



Students, the Public and the Media: Teaching Credibility

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Michael P. Smith of the Media Management Center describes credibility as a journey, not a destination. The same can be said of education. And in the case of journalism education, what better way for students to learn about credibility than to have them engage the community in a discussion about the local news media?

Into the Classroom: Taking Credibility Another Step

by Peggy Kuhr

Basic News Writing was one of Meagan Brown's first journalism classes, and she was nervous. Thoughts of approaching and talking to strangers provoked enough anxiety, but worse, the professor expected the 24 students in her Wilkes University class to organize a community roundtable for a local newspaper.

"It was just ridiculous the amount of manpower needed" for the roundtable, remembered Sarah Herbert, Brown's classmate at the Wilkes-Barre, Pa., school.

Tania Cantrell, a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, had other concerns. Was there enough time in a semester for students in her Media Sociology class to complete the academic assignments and then turn theory into practice by working with a newspaper? Even the professor wasn't sure how the roundtable project with the *San Antonio Express-News* was going to turn out.

These students at Wilkes University and UT-Austin had instructors who had decided to use the Credibility Roundtable in the classroom. Journalism professors around the country have worked with neighboring newspapers and allowed students to plan and run a community forum. By adding students to the mix, the lessons about credibility—and what the news media must do to improve their standing with the public—can move into the classroom as well.

This chapter is for university instructors interested in using the roundtable approach, and for news managers who might want to find a partner at a local university. The advantages of adding a Credibility Roundtable to the classroom experience are many:

- Instructors provide students with the practical experience of getting into the community and listening to the public discuss journalism.
- Students bolster analytical and problem-solving skills and deepen their understanding of audiences.
- Students work with professionals, and they can help make daily journalism better. The conversations at a roundtable often turn into specific recommendations of action for a newspaper, television station or online news operation.
- Time-strapped news managers let the professors and their students do most of the work. And, by turning to a third party to run a roundtable, the journalists enhance their own credibility.
- The public gets a chance to see the university and the news organization in action. In Lawrence, Kan., community members liked the idea of university students holding a forum for the local newspaper. “Students need to have an investment in the community,” said Jan Dicker, a local schoolteacher who participated in the roundtable. “This helps get them out into the community.”
- The risks are small. With enough preparation and enough practice, students can, indeed, run the show. And they will see that journalism affects real people in real ways. “I just thought people picked up a newspaper, read it and put it down,” said Brown, who was a junior at the time of her class’s roundtable at Wilkes University. “I never really thought that people thought about the credibility of a newspaper.”

Adding a Roundtable to the Syllabus

The point of a roundtable is to focus on the connection, or lack of it, between the public and the news media, and then to design a project with a news partner. This approach fits into writing classes, ethics classes and other topic classes at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Dr. Andrea Bremer Frantz at Wilkes University used the roundtable approach in Basic News Writing, with 24 sophomores and juniors. For many, it was their first journalism class. Dr. Stephen Reese at the University of Texas incorporated a roundtable into his Media Sociology graduate seminar, with nine doctoral students. Other professors have added a roundtable to their reporting courses: Chris Roush used one for his Business Reporting class of juniors and seniors at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; John Irby, in his Public Affairs Reporting class at Washington State University.

Fitting a roundtable into a journalism class structure isn't difficult, but the instructor does need to allow for flexibility. For example, the class must understand that news professionals' schedules can change with little warning. Teachers, students and news professionals all learn to roll with occasional changes and shifts in focus.

Most news organizations that have held a roundtable turn to someone outside the newsroom to run the session—a professor from a nearby university, a consultant or facilitator, a respected religious leader. The big difference with a university roundtable is that students do the work. They become the planners and the moderators. They deliver a final report with recommendations to the news organization.

This puts pressure on the instructor to make sure the students are prepared; and it puts even greater pressure on the students. They're not just working for a grade. They are collaborating with professional journalists and putting on a program for the community. "Here we were sophomores and juniors doing this big credibility project," Brown said. "It really will be something you'll be proud of. You can brag about it a little bit" on your resume.

What's the Role of the News Partner?

The challenge of a university roundtable is in finding a news organization partner that can work well with the professor and students, and that can work within the timetable of the school's academic calendar.

It's best if the professor and the news organization have agreed to partner before the course begins. That gives the class as much time as possible for the roundtable work. Representatives of the news organization—whether it's the managing editor, a section editor or a public editor—should decide the focus of the community forum.

Training students to lead conversations

If journalism programs aim to hone good timing, focused questioning and great listening skills among students, the experience of running a roundtable is invaluable training.

It's one thing to listen and respond to an individual in an interview. It's an entirely different experience to help guide and foster full participation in a conversation among 10 to 15 people.

Through pre-roundtable role-playing, a student moderator can learn how to tell whether silence or response will best further the discussion.

In our rehearsals, we tried to anticipate all kinds of responses—everything from dead silence to belligerent name-calling. The student moderators had to problem-solve and adjust strategies to meet the needs of each situation, skills that can translate to anything they do in and beyond the classroom.

—Dr. Andrea Breemer Frantz,
Wilkes University

The most effective roundtables, just like the most effective stories, are those that have a focus. Student-run sessions have ranged from general topics, such as newspaper credibility among 18- to 35-year-olds, to those centered on coverage of a particular issue. University of North Carolina students ran a roundtable on the partner newspaper's coverage of the pharmaceutical industry.

Beyond supplying the roundtable focus, the news managers' role is to:

- Help the class understand why this is an important topic to explore. This includes providing background information on the news organization, the topic and the community.
- Help the class decide who should be invited to this roundtable. Often a reporter or an editor can provide names and contact information—which at least is a starting point for students, who may come up with other names of people to invite.
- Let the newsroom know what's going on. The roundtable can help forge connections with the community, but the journalists in the newsroom need to know about it.
- Attend the forum. Journalists who attend a roundtable are there to listen and to answer questions the public may have about how the news organization works.
- Respond to what they learn from the class and from the roundtable. Some roundtables result in noticeable, immediate change. The *Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, which serves north-central Idaho and southeast Washington, decided to move its columnists off Page 1. The *Lawrence (Kansas) Journal-World* used citizen comments to help plan its ongoing coverage of a school-bond referendum.

What the Journalism Class Does

Once the partnership has been established and the news organization selects the roundtable focus, the rest is up to the students and the instructor.

Students may already be aware of the gap between the news media and the public. And there's a wealth of credibility research to point them to, including The Freedom Forum's work that resulted in "best practices" handbooks for newspaper and television journalists, and ASNE's Journalism Credibility Project reports. More recently, the State of the News Media reports discuss the audience and its trust in journalism. This material can provide the framework for understanding the importance of engaging with the community.

Students also need to learn about their news partner and the topic they'll be exploring at a roundtable. In a sense, they must become "mini-experts" in the topic at hand. They should review any previous relevant

coverage, and they should be up to date with their news partner's ongoing coverage. News managers can visit the class to give them background; the class can tour the news operation.

Then there are the many tasks and duties that students must accomplish. Here's how John Irby outlined them for his class at Washington State:

THE CHECKLIST

Event Coordinator-Budget Analyst (to work with the professor throughout the project).

Before the event:

- External participant selection.
- Letters of confirmation to participants.
- Maps of the roundtable location and parking.
- Coverage of the event.
- Refreshments.
- Room set-up and clean up.
- Signage.
- Tent cards, or name cards.
- Flip charts.
- Child care.

During the event:

- Equipment and Technology managers.
- Digital photographers.
- Greeters.
- Welcome and Introductions.
- Facilitators: One for Part 1 of the roundtable and a new one for Part 2.
- Wrap-Up Speaker.

After the event:

- Evaluation/Review report.
- Thank you letters.
- Roundtable brochure.

Making conversations work

Take nothing at face value.

Notice what words and phrases people use. Ask, "What do you mean?"

Listen for where people get stuck.

Watch for when people want more facts, or if a perception blocks them from talking more about a concern.

Ask people to square their contradictions.

Illuminate what folks are struggling with. Ask, "I know this can be a really tough issue, but how do the two things you said fit together?"

Watch out for your own preconceived views.

Everyone has biases that can serve as filters when asking questions and interpreting what you hear. Be alert to them.

—The Harwood Institute
for Public Innovation

An additional task for professors may be to develop consent forms for quoting roundtable participants and photographing or taping them.

Classes with as few as nine students and as many as 29 have put on a roundtable. For sample checklists and an outline of how to work through them, professors and editors can consult the handbook “Talking With Your Town: Steps to a Successful Community Conversation,” available at <http://www.apme-credibility.org/publications.html>.

What about Controversy?

A successful conversation with the public means people can express their views freely and frankly. But are students able to handle that?

With her sophomores and juniors, Frantz and *The Citizens’ Voice* in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., took on the more general topic of the newspaper’s credibility with younger residents. The topic was important to the newspaper and a good match for the inexperienced journalism students.

At Washington State, students moderated a discussion with the public



Kansas graduate student Anton Menning holds boom mic at roundtable about story comments posted on ljworld.com.

about more than a year of coverage of a local church-related controversy. It was a hot topic; and the professor wasn’t in the room during the roundtable. And yet the event was a success.

“Participants, without exception, were pleased they participated, even though some had significant doubts about committing to the process or believing any good would result, as all previous public gatherings on the topic

throughout the period of controversy [had seemed] to always end in serious acrimony,” Professor Irby reported.*

Students succeeded because they were prepared. They had practiced the questions they wanted to ask; they had rehearsed worst-case scenarios. Little was left to chance. Just as important, they kept the conversation focused on the newspaper’s coverage, not on the divisive topic itself.

Irby said the roundtable “likely was the first time in the debate process that the extreme sides acknowledged the other’s point of view as possibly relevant and real.”*

At the University of North Carolina, a class of Business Reporting

* John R. Irby, “Newspaper Credibility: One Approach to Connecting with Readers Through a Mediated Discussion of Controversial Issue Coverage,” paper presented at the Newspapers & Community-Building Symposium XI, National Newspaper Association Convention-Trade Show (2005), p. 21 and p. 24.

students had a high-powered lineup of drug company executives for their roundtable on *The News & Observer's* coverage of the prescription drug industry. Before the roundtable, the professor worried that students wouldn't be able to handle the conversation and the event would become "a complaint-fest toward the Raleigh, N.C., newspaper."

Again, students were well-prepared; Professor Chris Roush was ready to intercede, if needed.

Instead, he reported later, "The discussion was extremely civil, and I never felt the need to get myself involved. The conversation flowed very well, and everyone took their turn speaking. I don't think anyone felt awkward or that their voice was not being heard. A number of the participants came up to me afterward to thank me for the opportunity to be involved and thought it was a great idea."

Often, there's another concern that students have. Will participants speak frankly if the news organization's representatives are there? Universally, the answer has been, yes.

"I thought we'd have to drag conversation out of them ... that they would be more hesitant, especially with newspaper representatives there," Lisa Loewen said about a University of Kansas-sponsored roundtable. "I was surprised at how enthusiastic the participants were," said her classmate Jason Royer.

The Learning Curve

The power of having students engage with the community is in the learning. They don't have to believe what a research article says; they don't have to believe what the instructor tells them. They can see, and hear, for themselves—and not just from one or two people, but from a whole room of them.

Here's what professor Lisa C. Miller wrote about the project her students did at the University of New Hampshire: "But most amazing of all, at least to me, was what the project taught me about teaching and about my students. This project empowered them in a way I hadn't imagined

Ground Rules

- Have a "kitchen table" conversation. Everyone participates; no one dominates.
- There are no "right" answers. Draw on your own experiences, views and beliefs.
- It's OK to disagree.
- Keep an open mind. Listen carefully and try to understand the views of those who disagree with you.
- Help keep the discussions on track. Stick to the questions; try not to ramble.
- Focus on constructive ideas and solutions.
- Have fun!

—The Harwood Institute
for Public Innovation

happening. It made them realize that what they'd been learning in classes actually mattered. It proved to them how much they'd already learned, and that their opinions and work could make a difference in the world."

Wilkes University students learned about the importance of accuracy when the newspaper coverage of their event had several errors. "We picked up on it a lot faster than we would have otherwise," Meagan Brown said.

What did she learn from the roundtable? "I learned to be very, very careful with your sources, with what you're doing and how. Make sure you get it all right. And be responsible in what and how you write."

Herbert, her classmate, said, "I learned to always keep it simple. ... People don't want to read big long stories," she said. "I learned that when they pick up the newspaper, they're drawn to big headlines and photos, and the first paragraph or two."

At Texas, Doctoral student Cantrell discovered what she called a "triangular, not linear, relationship" among journalists, academics and students, and the public. "In the academy, we try to connect theory with practice," she said. "A missing component is the public. A Credibility Roundtable allows for a triangular relationship."

Look for more information on teaching credibility at
<http://www.apme-credibility.org>