



Local Journalism: Up from the Streets

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Abstract

At a time when the field of Journalism faces challenges ranging from corporate consolidation and control, to a loss of credibility and trust, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find in-depth, well-researched local news stories about housing, immigration and poverty that actually bring about local change. Professional local journalistic outlets are finding it increasingly difficult to survive as Journalism as an industry is consolidating, shrinking, and cutting resources. No one understands the impact these under-reported issues have on these communities better than the young people growing up in them.

The *Lehman College/City Limits Collaborative Project* brings the young aspiring journalists and storytellers from the local communities together with an award-winning and respected local news outlet, to tell stories developed, written, and reported by those most closely impacted by the issues often overlooked or ignored by shrinking big media. The result is a new breed of journalists trained on grassroots storytelling, joining with experienced and established news outlets filling in-depth community news voids.

The more things change the more they stay the same.

Despite change in the overall media landscape, despite the decline of newspaper-based journalism, despite media consolidation and despite the fragmentation of traditional news into punditry and “infotainment” (Karter, 2022), New York City remains the Media Center of the world.

New York City also remains a Mecca for immigrants from all corners of the world based on its history of accepting newcomers. Whether they be immigrants packed into steamer ships in the 1800s or refugees disembarking buses from the southern border today (Zraick, Kriegstein, 2023), New York City serves as an entry point and home for immigrant groups coming to the United States. As a result, the NYC five Boroughs contain microcosms of most im-

migrant groups (Mayor’s Office, Immigrant Affairs, 2021). These factors came together to create a unique opportunity to draw journalists from the communities that need coverage the most.

Lehman Multilingual Journalism

Lehman College is a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and has garnered national recognition for programs serving the Latino population (Hinman, 2020). While journalism programs have long existed at CUNY (Queens College and at City College) these have, until recent years, been traditional print-based programs and have served a general student population. The student body at Lehman reflects the Bronx communities it serves. Predominantly Hispanic, the typical Lehman student is first-generation college attendee, speaks a language

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other than English at home, is highly likely to rely on financial aid and student loans, and skews female (Bohlke, L. 2022). Lehman students generally work at least one job and have family obligations that make burdensome demands on their time and resources.

Lehman's journalism program is relatively young having grown out of the Languages and Literatures department in the early 2000s as the Multilingual Journalism Project (Carney, J. 2004, Fall). This multicultural approach from the very beginning shaped a program that reflected the concerns of our students. Even though the face of journalism in America was changing to reflect a more multicultural approach (Benson, 2005), rarely were new journalists emerging from the communities most in need of reporting - their own. Our students were literally embedded in the communities that they report on.

As the numbers of weekly, free, and print-based publications decreased, being replaced by questionable online bulletin boards, blogs and websites (Mahonie, Napoli 2020), news impacting the local communities in New York City became increasingly harder to find and even harder to trust. It was with this knowledge that we crafted a unique hyper-local journalism program geared to serve the communities tucked into the mosaic of ethnic neighborhoods of New York. We also realized that the many of the best under-reported stories were the ones generated and investigated by the students themselves.

The trend of local journalism programs working with traditional weekly neighborhood-based newspapers is not new, especially in a world where such publications are finding it hard to survive. Local and Ethnic publications are faced with consolidation, economic pressures from diminished advertising and a push towards more sensational news coverage. At Lehman we found ourselves in the enviable position of being able to support local media outlets, and provide a rich new source of investigative and entrepreneurial journalism. It was from this premise that we started the *Lehman Journalism - City Limits Collaborative*.

Connections

Through its evolution, the Journalism & Media Studies Dept. at Lehman has experienced the growing pains of many academic departments within universities, where financial and bureaucratic obstacles make growth difficult. While CUNY looked nationally for candidates when openings slowly began to be approved for our faculty ranks, we looked locally. Most

of our faculty have connections to the local media serving NYC. From this pool we developed a stable of experienced and attuned journalists to teach targeted adjunct courses. This process eventually permitted these working journalists to become the best suited candidates for full-time instruction and tenure-track faculty. Many of our teaching staff are "second career" professionals who swapped their full-time position of Working Journalist to Journalism Educator but still hone their skills working in local media, part time. By inviting local journalists to become stakeholders in the education of students in our communities, students win, the journalists gain large active pools of "cub" reporters - and sources, and the journalism program gains relevance and credibility. This model is scalable and replicable and created the *Lehman - City Limits Collaborative*.

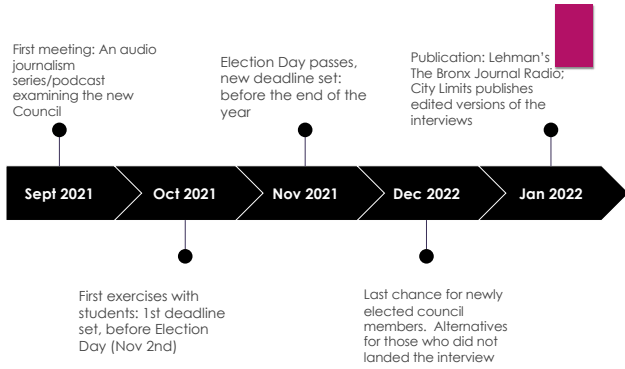
City Limits

"City Limits is a nonprofit, multiplatform news organization based in New York City dedicated to hard-hitting reporting and in-depth investigations that serve the people of New York. Founded in 1976 in the midst of New York's fiscal crisis..." (City Limits Website) Lehman Assistant Professor of Journalism Eileen Marky and City Limits Spanish Language Editor Daniel Para-Mejia saw an opportunity to bring the resources of our two organizations together and create a fresh new approach to hyperlocal journalism. The result is an ongoing series of unique multimedia Enterprise and Investigative Journalism projects ranging from local governance to environmental justice.

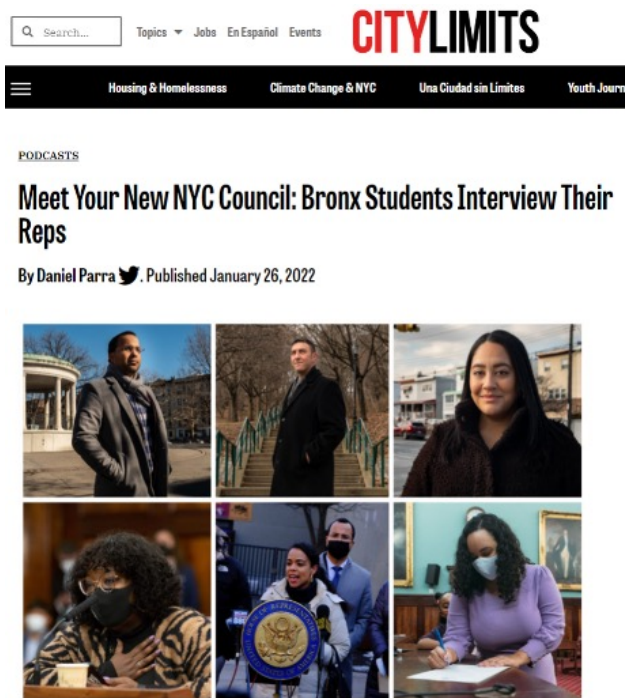
Your New, New York City Council

In 2022, New York City found itself for the first time with a majority-minority and female City Council. Even though the Council is the most impactful form of government in local neighborhoods, rarely are the people who serve recognizable to their constituents. In fact, only a few of the students knew who their council people were or even what their responsibilities are. Over the course of the Fall, 2021 semester, through the beginning of the City Council session in January of 2022 a class in Journalistic Interviewing dedicated much of their time investigating the work of the Council, the qualifications of candidates and finally the actual elected officials.

The result was a series of podcast interviews with the new and returning council members, delving into



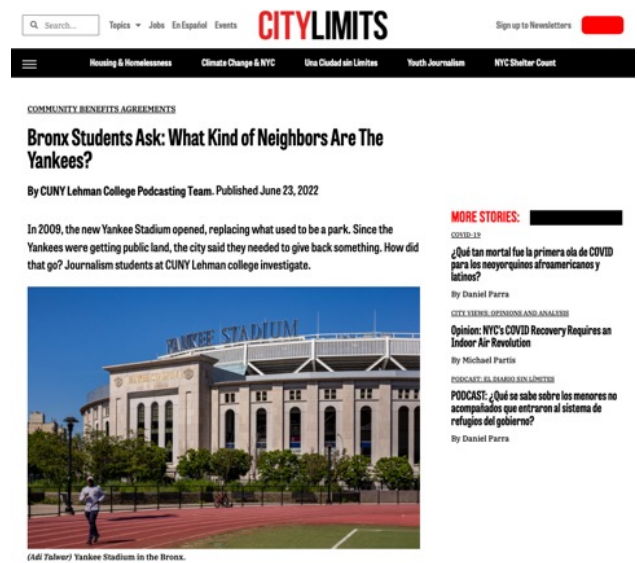
issues specific to the neighborhoods they were elected to serve. The series was distributed both on the Lehman College *Bronx Journal Radio* stream and as podcasts on the *City Limits* News platform. The questions posed to the council members were based on the individual experience of the students living in the communities that they were setting out to serve. The fact that the interviewing journalists were also constituents, presented a valuable opportunity to present relevant information to listeners.



Yankees Strikeout

Another effort in the Collaborative grew out of frustration with the new Yankee Stadium. Although a number of students lived in the shadow of the \$2.3 Billion monolith, almost none had ever been able to set foot inside. When they learned that many promises had been made in exchange for support for the new stadium and there was little evidence of Yankee

community involvement, they dove into the story. The result was an Investigative Journalism piece that examined how the New York Yankee organization had reneged on promises to the Bronx community given during negotiations back in 2006. By combing through public records, contracts and seeking out interviews with politicians, local nonprofits and journalists, students uncovered a shocking failure of the New York Yankees to live up to the obligations promised to the people of the Bronx. Students learned that a stadium that was sold to New Yorkers as a “no-cost project”, eventually cost over a \$1 billion in taxes. The resulting article and podcast were distributed on both Lehman’s *Bronx Journal* website and the *City Limits* platform.



Buried Beneath The Bronx

The most recent project began as a tip from a source and caused students to notice the many vacant, unused, or underutilized lots dotting their Bronx neighborhoods. The result is an interactive, data-driven investigative piece that mapped toxic waste sites throughout Bronx neighborhoods. The reporting relied on public records from the state and federal government, interviews with policy makers and stakeholders, site visits, GIS mapping, audio and video interviews and months of scouring and parsing complex scientific data.

The student journalists found there are 57 active “brownfield” sites in the Bronx, places with such serious toxic contamination that the state’s department of environmental conservation requires remediation because of serious risk to human health. Neighbors near one local lot have begun to organize to monitor and make faster progress on these cleanups.



Across The Curriculum

Possibly the most important by-product of this type of Journalism is Trust. When it's the "kid next door," or even their own children or family member in the byline, credibility comes naturally. All this work in the *Lehman Journalism – City Limits Collaborative* stems from a commitment to use our best and most effective resource: the unique experiences and perspectives of our Bronx students.

References

- [Report.pdf](#)

- Prior to teaching journalism, media studies and media production at Lehman College - City University of NY, Assistant Professor Jim Carney spent over two decades creating and producing local news and community programming in Manhattan and The Bronx, earning multiple CableAce & Emmy Awards. He oversaw the development and expansion of BronxNet, one of the pre-eminent community media centers in the US and served as founding Academic Director of the CUNY Online Baccalaureate Program in Media, Communications & Society.*

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