# Book Review: Community-Centered Journalism

**Andy Nelmes**
*Cardiff University, UK* **|** *nelmesaj@cardiff.ac.uk*

Most of what is written about the current crisis in journalism focuses on failed business models, massive job losses, plummeting advertising revenue - in short, a national and international industry struggling to survive, let alone thrive, and the subsequent damage to democracy as it collapses. News blackholes, news deserts and zombie news coverage are real dangers in an era when fake news is on the increase and trust in journalists is deteriorating. The big question being asked by academics, industry commentators and decision-makers is: how can power be held to account if the media ceases to function and that which survives loses credibility?

There have always been sections of society which have struggled to be heard, been routinely ignored by the media or have a history of negative news coverage. Distrust of journalists is high in these marginalised communities, often quite justifiably given the pressures reporters are under to sensationalise news events. However, journalism can play a vital role in engaging with social problems and providing solutions. This is where Andrea Wenzel's book *Community-Centered Journalism: Engaging People, Exploring Solutions and Building Trust* (2020) makes an important contribution while also setting up the challenge of rethinking accepted norms and values of journalism, such as objectivity and professional boundaries.

Wenzel says this book is not about saving the journalism industry:

> It's a book about reimagining how journalism could better serve communities and what that looks like may bear little resemblance to traditional ideas of journalism. I'm interested in looking at the process of community-centred journalism and how it could repair journalism and, along the way, I hope that can be used to address some of the harms that journalism has caused over the years including problems around trust. But my starting point is not how to improve the industry but how to try to improve the communication health of communities. (Wenzel et al. 2020)

Journalists are used to reporting on society's inequalities, but journalism is rarely used to tackle social problems (Buckland 2018). All too often, the basic information needs of the poorest are not being met as journalists treat news in a hierarchical way, reflecting society's power dynamics. Community journalism is a way to challenge this and draws attention to the relationship dynamics between journalists and the communities they serve (Reader 2012). It is a place-based 'connectivity' or 'embeddedness' (Lewis et al. 2014), which resonates with Wenzel's research (2020). Her book draws on case studies which are interlinked by a nearness to people and face-to-face meetings – be it through community forums, workshops, information tables or talking to people in the street. Reader (2012) says this 'nearness' increases the community's accessibility to journalists as well as the journalists' sense of accountability for their actions. This is at odds with the working practices of most mainstream journalists – desk-bound, online and geographically distanced – whose main sources tend to be those members of the community with the loudest voices and highest profiles (i.e. the most powerful). Lewis et al. (2014) highlight that one of the main difficulties faced with setting up and maintaining genuinely reciprocal community journalism is that it takes time to establish relationships of trust and goodwill which a 24/7 news cycle mitigates against.

Wenzel (2020, p. 4) takes two practices as starting points – solutions journalism and engaged journalism – which test the boundaries and challenge journalistic norms, such as objectivity, that "reinforce hierarchies of race, class and geography". With solutions journalism, a journalist's role is not only to report on problems but to rigorously report on responses to social problems. By comparison, engaged journalism is a range of practices that aim to build relationships between journalists and the public and involve the public in the journalistic process. Uniting these approaches, Wenzel (2020) utilises a communication infrastructure theory (CIT) - a theoretical framework which, she says, "grew out of a desire to understand the role communication plays in building and maintaining community cohesion and also the processes of social change at the local level" (Ball-Rokeach et al. 2001; Kim and Ball-Rokeach

2006). While journalism scholarship often focuses on journalists assuming a central role in the communication health of communities, "CIT positions them as only one actor in a larger network where other actors also have agency" (Ball-Rokeach et al. 2001; Kim and Ball-Rokeach 2006).

> When applied at the local level, solutions journalism and engaged journalism practices intervene in what communication infrastructure theory, or CIT, calls 'storytelling networks' – that is, the network of residents, community groups, and local media that are all involved in circulating community stories. (Wenzel 2020, p. 4)

Wenzel's case studies (2020) cover a diverse range of communication projects across the United States, from South Los Angeles and rural Kentucky to the South Side of Chicago and Philadelphia. They involve rural and urban communities, poor and affluent, white-majority and Black-majority, ones which voted for Trump and others where the Democrats won.

In the introduction, Wenzel (2020) recounts her own experiences of working as a global affairs producer in public radio in Chicago and her growing disenchantment with having a listenership sitting within an 'ideological bubble' (i.e. disproportionately white with higher-than-average levels of education and income in a majority Black and Brown city). Wenzel subsequently worked on projects to explore ways to engage more directly and positively with the wider community which has since influenced her academic research:

> 'I not only have researched solutions journalism and engaged journalism initiatives but also have gotten my hands messy attempting to help to organize them. As such I make no claims to be an objective outsider. I am doing this research because I want to understand how I too can help facilitate this work more effectively' (Wenzel 2020, p.6)

The introduction goes on to place journalism interventions in context and gives a valuable overview of trust in journalism, the early development of peace journalism and public journalism, solutions journalism and engaged journalism, community engagement and boundary work with a very detailed discussion of CIT.

Chapter 1 looks at a media intervention organised by the University of Southern California's Metamorphosis Research Group. It focuses on the storytelling link between local media and community organisations in South Los Angeles, which is a majority Black and Latinx area that has historically been stigmatised. Chapter 2 studies more closely the storytelling link between residents and local media by paying attention to Chicago's Curious City, which is a

public media initiative seeking listeners' participation in creating output. Chapter 3 examines the entire storytelling network in a politically polarised region by introducing a model for designing research-based local journalism interventions in a majority Republican area in Western Kentucky. In chapter 4, Wenzel (2020) draws attention to Philadelphia where projects in a historically African American neighbourhood suffer from challenges of disempowerment, while there is a majority white suburb with a significant proportion of Trump voters. This chapter argues that community-centred journalism projects may not be scalable, but they may be portable. More community-centred projects are examined in chapter 5 which challenges the boundaries of journalism by adopting new roles and competencies, often incorporating community-organising practices. This chapter features very good insights from key practitioners into the need for journalists to adopt new roles when engaging with communities. It also looks at ways of evaluating impact and the possibilities of philanthropic funding. Wenzel's book (2020) concludes on a positive, though guarded, note that it is possible for journalists to regain the trust of communities, although it will require time, effort, patience and a willingness to rethink traditional journalistic roles.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**
Andy Nelmes is a PhD student at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Culture researching the news ecosystem of a city in the UK looking at the power dynamics of local news as it travels between declining traditional media and emerging hyperlocals.

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