

Commentary

## Newsroom Notes

*Nouvelles de salle de presse*

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### ABSTRACT

Newsrooms attract passionate, opinionated humans who are slotted into a centuries-old hierarchy and expected to deal with issues in repetitive and negative ways. Newer, more diverse story-tellers who we need in order to continue to serve our audience are often driven out. Newsroom Notes is an attempt to confront these wicked problems and build the newsrooms of our future, bringing together journalists from the field to speak to journalism and non-journalism students at Toronto Metropolitan University. Newsroom Notes is not attached to a course, but is open to anyone on campus who wants to talk about and think through these wicked problems. This commentary discusses early results of the new program, including building a new community of news-gatherers and news-users who see each other as equal problem solvers for the newsrooms of our future. It also poses suggestions for replicating this model within other schools of journalism to empower the news community and send emerging reporters and news consumers out into the real world with the confidence and tools to make actual change.

### RÉSUMÉ

Les salles de rédaction attirent des personnes passionnées, aux opinions bien affirmées, qui sont cataloguées dans une hiérarchie vieille de plusieurs siècles et dont on exige qu'elles traitent les problèmes de manière répétitive et négative. Les nouveaux journalistes, plus diversifiés, dont nous avons besoin pour continuer à servir notre public, sont souvent mis à l'écart. Le projet Newsroom Notes (Nouvelles de salle de presse) est une tentative de faire face à ces problèmes

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complexes et de construire les salles de rédaction de notre avenir, en réunissant des journalistes de terrain qui présenteront leurs efforts à des étudiants et étudiantes en journalisme et à d'autres disciplines à l'Université Métropolitaine de Toronto. Newsroom Notes n'est pas lié à un cours, mais est ouvert à toute personne sur le campus qui souhaite parler et réfléchir à ces problèmes difficiles. Ce commentaire examine les premiers résultats du nouveau programme, notamment la création d'une nouvelle communauté de créateurs et de consommateurs d'informations qui se considèrent mutuellement comme des intervenants et intervenantes égaux dans la résolution des problèmes pour les salles de presse de notre avenir. Il propose également des suggestions pour reproduire ce modèle dans d'autres écoles de journalisme afin de renforcer la communauté des journalistes et d'envoyer les nouveaux rédacteurs et consommateurs d'informations dans le monde réel avec la confiance et les outils nécessaires pour apporter des changements réels.

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Academic institutions are not designed to move quickly with effective teaching solutions to respond to real-time problems. Our journalism students have reported gaps in the curriculum for years, including a lack of trauma-informed interview training, the absence of challenges to traditional notions of objectivity, and shortcomings in

teaching how to report responsibly on crime and policing. Moving everything online in 2020-21 seemed to exacerbate the problems because Zoom limited the organic ways educators might usually discuss issues as they came up. Instead of a room full of students engaging with the speakers, the content, and asking unexpected questions, we had

Zoom meetings full of black screens as many students left their cameras off and we all struggled to come to terms with online learning.

In recent years there have also been many discussions and renewed questions about how educators might prepare students to join today's newsrooms. Kelsey R. Mesmer (2023) recently argued for "a shift in how we talk about hostility toward journalists in our newsrooms" (p. 1), while Dworzniak and Garvey (2018) ask if educators are covering trauma reporting and the mental health issues that can arise in journalistic work (pp. 368-369). A survey of U.S. journalism students showed that harassment of student journalists is increasing (Heckman, Chung and Santos, 2022). Despite evidence that the need exists and calls to action to improve how we prepare students for issues in the newsrooms they seek to join, there are few examples of what educators are actually doing to improve the transition from school to newsroom discussed in journalism education literature. In this piece, I hope to provide reflections and details of one approach — Newsroom Notes at Toronto Metropolitan University — while encouraging educators to work with students to co-determine topics of discussion and investigation. The purpose of this commentary is to share early insights and raise questions that will make space for further study.

## HOW IT WORKED

In order to address existing gaps (and new ones that came up during the pandemic) I created Newsroom Notes in the Fall of 2022 as a weekly public discussion forum where I bring working journalists into our public spaces to talk about real-time issues as they come up. Meant for any year of learning and any student regardless of their area of study or program, Newsroom Notes was publicized throughout the university and held in person (rather than virtually or recorded) to create a space that is safe for all participants to speak their truths and share anecdotes they might not have otherwise felt comfortable sharing. Before the sessions began, I brought in one of my peers from the School of Interior Design to talk about the set-up of the room, and we decided on a cir-

cle-of-chairs approach wherein everyone was on equal footing able to see everyone else in the conversation. The pandemic separated more than just classmates, and by not putting our guests behind a lectern with a PowerPoint presentation or attaching Newsroom Notes to a specific course, those barriers were eliminated. Students came together based on sub-interests within journalism and the larger university community and learned more about their peers in the process.

Because we didn't specifically attach this to a single classroom, students came to the sessions from all over the university. Students who didn't usually encounter each other in classrooms helped answer each other's questions from their own lived experiences, something I found particularly important when the questions came from the intersectional experiences of people of colour and the special issues they encountered on their internships. Sessions were never recorded, which I believe contributed to the success of these events.

Between September 2022 and April 2023, I invited 20 working journalists to speak with students; 18 of our guests self-identified as a racialized, and eight were early-career journalists. In terms of marketing, I created an original branded look for the posters and used the same branding on social media which was shared by the School of Journalism every week. In the first semester, I ran the talks at 9 a.m. on Wednesdays. Responding to feedback from the students who attended and those who were unable to attend, I moved the second semester talks to 11 a.m. on Wednesdays. By running the events during the day (rather than in the evening after classes are generally done), I aimed to draw the most potential participants, and keeping the time of day and day of the week consistent builds awareness. We booked each speaker for 45 minutes, but in a few instances, interest was so high, the guest ended up staying much longer to answer questions. After many of the talks, students who missed the event came by my office to find out more about what they missed and offer ideas as to the next topics they were interested in learning about — interest generated interest.

The most popular topics of discussion were photojournalism and the power of the personal

essay, and the students who attended varied in their year of study, experience levels, and focus of study. What didn't vary was the level of engagement — because these students were there “by choice” with no assignments or grades attached to their attendance, they came because they had unanswered questions. The other end of the spectrum of student interest meant that for some sessions, we had fewer than two or three attendees. Our session on microaggressions was completely empty, and we had only three students come to our fact-checking talk. This is despite students reporting for years that they needed strategies for dealing with microaggressions and asking for help with developing their fact-checking skills. When students asked me about these subjects following Newsroom Notes round-tables, I asked them why they didn't attend and they reported they hadn't heard about the event, or didn't recognize the term microaggressions as what they had been describing to me in anecdotes from their own lives. Learning from that, this year I'm going to talk about upcoming topics within the events themselves and crowdsource words and terminology amongst the student group to better represent and respond to their needs.

## WHO PARTICIPATED


While my initial goals were focused on gathering and addressing concerns from students heading into newsrooms, what I discovered was the impact these conversations could have on the relationships between journalists and our larger community, as non-journalism students joined the open sessions. The Trust in News Project recently found that the audience views news media as an institution with a lot of power and journalists as privileged individuals (Arguedas et al. 2023). The Canada Press Freedom Project tracks the freedom of the press (including assaults, denial of access etc) for journalists, all of which could be improved through transparency and understanding of what we actually do. Opening the room to non-journalism students provides a community space for conversations about audience representation, and many students seem hungry for it. It was a happy discovery to witness that kind of burgeoning un-

derstanding in an audience that can see the media as a faceless entity. Meanwhile, journalism students looked around the room, and felt safe to ask about working for free, strategies on how to say no to a boss, how to deal with sexual advances, and many other topics within topics. From first-year undergraduate participants all the way up to graduate students, the variety and depth of questions were useful to observe as well because the circle opened up answers from the guest and me as the host.

## CONCLUSIONS

To recreate the Newsroom Notes you need three elements: the space, the topics, and the speakers. I suggest picking a meeting space that is open and big enough to position the audience and speakers on equal footing; this contributes to the democratized tone of the discussions and makes people feel more comfortable about what they are sharing or asking. Polling your students (more than once, ideally at each workshop session) for topics they are interested in is the next step and can open up ideas you never even thought of, even ones that have nothing to do with newsrooms and have more to do with fitting into our current world and community. How does the media evolve and respond to real-world criticisms? How can we be more transparent as a community and as reporters in the community? Finally, you will need to coordinate with the rest of the community to find suitable speakers to address the topics and open this as wide as you can in terms of diversity and accessibility.

Perhaps other educators are implementing their own version of Newsroom Notes to do more to draw attention to the issues our students are raising, but I hope that commentaries such as this one will further disseminate this work and trigger more collaborations and sharing of findings. The impact of Newsroom Notes has been to contribute to creating a new community of people who are interested in journalism as more than a career on a pedestal. Participants see journalism as a culture that needs change and that can be changed. This special community includes students who intend to join newsrooms and students who want to be

active participants in how their communities are covered, as well as working journalists who join us as guests at our campus. In its next iteration, I want to measure that impact a little more quantitatively, asking questions of my audience that I can track over time like what brings them to the Newsroom Notes they are attending, what faculty they are from, or what year they are in. I also intend to apply for a grant to hire a teaching assistant who can help market the sessions outside of the journalism school with a newsletter and social media accounts, and create a survey that helps me build out the topics students are most interested in learning about. What I have already learned from this first run that could be replicated elsewhere in other similar situations is that providing a space to talk about student concerns that is not tied to grades or specific courses will give them a confidence they may not display in a classroom to ask the “scarier” questions, and that the topics they say they want more training on aren’t necessarily the ones they show up for. For the non-journalism students, these sessions demystified the work of journalists, in several cases causing a complete about-face in their assumptions about the work we do. Opening the room to non-journalism students provides a community space for conversations about audience and representation. Some students seem hungry for it. 

**Angela Misri** is an assistant professor at Toronto Metropolitan University who spent the last 25 years working as a journalist at the CBC and the Walrus. Misri is also the author of seven fiction books and two screenplays.

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