solutions interview, not because they were concerned about the assignment but because they felt genuinely invested in this community group and had become stakeholders in its success. Their submissions corroborated that investment, with some turning in the best work I had seen from them all semester.

I know the last couple of weeks of any term can be a drag, so I would encourage you to invigorate your classes with community journalism opportunities like this one. Motivating them near the finish line through experiential learning can elicit community connections and remind them why they got into this business in the first place.

Also, breaking stuff is fun.

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panels, and this year I put the focus on research. We have three joint sessions with three different DiGs: PJIG, Media Management, Economics and Entrepreneurship, and Broadcast and Mobile Journalism.

The first session (PJIG) is tentatively titled Collaborative Journalism Experiments with Community Media Resources, and is focused on creating and maintaining collaborative partnerships with community media centers anchored by public, educational, and government access channels and publications. Its purpose is to address the need for reimagined local storytelling initiatives and will feature professionals and researchers.

The second session (MMEE) is tentatively titled Shifting Ownership Structure across Media and Information Sectors: Impacts, Implications, and Research Methods. It will examine community journalism through an eco-

nomic-oriented theoretical framework, and discuss the implications of the restructuring of media ownership. It will bring together scholars on media economics, history, legal, community, and international studies and should lead to an excellent discussion.

The third session (BAMJ) is a teaching session focused on Teaching Journalism Students to Tell Stories from their Own Communities. It will focus on designing curricula to help marginalized students who do not see themselves, their communities, and their stories in mainstream media find their voice and be able to discover and report on their communities' authentic experiences. Again, this will make for an excellent discussion.

All in all, COMJIG has a pretty solid slate lined up for this year's conference. See you all there!