



Professional Extension of the Classroom: Local News Editors' Perspectives on News-Academic Partnerships

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Abstract

This study examines the perspectives of seven news editors who engage in collaborations between their respective newsrooms and an undergraduate journalism program – focusing on the partnership's purposes, contributions, benefits, challenges, and sustainability. Through in-depth interviews, and guided by the collaborative journalism and political economy model of journalism frameworks, the findings suggest student journalists who engage in news-academic partnerships help community news outlets maintain robust news coverage despite economic pressures. While news editors noted that students added some reporting capacity, they primarily valued the partnership as a way to cultivate future journalists and strengthen the pipeline of skilled applicants amid staffing shortages. The findings suggest that such partnerships offer a viable business model for sustaining local journalism by developing a steady workforce of journalists and adapting to economic constraints.

Introduction

News-academic partnerships in the U.S. are diverse in size and structure, rapidly growing in number, and increasingly recognized as a strategic response to the crisis in local journalism. They leverage the resources of higher education to address critical gaps in news coverage, train the next generation of journalists, and strengthen local democracy. The University of Vermont's Center for Community News estimates that higher education institutions in as many as 41 states currently participate in some form of a news-academic partnership, though the Center uses a broad definition for such collaborations and the operational status of each is unclear (Center for Community

News, 2025). These partnerships take various forms – including faculty-led reporting projects, course-based collaborations, and even university-based news services – exist for many reasons: they provide experiential opportunities for student journalists, and, in some instances, they help fill news gaps in regions where communities are experiencing dwindling sources for local news (Salahi and Smith, 2021). The partnerships are distinctly different from internships or campus media, as students report on issues beyond the campus and for external news outlets, often under the guidance of both faculty and professional editors. Nearly 2,000 student reporters have produced more than 7,500 news stories within a single year, demon-

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strating both the sale of student involvement and the volume of content generated for local news ecosystems (Center for Community News, 2023/2024; Salahi and Smith, 2024).

Since 2005, the U.S. has lost more than two newspapers per week, and with it, two-thirds of its journalists (Local News Initiative, 2023). In 2023, journalism experienced “the highest number of jobs cuts in the industry,” as newsrooms across the country eliminated more than 2,700 positions (Darcy, 2023). While a majority of these programs are initiated by faculty – with only a small fraction started by university leadership or at the request of news outlets (Center for Community News, 2024) – content production partnerships between community news outlets and academic programs serve multiple stakeholders: audiences, media outlets, universities and colleges administration and faculty, and students (Salahi and Smith, 2021). Royal *et al.* (2020) contends that one of the responsibilities of higher education – a stakeholder in a news-academic partnership – is to continually “adapt and adjust” as the media industry looks for new approaches to identify, understand, and engage its audience. News-academic partnerships are a growing initiative aimed at supporting the emergent media landscape.

Democracy relies on a robust and free press, and the state of journalism mirrors the state of the nation’s democracy. The success of robust and reliable local news journalism is paramount to a healthy democracy, but the changing political economy of the news industry has weakened journalism’s role in society (Barclay, Barnett, Moore, & Townsend, 2024). This is particularly important in smaller communities. Residents in areas with steady streams of fact-based news of their communities are more likely to participate in civic engagement like voting, voicing issues of concern and volunteering time and resources (Barthel, Holcomb, Mahone, & Mitchell, 2016; Stamm, 1985). A fortified local news ecosystem also directly correlates to a community’s economic development (Gao, Lee, & Murphy, 2019). Reliable sources of community news also ensure national security by protecting against information harms such as disinformation. Journalism is facing an existential crisis through the systematic closures of news outlets across the nation, including regional and hyperlocal newspapers. It is important to examine initiatives such as news-academic partnerships that are working to fill news voids in urban, suburban, and rural communities, which may serve as

a creative solution to support trusted news coverage, thereby bolstering media literacy and civic engagement.

Indeed, some partnerships require students to produce daily or weekly content, offering a steady number of stories to help fill the news gap for many local outlets that do not have the resources and staff. Previous research has examined the perspectives of faculty members who lead news-academic partnerships and found that these partnerships are intended to be collaborative rather than competitive with existing news outlets (Salahi and Smith, 2022). Previous research has also analyzed the student-produced content contributed to news outlets for their audiences and found that student work involves well-sourced news and feature contributions (Salahi and Smith, 2024). No research to date, however, has examined the perceptions of editors of news organizations who help to lead these partnerships on the benefits and its sustainability.

Understanding the perspectives of editors is critical because they are often the gatekeepers of newsroom operations and play a vital role in shaping the structure, expectations, and longevity of these collaborations. The insights reveal not just how these partnerships function, but also how they are valued as part of broader strategic decisions – whether as a content supplement, a cost-saving measure, or a long-term investment in sustaining local journalism. By examining how editors interpret the purpose, contributions, challenges, and sustainability of news-academic partnerships, this study moves beyond documenting perceptions to evaluating the practical implications of these models for the future of local news ecosystems.

Theoretical Framework

Collaborative Journalism

This study also draws on collaborative journalism which emphasizes cooperation among journalists, news organizations, and academic institutions to share resources, expertise and content to pursue public interest reporting. According to Jenkins and Graves (2019), collaborative approaches to journalism allows news outlets to report on topics they would not typically cover as well as “engage with familiar subjects in more comprehensive ways.” Collaborative journalism moves beyond traditional notions of competition in the media landscape, instead grounding partnerships as a strategy to improve coverage, increase reach, and sustain journalistic capacity – especially in under-

served areas (Stonbely & Siemaszko, 2022).

This framework is relevant for understanding the dynamics of news-academic partnerships, which embody many of the core principles of collaborative journalism. These partnerships often arise out of necessity since many news-academic partnerships align to co-produce content that neither could consistently generate alone. However, just as there are many forms of news-academic partnerships, the conceptualization of “collaboration” can be ambiguous at times. Collaborative models of journalism – in whatever its decided form – can be more accurate, informative and impactful (Salahi and Smith, 2021/2022) and, in recent years, media outlets have migrated toward collaborative journalism practices to expand engagement and reach within the communities it serves (Ali *et al.*, 2018). Each partnership, however, reflects a shift toward networked journalism – a more horizontal model of news production in which power, responsibility and authorship are shared across institutions (Beckett, 2010).

When combined with political economy, the collaborative journalism framework allows this study to acknowledge the systemic pressures that are driving these partnerships and examine practical ways in which actors navigate the systemic pressures through collective journalistic work.

Political Economy of News

Political economy is an interdisciplinary field of study that combines elements of economics, political science, and sociology to analyze the relationships between economic and political processes within societies. It focuses on the ways in which economic structures, institutions, and power dynamics shape and are shaped by political systems (Clark & Kugler, 2013). Media ownership concentration, the influence of advertising revenue, the impact of digital platforms on news distribution have challenged independent and community-driven news initiatives and therefore the people whom these news outlets serve.

The political economy approach to journalism emphasizes the importance of understanding the economic and political structures that shape media ownership and control (Mosco, 2016; Schwartz, 2014; Winseck, 2011; McChesney, 2003/2004). It highlights the ways in which these structures can shape the content and distribution of news, and the implications this has for democratic societies. The decline of local news outlets can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the rise of online news sources and

the consolidation of media ownership.

As local newspapers and other news sources have struggled to compete with larger media corporations, many have been forced to cut back on staff and reduce their coverage of local events and issues. Some news outlets have turned to forming partnerships with college and university journalism programs to help sustain their operations, expand their content offering, and train the next generation of journalists.

Applying a political economy perspective allows this study to consider how news-academic partnerships emerge as both a response to and a product of these systemic pressures. Since these collaborations are often situated within the context of shrinking newsroom resources and the search for sustainable business models, the framework examines the ways in which universities and news outlets negotiate power, resources, and influence to sustain local journalism. This approach moves beyond institutional forces that drive the formation, operation and potential impact of these partnerships. Rather, it enables a deeper understanding of how these partnerships might address – or reproduce – existing inequities in news access, content diversity, and community representation (Salamon, 2024).

While many business models of news operations have been well documented and studied, news-academic partnerships as an economic and political driver within an ecosystem has yet to be deeply explored. Our previous research (2022) suggests that journalism faculty that engage in news-academic partnerships guide student journalists to create content that does not compete with the current news landscape; rather, their work is meant to supplement and bolster news coverage of information important to the community their news partner(s) serve. It is worth exploring how partnering news outlets perceive the partnerships, and whether they may position such partnerships as a business model to increase content and assert their leadership as a robust news source in the community they serve.

Research Questions

This study sought to understand the perspectives of editors at news outlets that facilitate news-academic partnerships on the purpose and potential of such partnerships. The study also examined the challenges of creating strong partnerships as news outlets seek to find sustainable business models to support their operations. The study was guided by the following re-

search questions:

RQ1: To what extent do news organizations and their partnering academic institutions benefit from the collaborations?

RQ2: From news editors' perspectives, what are the challenges of news-academic partnerships?

RQ3: From news editors' perspectives, are news-academic partnerships a sustainable business model for local journalism?

Methodology

To understand the perceptions of editors who participate in news-academic partnerships(s) as well as their reliance upon strategies and practices, we interviewed 7 editors who currently oversee an ongoing news-academic partnership with their respective news outlets.

In-depth interviews are useful in data collection because they provide the ability for participants to provide subjective perspectives on their respective experiences and for researchers to probe for more detailed explanations (Singer, 2009).

Through research of current standing news-academic partnerships in early 2024, we located contact information for 21 editors at news outlets who were overseeing such projects and made initial email contact. A total of 7 editors responded to our direct email outreach. We also solicited participants through outreach via social media channels such as Facebook groups and X (formerly known as Twitter), as well as emails to listservs for news and media industry and academic organizations, but did not receive a response.

Seven geographically diverse participants, who engage in news-academic partnerships in their respective regions across the U.S. responded to our request for participation. We conducted hour-long, semi-structured interviews via Zoom with those seven editors in order to gain additional understanding of their perceptions for facilitating news-academic partnerships in their respective news outlets. Participants were asked to describe the type of partnership they held with a journalism class or program, its inception, and the work involved in sustaining the partnership. Participants were also asked to describe any benefits – including personal, institutional and organizational benefits – as well as challenges to sustaining the partnership. Participants were also asked to reflect on whether the work produced through the partnership filled a news gap as well as whether it could be viewed as a sustainable business model to support news op-

erations. Finally, participants reflected on how their area's news ecosystem would be different if their partnership had not existed.

Interviews were held and recorded via Zoom between April 2024 and June 2024. The digital software company provided us with transcriptions of our discussions. Confidentiality was ensured to participants as per the guidelines of a university's institutional review board, which approved the human subjects research for this descriptive study. To analyze the interview responses, we carried out the inductive process of line-by-line coding in order to identify thematic patterns, which is a common practice in qualitative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms have been assigned to each editor. They are noted as editors because they serve as managing editors to the existing news-academic partnership. The following information provides insight into each of the editors, who work in different newsrooms, and their roles within their news organizations:

- News Editor #1: News editor for a public radio station in the southwest region of the United States.
- News Editor #2: Editor-in-chief for a daily newspaper in the southeast region of the United States.
- News Editor #3: Producer for a public television station in the southwest region of the United States.
- News Editor #4: Executive editor for a digital newspaper in the midwest region of the United States.
- News Editor #5: News director at a commercial television station in the southern region of the United States.
- News Editor #6: General Manager at a commercial television station in the southern region of the United States.
- News Editor #7: Assistant news director of a public media outlet in the southeastern region of the United States.

Findings

Student Contributions

Across all partnerships examined, student journalists pitched, reported and produced original stories that were submitted for publication or broadcast. Editors cited that these contributions help fill gaps in local coverage, especially in regions they might not have

resources to pursue. According to News Editor 2, who manages a legacy newspaper, the collaboration between their station and the nearby university helps cover smaller communities that might otherwise be overlooked due to reduced staff: “There’s a lot of stuff going on that we would never get to. So they’re filling in the gaps. Otherwise it wouldn’t be reported.”

News Editor 1, whose partnership involves students from a practicum class working on stories that may air on the radio station stated: “It’s definitely beneficial to us because again, we’re getting stories that, you know, we don’t have the manpower to cover.”

News Editor 3, whose news outlets’ collaboration with the local university spans more than four decades, stated that the long-standing partnership sustains through the university-provided funding as well as the physical space where the students work. A significant aspect of the partnership is the involvement of student contributors. News Editor 3 states: “We have a process, we’ve been doing it for decades. So we have a training process and, and steps we go through to train them.”

In all of the partnerships examined, students pitch and produce their own stories which are submitted to the news outlet. The news outlet is responsible for editing and publishing or broadcasting the story, if the story meets the editorial standards of the news outlet. News Editor 7 states that student-produced stories often cover topics that appeal to younger audiences and perform well in terms of engagement metrics: “A lot of the stories that we have put up on the air have, and on the web, have done better than what we’ve done metric-wise than some of our stuff produced by the staff reporters.”

All seven editors interviewed described their respective newsroom as a “training hospital,” (though not all used that exact term) offering professional exposure in return for high-quality, publishable student work. Students are integrated into newsroom operations, and, in some cases, students were paid for their contributions and worked in newsrooms physically located on or near campus. News Editor 3 stated: “We consider ourselves a training hospital for the students. We have a close relationship with the university on training students.” Given the level of training students receive and the contributions participating students are expected to make, their students are paid for their time and their work.

While not under editorial control of the university, the newsroom is described as “student-centered,”

meaning that it is structured to integrate both the university’s undergraduate and graduate students in some way into its news production.

News Editor 5’s newsroom is owned by the local university, so students are fully integrated into news production. News Editor 5 described their newsroom as student-centered: “If we have three reporters that day, at best we’ll have one professional reporter and then two students who are learning alongside of that professional reporter.”

News Organizations’ Contributions – Mentorship and Training

All of the editors described their primary role in the partnership as providing mentorship and training for the student journalists. News Editor 7, who oversees a radio station that partners with its area university, says students are involved in pitching, reporting, audio editing, and digital content creation. They receive feedback from professional journalists and editors:

They’re learning how to work with audio editing, they’re learning storytelling, they’re learning how to find compelling bites and to interview for soundbites [...] Every student will get feedback from an editor here. We felt that that was really important that [editors] put the time in to do this [...] For us, we have put a focus on realizing that we need to do our part in sustaining the next generation of journalists.

The news editors expect that working with student journalists may help to improve a news outlet’s pipeline for permanent employment. Before hiring new journalists, editors said that their partnerships allow for news outlets to be involved in the training of future journalists to help prepare them for a career. News Editor 1 stated: “They’re going to get that basis of what it takes to actually work for a news outlet.”

News Organizations’ Contributions – Alignment With Academic Curriculum

The editors all regarded their newsroom as an extension of the classroom for students who participate in the partnership. The partnership is run through courses that students take and work with faculty to ensure alignment between academic instruction and newsroom expectations. “We do work very closely with a few of the professors so that we know that we’re teaching the same thing,” News Editor 5 states.

News Editor 4, whose newsroom partners with two area university programs, says that the partnerships have evolved over time to become more structured and effective for both the news outlet and the

students involved. Students in the partnership report on local government and work on larger investigative pieces.

Partnerships' Mutual Benefits

The partnership benefits both the news organization and the students by providing real-world experience, fresh perspectives, and potential hiring opportunities.

News Editor 2 states: "It's a two-way street. They learn from us, we learn from them."

News Editor 3 states: "As I tell [the students], we can't do our jobs without you."

Partnerships' Mutual Benefits – Improved Recruiting and Retention

Another purpose stated by News Editor 4 is to help grow the news outlet's talent pool by retaining the students that train with the news outlet. News Editor 4 states: "Really what I wanted to do was selfishly create a pipeline for students that were actually prepared to work in the workforce."

News Editor 6, who manages a television station that partners with multiple area colleges and universities, says the television stations in smaller markets find it challenging to retain talent since they may be looking to move to larger markets, while larger markets are hiring inexperienced graduates who may go to school in close proximity to the television station. News Editor 6 emphasizes the importance of building relationships with educational institutions to both train, recruit and retain talent, stating: "The more partnerships I can form, I form loyalty. And when we recruit, we're very clear on what they can expect when they come here."

Challenges: Limited Newsroom Capacity and Skill Readiness

Since the students primarily work in an academic setting with assignment expectations that differ from a daily news environment, one of the main challenges outlined by editors is the difficulty managing deadlines.

Additional challenges reported by some of the editors include students lacking basic journalism skills and professors underestimating students' capabilities. News Editor 4 states: "I think the basics are really something that journalism students are not being taught very well."

Although editors said student contributions are beneficial to help to alleviate staffing shortages, the staffing shortages and time constraints in the newsrooms make it difficult to train and mentor students, which add to the challenge of news outlets meaning-

fully contributing to the partnership. News Editor 5 states: "It's critical to us that we have those students, but I also feel like we could be giving them a better opportunity and a better training experience if we had more professional staff." In some cases, students may be putting into the partnership more than what they're getting out of it. "I really do feel like if we had a larger professional staff, we could be spread out with the students and teaching [sic] them the appropriate way to do stories, to not necessarily use shortcuts, to not just go out there and see what happens and we'll fix it in post [-production]."

Partnerships' Sustainability

Despite the challenges, all of the editors regard their respective partnerships as "vital" for addressing the issue of news deserts and providing community coverage.

News Editor 1 stated: "The local newspaper is just shrinking every day. Being able to hire someone to have that pipeline where you have students from the local school who need to experience the real, real-world experience, it's vital."

News-academic partnerships can be tailored to the ecosystem within which the partnership exists to provide a sustainable business model for local journalism. News Editor 2's partnership evolved from traditional internships to more structured collaborations, starting around 2020. According to News Editor 2, it may take a few iterations of the partnership to find what structure works best for the newsroom: "I think our first attempt we had mixed success because we had students that were probably not advanced enough. And so the work that they were producing was not publishable."

The partnership now primarily involves advanced journalism students working on specific beats or contributing to large or special events, such as election coverage.

The editors interviewed regard the partnership as an educational process and a pipeline for future employment, and not as a replacement for staff positions. News Editor 7 states: "It has been framed from the get go as, 'this is us bringing our expertise to the next generation of journalists.'"

Indeed, more staff positions – or, at least, dedication by the news staff to collaborate with students – may be required to adequately support a partnership. News Editor 1, who manages a local radio station said that tailoring the partnership to work with a finite

number of students may help bolster news coverage while also providing the teaching and mentorship opportunity for students.

“It’s just a matter of saying, can I work with eight students? No, we need to keep it to four, maybe five students, and I think five is stretching it just because of, again, the time commitment on my end,” News Editor 1 stated.

News Editor 3 advises other news organizations considering similar partnerships to “accept that there is a bureaucracy” and understand that processes may take longer than in commercial settings.

Discussion

This study examines the ways in which news-academic partnerships offer critical support for local journalism under conditions of economic constraint. The findings underscore the potential of news-academic partnerships to sustain community journalism not primarily through short-term reporting capacity, but by strengthening the long-term talent pipeline. Editors noted that while student journalists required supervision and training that limited immediate productivity, the partnership offered an avenue to attract and prepare future reporters familiar with community-centered journalism. These observations should be understood within the broader debates about the political economy of news and collaborative journalism. Rather than viewing these partnerships as merely pragmatic responses to shrinking resources, they can be interpreted as symptomatic of larger structural transformations in journalism labor and sustainability.

These findings highlight an adaptive strategy local news outlets are using to navigate economic constraints while maintaining their role in providing community news. Through the lens of the political economy of journalism, the reliance on universities to serve as content producers underscores both the dysregulation of local media systems and higher education’s entrance into the journalism marketplace. As McChesney (2003) argues, economic pressures have increasingly shifted journalistic labor toward unstable or subsidized forms. Our findings suggest that news-academic partnerships may simultaneously mitigate and reproduce these dynamics: they supply content and labor that helps outlets survive, yet they also normalize the outsourcing of core journalistic functions to institutions whose missions differ from those of professional newsrooms. This raises important questions about power and dependency – whether

universities are acting as safety nets for struggling news economies, or whether they’re redefining what constitutes sustainable local journalism (Winseck, 2011).

This study also contributes to scholarship on collaborative journalism. Previous works have documented the value of collaborations across newsrooms in expanding coverage and fostering innovation (Jenkins and Graves, 2019; Stonbely & Siemaszko, 2022). The partnerships examined here extend this model by incorporating higher education institutions as collaborators. Doing so complicates traditional forms of collaboration, as students occupy hybrid roles of both learner and contributors whose work is evaluated in academic and professional contexts. This dual role raises questions about professional standards, audience trust, and the long-term viability of such models as substitutes – or complements – for professional newsroom labor.

Future research should build on these insights in several directions. Longitudinal studies could track whether student journalists who participate in partnerships remain in local journalism and whether such experiences influence their career trajectories – a key question given ongoing workforce instability in the profession. Comparative research across different types of partnerships – public versus private universities, rural versus urban news outlets – could clarify conditions under which collaborations are most sustainable. Little is known about community perceptions of student-produced journalism; examining whether audiences view such content as legitimate and trustworthy would illuminate the civic implication of these arrangements.

While this study provides valuable insights into the perspectives of editors on news-academic partnerships, only seven editors were interviewed, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and opinions across different types of news organizations and geographic regions. However, the participants who were included represented different regions across the U.S., which is representative of the widespread adoption of news-academic partnerships. We believe the insights presented are useful in understanding local news strategies in the emergent media era. Additionally, this study builds upon previous news-academic partnership scholarship, including previous work that focused on the views of additional stakeholders such as faculty who oversee such partnerships (Salahi and Smith, 2022).

The conceptual contribution of this study lies in framing news-academic partnerships not only as stopgap measures but as experimental structures for reimagining journalism. The crisis in local news demands not just new revenue streams, but systemic rethinking of how journalism is produced and sustained. Universities, while imperfect partners, may play a role in this reconfiguration – though whether they strengthen democratic information systems or merely delay the decline of local news remains an open question. Like most business models, there are challenges to news-academic partnerships, including underprepared student journalists, and balancing the demands of mentorship and news production with limited staffing. However, this study suggests the benefits for both news organizations and students are significant to bolstering the local news ecosystem. While editors reported that supervision needs limited some students' ability to immediately fill coverage gaps, they viewed these partnerships as critical for cultivating the next generation of reporters who may later strengthen community journalism. Such initiatives represent a creative response to the ongoing political and economic challenges facing journalism and could be viewed as part of a broader ecosystem of solutions, rather than the complete answer to the crisis in local journalism. Ultimately, the findings highlight that the value of such collaborations may lie more in future workforce development than in immediate newsroom capacity.

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