From disillusion to engagement: Minority teen journalists and the news media

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Abstract

Because most high schools that can afford to fund journalism programs are located in middle-class suburbs, the majority of research on teen journalists reflects the experiences of middle-class, predominantly white students. By examining two afterschool journalism programs serving youth from inner-city communities, this article discusses teen journalists who are predominantly low-income and racial minorities, examining their views about journalism and news media. In the process, it explores these teens' notions of democracy and the public good, revealing how class location influences youth attitudes towards news media and civic participation.

Introduction

High school journalism programs have traditionally been considered incubation grounds for the formation of future journalists and for teaching young people about the First Amendment and democracy. Yet, for reasons that will be discussed in this article, low-income and minority youth are under-represented in high school journalism programs across the United States, resulting in a relative paucity of research about these students' experiences with and attitudes about journalism. Youth living in low-income communities often have first-hand experiences with poverty, violence and injustice that complicate their perceptions of democracy. To learn more about the views of this population, the present

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study focuses on afterschool teen journalism programs that serve youth from inner-city communities, hosted by non-profit organizations seeking to serve 'at-risk' youth.[1]

The goal of this research was not only to gain an understanding of what journalism work meant to these young people, but to learn how these students' daily experiences with socio-economic and racial inequalities influenced their attitudes towards journalism, the news media, and civic engagement. The findings indicate that the greatest benefit of journalism training for disenfranchised youth may not lie in the generation of stronger communication skills (although this is certainly a benefit), but in the development of a sense of civic empowerment among youth populations that commonly feel alienated from journalism and politics. While the youth interviewed for this study expressed low levels of trust in politicians and the mainstream media (newspapers and TV news), they showed passionate concern for political issues affecting their communities and, given opportunities to express these concerns, blossomed as journalists and citizens. This research points to the need to consider students' socio-economic backgrounds when developing journalism curricula and to increase teen journalism programs in low-income communities as a tool for teaching about civic engagement.

Literature review

Much research on high school journalism has concluded that teenagers working at high school newspapers develop stronger research and writing skills than their non-journalism peers (Claes and Quintelier, 2009; Cotton, 1998; Dvorak, 1988, 1989, 2008; Dvorak et al., 1994). Dvorak, who has studied high school journalists for more than 25 years, found consistent results over more than two decades: 'High school journalism students earn higher grade point averages, score better on the ACT college entrance examination and demonstrate better writing and grammar skills in college, compared with students who do not have those journalism experiences' (2008: 1). Other studies conclude that students gain self-confidence from seeing their work published for a wide audience (King and Stovall, 1992; Novek, 1995; Simic, 1993). King and Stovall, who included a section about socio-economically marginalized youth in their guide to classroom publishing, observe that for low-income minority teens, in particular, having their writing published validates their culture to the larger community (1992: 33). The authors state: 'Young people rarely have a voice in the mass media … And the *most* silent of this already silenced group are the youth who have not been melted into the elusive mainstream' (1992: 64). Journalism projects offer increased levels of confidence and academic motivation for all students, they argue, but *especially* for those who are isolated from the mainstream because of race and social class: 'audience feedback is far more potent than grades as motivation with these students' (1992: 101). Novek, who conducted a research project in which African-American high school students published a newspaper for 19 months, found that newsmaking increased the confidence and self-efficacy of this population, helping them 'to connect with one another and thereby to take more self-directing roles in their lives' (1995: 69).

Still other scholars maintain that participating in high school journalism programs increases adolescents' knowledge of civic engagement and democracy (Clark and Monserrate, 2011; Freedom Forum, 1994; SJI, 2010). One of the best-known publications

on high school journalism, *Death by Cheeseburger: High School Journalism in the 1990s and beyond*, asserts that while student journalists gain direct benefits of learning to report, write, edit and manage resources, the entire student body is also better off 'for having a vehicle of expression, a means to exchange ideas, to raise issues and even to provoke controversy. These lessons of free expression … are the essence of our democracy in the USA' (Freedom Forum, 1994: v). A recent report published by the Scholastic Journalism Institute (SJI) states that high school journalism students are 'more involved in their communities, more civically engaged and more curious about their world' than are other young people (2010: 1). While these studies suggest that high school journalists gain knowledge about democracy in terms of increased issue awareness, Clark and Monserrate (2011) note that the benefit of high school journalism experiences may lie less in acquiring knowledge about specific political issues or electoral processes than in socialization processes that help young people see themselves as part of a larger collective citizenry. The authors conclude that scholastic journalism is an important form of civics education for teens.

However, the above-mentioned benefits of scholastic journalism are much less likely to be experienced by low-income and minority students, both because of a lack of funding for extra-curricular programming in poor school districts and because many minority students feel that high school newspapers do not relate to their realities. A comprehensive study of 233 high school newspapers in 33 states during the 1990s found that newspaper staffs were generally dominated by white, middle-class students, given that schools which could afford to fund newspapers were most often located in relatively affluent, predominantly white suburbs. Economically strapped urban schools, with student bodies comprised largely of racial minorities, were 'likely to have weak, infrequently published newspapers, if any at all' (Freedom Forum, 1994: 33). The report also found that, across the country, minority students who attended predominantly white schools considered journalism programs as 'a White thing' and expressed feelings of alienation towards their school newspapers and towards journalism in general (1994: 31). Recruiting minority students to high school journalism programs was difficult, the study noted, because these students were 'accustomed to seeing inadequate coverage of their groups in adult media' and viewed school media as 'alien, if not hostile to their interests' (1994: 32). Historically, racial minorities have been under-represented in the mainstream media's general news coverage and over-represented in stories about crime and other social problems (Dorfman and Schiraldi, 2001; Entman, 1992; Entman and Rojecki, 2000; Greco-Larsen, 2006; Grossberg, 2005; Soler and Garry, 2009; Wilson et al., 2003). Recent studies on race and scholastic journalism have continued to find that minority students are under-represented on high school newspaper staffs, reaffirming that race is a predictor of which schools have newspapers and which students are leaders of these publications (Callahan, 1998; Dvorak, 1998, 2000; Pardun and Scott, 2004; SJI 2010). According to the Scholastic Journalism Institute, the most serious threat to high school journalism today is the widespread elimination of such programs for economic reasons, and 'high-poverty, high-minority schools are most at risk' (2010: 1). For these reasons, economically and racially marginalized youth remain under-represented in research on teens and journalism.

Another body of literature relevant to the low levels of minority and low-income youth participation in scholastic journalism focuses on the issue of censorship. In

contrast to the above-mentioned 'lessons of free expression' that are the ideals of high school journalism programs, restrictions on the free speech of student journalists are common. High school teachers and principals frequently discourage or prohibit student stories about war, teen sexuality, school policies or other controversial issues (Amster, 2006; Dennis, 2007; Fiore, 2002; Freedom Forum, 1994; Hobbs, 1998; Lomicky, 2000; Martinson, 2008). Censorship has been found to disillusion student journalists regarding the viability of their political agency. Amster notes that 'Adults in the schools are too often concerned about image and public relations and too infrequently about students' investigation of the world and their place in it' (2006: viii). Martinson observes that censorship at school newspapers creates a situation in which 'students fail to understand why it is important that they be engaged and committed citizens because they learn through the socialization process … that the way to survive is not to raise questions but to go along' (2008: 211). Such dynamics instill in students a sense of irrelevance as political actors, curtailing their enthusiasm for journalism and civic engagement. While this problem exists at many high schools, including some schools in well-funded districts, Amster (who described vast resource differences in the journalism programs of wealthy versus low-income schools) found that journalism teachers in wealthier schools were more likely to admire rather than disapprove when students' opinions diverged from those of the adults (2006: 76). She found that expectations of not being able to express themselves freely were an additional factor in the disenchantment that low-income students felt towards high school journalism programs.

Educational theorist Beth Rubin observes that 'disjunctures' between the political ideals expressed in civics textbooks and the reality of students' experiences are particularly acute among low-income minority youth (2007; Rubin et al., 2009). She notes that low-income urban teens express very low levels of trust in the institutions around them, and that civic learning for such students is 'fraught with complexity and contradiction' (2009: 220). We found this to be true regarding the institution of journalism, with teens discussing stark differences between what they believed journalism should be and what they felt it was.

Methodology

One-on-one interviews were conducted from December 2007 to January 2010 with 30 teenagers aged 14 to18 who were participants in afterschool journalism programs hosted by non-profit organizations that served predominantly low-income, minority youth. Five parents and four staff people were also interviewed about the impact of journalism training on the teens.

After attaining Institutional Review Board approval for the project and with full cooperation from the directors of the non-profit agencies that ran the journalism programs, interviewees were recruited by distributing flyers about the study to program staff, program participants and their parents. Through letters and phone calls, youth and their parents were contacted to set up and confirm interview dates. Individual teens were interviewed at the organizations hosting the journalism programs, directly before or after the teens' regularly scheduled journalism workshops. Written consent was acquired from

all participants, along with parental consent for those under 18. During the interviews (lasting about 45 minutes each), teens were asked to share their thoughts on the profession of journalism and its role in society. They were also asked to discuss their feelings about the mainstream news media. Research questions included: what have you learned from your journalism program? what do you like/dislike about the news media? what are the roles and responsibilities of a journalist? And, because journalists are said to serve the public interest or 'the public good', the teens were also asked to discuss what the term 'public good' meant to them.

Twenty of the interviewees were participants in an afterschool radio journalism program located at a non-profit organization in Boston.[2] The program trained teens to research, write, and produce current events stories, encouraging them to attend local community meetings in order to develop a better understanding of socio-political issues such as air pollution, gang violence, transportation problems, and gentrification affecting their neighborhoods. The stories were aired on a community radio station run mainly by teens (Marchi, 2009) and were also available on the station's website, where the youth blogged about their stories and received feedback from the public. All of the interviewed radio journalists had attended a one-semester radio journalism course and had worked at the radio station for periods ranging from six months to two years. Ten other teens interviewed were participants in an afterschool video journalism program in Philadelphia, sponsored by a public television station that trained high school youth in video production and media literacy.[3] Students learned to conduct interviews and produce original documentaries on topics of concern to them, such as homelessness, teen pregnancy, healthcare reform, immigration, and violence against women. Aired on local television and online, the documentaries were also shown at publicized public screenings throughout the city. At the time of the interviews, all 10 students had completed at least one documentary video project. Four of the 10 had also attended a Young Journalists' Summer Camp, sponsored by the same public TV station.

Demographic data on participants was obtained during the interview process. The students represented a diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds comprised of 83 percent racial minorities: 18 percent Asian; 21 percent African-American; 16 percent Middle Eastern; 28 percent Latino; and 17 percent White. Eighty-seven percent of the teens were from low-income families, with parents/guardians who were unemployed, underemployed, or fully employed in low-wage, low-benefit positions such as cashier, manicurist, childcare assistant, security guard, house cleaner, or elderly care aide.[4] More than half of the teens lived in single-parent households headed by women, and half had parents who were immigrants to the United States (although all but three of the students were born there). Ninety percent of the students attended urban public schools, with the remainder enrolled in urban parochial schools. Both the public and parochial schools attended by these students faced budget cuts and other financial struggles. Only three students reported having high school newspapers at their high schools.[5] The gender distribution of the students interviewed was 47 percent female and 53 percent male. All participants' names have been kept confidential and pseudonyms have been used. Except for ellipses to shorten certain long quotes, all quotations are written as recorded.

Inner-city teen journalists' attitudes about journalism

While they were enthusiastic about participating in their respective radio and video journalism programs for reasons that will be discussed, many of the youth expressed disillusion with the mainstream news media. They recognized that their communities faced serious problems, but also felt that positive aspects of the people and places they knew were rarely shown in mainstream newspapers and TV news. Instead, they felt that their communities were portrayed in negative ways: 'Every time the news talks about [name of speaker's neighborhood], it's about houses burning down and cars getting stole and kids killing each other. It's not about anything positive,' said Kia, 15. Wanting more positive news about his community, Michael, 18, stated: 'You just hear gossip about what's happening here because the news doesn't cover these kind of places except to focus on bad things.' Another complaint was that the news was sensationalized. Jay, 18, the son of Turkish immigrants who regularly watched and read Turkish news, expressed disdain towards US news: 'I try to watch the news on TV and I just can't take it. It's just people screaming at each other. It doesn't go anywhere.' Stefani, a 17-year-old Italian American, did not like the negative content of the news, but admitted she often got swept up in the morbid details: 'I think, for a lot of people, tragedy and crazy stuff is interesting. And then I'm thinking, "Wow, I'm actually enjoying something bad happening! It makes me feel like a bad person, but why do they glorify stuff like that on the news?"'

The theme of news as 'depressing' emerged in numerous responses, such as the following quotes from Jackie (Cambodian, 15): 'I don't really like to watch the news. It's kind of depressing', and Marvin (Latino, 17): 'I stopped watching the news because … every day I hear somebody died, some explosion, somebody else kidnapped. I couldn't really deal with that. I didn't want to be depressed.' Tara (African-American, 15) felt similarly: 'Everyday you read the paper, turn on the news, and it's always about a young person dying.' An African-American male discussed what he felt was the racist nature of coverage: 'I think it's kind of annoying that the major stories in the news are about people who get shot, usually people who have colored skin' (Tree, 17). The teens were painfully aware that people from other areas of their cities did not think highly of their neighborhoods, and blamed the mainstream media for these negative perceptions. In contrast, teen journalists from middle-class communities do not experience this sense of devaluation.

The youth expressed a belief that the interests of people like themselves were not well served by the mainstream news media. Some stated that the news was biased against people of color, while others suggested that news outlets presented perspectives of the wealthy, shielding rather than exposing their wrongdoings. Mohamed, (Middle Eastern, 15), was being raised by his single mother who pieced together three part-time jobs to make ends meet. A serious student who watched and read the news often, Mohamed stated:

> It sort of gets on my nerves that, back when the housing bubble was still intact, there would be hundreds of articles in the *New York Times* talking about what restaurant is best, but very few talking about what happens if the housing bubble pops, what happens with these companies like Enron.

Tiffany, 17 (Latina), who planned to work in her aunt's hair salon after graduating from high school, stated, 'My brother is a soldier in Iraq. His best friend got killed and we worry about him every day … But President Bush got us into the war and all the journalists went along with it. Nobody was thinking about people like us.'

These views contrasted starkly with the teens' ideas of what journalism *should* be. From their social studies classes, and especially from TV and movie portrayals, the youth were well aware of journalists' historical roles as truth seekers on behalf of the public interest. They defined journalists as people who had a 'huge role' and 'responsibility' to communicate important information to the public so that citizens could be 'informed' and make wise decisions. Agata, 15, who stood out as unusually well informed for her age, explained: 'Journalists have a huge role in society … I can say that I have read many articles and changed my opinions on topics afterwards.' The power of journalists to influence people's perspectives was also noted by Jay: 'Journalists need to write stories that raise awareness and inform people of things they might not know before, whether it's a big story or a little story. Something that changes your perspective on life.' Many responses echoed this theme, demonstrating that the teens believed journalists had a higher level of moral responsibility than did the average person. In the words of Miles, 17: 'It's the responsibility of a journalist to bring out the truth and to record what's going on in the world in an honest fashion.' Danny, 18, explained: 'Journalism is basically standing up for what's right.'

The teens held expectations that journalists should work on behalf of 'everyday people' as opposed to benefitting the interests of the powerful, and discussed various ways in which the public depended on journalists. These included receiving warnings about potential health hazards, exposés on corruption, or information necessary to vote, purchase a home, or support or protest a war. They recognized the need to have an informed citizenry in order to achieve democratic self-governance and viewed journalists as people who should be 'fair', tell the 'real story', and 'take a stand' for the community:

> [Journalists] are supposed to give all sides of a story. They're supposed to give the information to the people. And cover all the issues going on in the world and in my community. (Eduardo, 14)

> They have to be well researched and well versed so people get the real story. It adds to knowledge. People make decisions in life based on it. It is important for the public to be educated on subjects they need to make decisions on. (Dennis, 16)

> Journalists have a lot of weight on their shoulders because they have to make sure their story is solid and true … They're out there, trying to stand for something, for the community. We have to know and understand *why*, and so journalists are out there trying to report a story so we can know *why* those people are fighting in the war, or whatever. (Michael, 18)

Despite their youth, the teens were not naive concerning levels of corporate and political corruption in society. In fact, they spoke about the economy, the environment, war, and other political issues with an impressive level of seriousness for their age. This may be because children from lower-income backgrounds are among the most vulnerable members of society. They have closer personal experiences with the economic, social and political fallout of failed and cut government programs, political corruption, crime,

war, environmental contamination, and other socio-political issues than do youth from higher income brackets. During the interviews, many of the teens mentioned difficult situations such as having a relative or friend who had been murdered or imprisoned, parents struggling to pay the rent, or family members fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan. They expressed frustration with the arson, robberies, assaults, drug dealing, gang violence, dirty streets, unsafe parks, and run-down schools in their communities and felt that since political leaders 'didn't care', journalists needed to do a better job of monitoring and uncovering wrongdoing:

> You're supposed to explain every single side of a story, whether good or bad, so people can get the correct information and not be lured into risking their lives, or anything like that. (Eduardo, 14)

> Journalists need to inform … the public about products' false claims. Like, if a company is lying to you about something in a product, like lead in toys and stuff like that. (Trevor, 17)

> A lot of factories pollute a lot of bad stuff, so journalists should try to make things better. (Renee, 16)

> The job of the journalist is to not only keep the people informed, but to be always checking up on the corporations and politicians. (Mark, 17)

Because they expressed ideas that journalists should be advocates on behalf of the collective good, the teens were asked to discuss what the concept of 'the public good' meant to them:

> The public good is something that helps everybody, not just a select few. (Sofia, 15)

> Everyone knowing about and caring about the wellbeing of everyone else, and doing something about it. If, as journalists, we communicate to the masses, then we could get people interested in things that they should be interested in. (Dennis, 16)

> The public good is public awareness in relation to pollution and stuff. Obviously, less pollution is, like, towards the public good, compared to things that are bad for the public. (Mark, 17)

> The public good is something that is in everyone's interest, something that helps everyone. Like going green. Or fixing the health care system. (Michael, 18)

While the teens believed that journalists had a crucial responsibility to act on behalf of the public good to promote more positive decision-making, they also stated that journalists often failed to meet this ideal. 'A reporter's responsibility is to give the facts, although it doesn't happen nowadays … They should be reporting on issues that affect normal everyday Americans,' said Óscar, 16. From the vantage point of these youth, the news media did not cover issues that their families dealt with on a daily basis or, at least, did not cover them in ways that seemed useful. 'Useful', for them, was coverage that explained issues in ways that 'everyday people' could comprehend, so that they could appreciate how policies and events ultimately affected their lives. It also meant news that

helped protect the public from danger. Discussing the types of issues he believed needed to receive more 'understandable' news coverage, a ninth grader launched into a surprisingly detailed account of the unethical lending practices of mortgage companies:

> Right now, the country is in a really bad situation. My family is actually in huge debt right now. My Mom, she's gotten into a house that she was basically tricked into getting, because I mean she wanted to get a house for me and my brother so we could have a stable place to live. And right now the mortgage rate is extremely high and every single month my Mom is struggling to get the money to be able to pay and she's actually not even paying anything to the principal, she's only paying interest, which really gets me bummed out because she's paying so much but she's not actually paying anything. So the house basically isn't even ours. Many people are in that situation right now. (Eduardo, 14)

In a society marked by stark racial and economic inequalities, students' personal experiences become part of their understanding of themselves as citizens (Rubin, 2009; Youniss et al., 1997). This influences their level of faith in democratic institutions and processes, as the following skeptical quotes illustrate. Tara, 15, stated, 'I think public good is really just people in power doing things that benefit them. They don't speak for everyone. They speak for a certain group.' Jay felt similarly: 'Politicians, unfortunately I feel that they are more concerned with self-interest and wealth accumulation, as opposed to what's really going to benefit the greater good.' George, 16, explained in greater length:

> The public good is what all the governors and mayors are always saying. They say they want what's best for us, though they won't do it. Like [Massachusetts governor] Deval Patrick bought himself a Cadillac as soon as he got into office, even though the state's having money problems. It was really expensive. It's like, he's not even in office for a *month* and he's spending all this money! Like, what about *us*? You've promised us so much stuff and you're not even keeping up with it, so it's all pretty much a bunch of lies. The public good would be giving schools more money because all the schools are having to cut teachers and so many public schools are closing.

The teens' disillusioned attitudes towards the idea of the public good and their disappointment in the news media are perhaps not surprising in an age when multi-million dollar bonuses are paid to executives who bankrupt their companies, and top political leaders go unpunished for knowingly deploying misinformation to lead the nation into war. Precisely *because* the teens came from communities that were most in need of the sort of serious investigative journalism that keeps the powerful in check, these youth felt alienated from news media that failed to live up to these expectations. However, their skepticism did not mean that they were apathetic towards public affairs.

While the phenomenon of 'cynical chic', a fashionable scorn and jaded negativity towards politics, has grown increasingly common among the general population in the past couple of decades, decreasing citizens' belief in their power to change the status quo (Eliasoph, 1998; Gamson, 1992), this did not seem to be the case with these youth. Their disillusionment was simultaneously coupled with passionate opinions about political issues that interested or affected them. For example, many stated that they enthusiastically followed the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama, in what

they felt was an especially exciting election because of the candidate's relative youth, race and idealism. Students from immigrant families followed debates on immigration reform and related news (i.e. about factory raids, immigration laws, or immigrant bashing). Students with family members in military service overseas followed coverage of the wars in the Middle East, and so on. It wasn't that the teens did not care about news and politics, as is often assumed of the young generation (Mindich, 2005; Patterson, 2007; Quigley, 1999; Times Mirror Center, 1990), but that they were often disillusioned by them. By focusing on issues that were personally important to them, the teens' participation in community-oriented journalism programs helped counter a sense of nihilism that was common in their communities, allowing them to see the ideals of journalism and civic participation in action.

Community-oriented journalism education

The major difference between the journalism programs we studied and most high school journalism programs was the community-oriented model. Free from the hierarchy of school administrators, school boards and other potentially censorious entities, the youth had broad editorial freedom to report on issues impacting on their daily lives. Rather than covering the football team, cafeteria food, student dress codes, and other issues that can seem trivial for teens dealing with daunting challenges on a daily basis, the non-academic location of their journalism training enabled them to cover 'taboo' topics that would be difficult or impossible to discuss in a high school context. Operating within a youth empowerment model and run by staff with public television and community radio backgrounds (journalistic realms historically involved in investigative 'watch dog' journalism), these models allowed teens to choose their own stories and encouraged those who wanted to report on controversial topics. Unlike most high school journalism programs, these programs had as much emphasis on teaching about community activism as on teaching the technical skills of journalism. Students were expected to report not only on local issues, but also on local community activists attempting to address these issues.

Another benefit of these programs was their emphasis on audio and visual forms of reporting. This is not to suggest that students from low-income communities cannot have strong writing skills, but to acknowledge that radio and video formats facilitate journalistic participation for students whose writing skills may not be strong, whether because English is not their first language or because they attend underfunded schools that are unable to adequately address their educational needs. Audio and visual journalism formats, deployed in students' communities, attract the participation of students who might otherwise feel outnumbered, inferior, or ill-equipped to participate in high school newspapers. It bears saying that high school newspapers offer many benefits for students who participate in them and the intention here is not to dismiss them but, rather, to point out how community-oriented journalism programs are particularly well suited for engaging youth populations that do not have access to or do not feel comfortable within scholastic newspapers.

The teens' journalism experiences proved highly inspirational for them as they reported on community issues they felt were ignored or under-reported by mainstream news outlets, including local politicians and politics, healthcare, sexuality, education,

safety and the environment. For example, the video journalists in Philadelphia produced a documentary about life in a rough neighborhood where gunshots were heard 'at all hours of the day' and children feared leaving their homes to play outside. Rather than end the story there, however, they focused on community residents who had organized a campaign to clean up and beautify the neighborhood, reporting that the residents were successfully taking back the territory from drugs and violence through a process of community involvement. Other video journalists produced documentaries exploring reasons for the high dropout rate in Philadelphia's public high schools, growing unemployment rates among teens, the healthcare reform debate, and the harmful effects of stereotyping. Besides covering problems, they also reported on positive aspects of their neighborhoods – giving voice to feelings of community pride. They produced profiles about local personalities, such as a 94-year-old Philly cheese steak vendor, a local dumpster driver who created art from trash, and a street corner 'rose lady' who brought 'joy to the neighborhood' as she sold flowers. Similarly, the Boston radio journalists produced stories about safety concerns and educational quality (or lack thereof) in local high schools, conducting interviews with students and teachers, and about the effects of racism in everyday life (including cases of police harassment of minority youth), and racial tensions in the midst of Boston's changing neighborhood demographics. On the positive side, they interviewed local community activists and volunteers, including other youth, who were designing LEED-certified green buildings and working to transform desolate sites of industrial contamination into new parks.

Like journalists at high school newspapers, these teens felt journalism helped them improve their writing, interviewing, and photography skills: 'I'm a better writer now. [Coordinator's name] is always on my case about stating things concisely,' said Mark. 'I'm learning how to be a reporter. Like, how to ask questions, how not to be afraid. Also, I'm learning to edit too. How to make it look good so people won't say it's weird or it sucks,' said Kayla, 17. 'I like learning to use the camera and how to approach others in a way you won't scare them,' said William, 14. The teens also improved their interpersonal skills. Michael confided, 'You might not believe this, but I used to be very shy. I would never talk to anyone. Now I interview everyone!' Tran, 17, developed a greater eye for reading people: 'When I interview people, I try to notice more people's expression and their feelings. Like, see their emotions and tell about it. If they're sad or happy and stuff like that.'

Yet the teens learned much more than academic, technical, and interpersonal skills. In researching and producing news stories that were relevant to their communities, they became local investigators and watchdogs – ironically the very things they felt were lacking in mainstream news media. One 14-year-old proudly declared:

> My first semester in the program, I worked on a story about drugs and how they affect the community here … I did drug percentages and interviewed police and the people across the street at White Hen [convenience store] and the laundromat.

A 15 year-old whose younger cousin was pregnant stated: 'I'm gonna do a story next week about teen pregnancy. It's important because a lot of teens around here are ruining their lives at a young age and dropping out of school.' Both students felt they were providing a public service by offering information they believed was important

for the good of the community. Similarly, Mohamed described the most important story he had done to date:

> This tanker carrying liquid gas was going through Boston Harbor, right by where Pier's Park was and stuff. And it shouldn't be coming that close to where so many people live … I used to always think the government would weigh the pros and cons and if there were more cons they would push it aside. I always used to have an idealistic view of government, but then when I saw the tanker coming, it was like a three-mile blast radius, coming right next to Pier's Park, which is a residential neighborhood and right across from downtown Boston which holds the financial district. It kind of struck me as weird because you think they would route it in a different way to make the area safer, but they didn't. So I reported on it.

This passage illustrates both Mohamed's belief that he is providing his community with information important for their collective good and also his understanding that citizens need to actively advocate for their interests, rather than trust that powerful authorities will automatically do so. Many other students spoke with pride of the important service they felt they were providing to the public by producing local community coverage: 'I'm telling the public and keeping them aware of what's going on, and that makes me proud,' said Monia, 15. 'I had to go out and search for stuff that informed me of what was going on, and it made me feel good that I could pass that knowledge to other people,' said Jess, 18. The enthusiasm of these teens illustrates that behind the façade of cynicism they often expressed was a desire to engage with political and social issues. The contradictions expressed between the public service they felt journalists *should* carry out and the disservice they felt mainstream news media *did* carry out (i.e. sensational and negative news, biased coverage, or inadequate coverage of local issues) is illustrated in Agata's description of one of the most important stories she ever covered:

> The first story I did made me proud of being a journalist. It was about misconceptions about Islam. Not only did my peers actually see it and enjoy it, but I also got praise from a couple of adults, which made me feel accomplished. I felt good because I spread a little bit of important knowledge, which is totally necessary, because of the sickening influence the media has on people.

A Muslim, Agata believed she was serving the public by combating what she felt was an anti-Islamic bias in the mainstream news.

Such opportunities to report from a youth perspective not only increased the teens' enthusiasm for journalism, but also attracted other young people to tune in to the teens' coverage. This was illustrated by public blog comments written in response to stories posted on the radio station's website, as well as by the loyal audience of listeners the reporters had among friends, family and local residents. The video journalists had similar followings of friends and family who watched their news stories on TV, online, and at public screenings.[6] The youth were excited about the news they reported, inspired by the activists they met, and enthusiastic about the civic engagement they observed and participated in as journalists. This altered the conceptual frame in which they saw themselves and their communities: 'When they said "journalism", I thought we were just gonna talk on the radio. I never realized we would really be *reporting* on issues!'

exclaimed Kia. 'People … are doing so much good work in the community, showing what can be done if people come together,' said George. Community-oriented journalism provided the youth with a form of civics education that Lance Bennett suggests is key for today's youth, allowing them to: a) pursue meaningful issues that enable personal identification; b) gain access to information that motivates rather than discourages collective solutions; and c) have contact with citizen pathways to governmental and civic actions on the issues (Bennett et al., 2009).

Conclusion

This study illustrates the complexities of how low-income adolescents develop as citizens, finding that youth perspectives on journalism and democracy are informed by young people's socio-economic circumstances in significant ways. This must be taken into account when developing journalism programs aimed at high school students. Because these young people came from communities that struggled with poverty, street violence, underfunded city services, environmental contamination, and a host of other problems unlikely to be present in affluent communities (particularly not all at the same time), they felt abandoned by elected officials and disappointed in the mainstream news media. Their everyday realities simultaneously engendered a sense of urgency regarding the need for serious investigative journalism and a corresponding sense of disillusionment at the mainstream media's failure to fulfill journalistic ideals. Despite their youth, the teens were not naïve concerning hypocrisy, conflicts of interest, and other problems within contemporary politics and news media, and expressed a fluctuating mixture of skepticism and hope about the ability of journalism to serve the public good. Encouraging them towards the hopeful side, their work as community journalists allowed them to connect with issues that were personally important for them, putting them in contact with networks of citizens who confronted local problems via community organizing and other political actions.

To improve mainstream news coverage while at the same time helping to address feelings of alienation often held by low-income and minority communities towards the mainstream news media, professional news organizations should support and collaborate with community-based teen journalists to develop story ideas, air young people's perspectives, and incorporate teen journalists into professional news reports. Such steps are already being taken by some public television and community radio stations, such as those discussed here, but are uncommon in the world of for-profit news. A professional news organization leading the way is National Public Radio, which sponsors a Youth Radio Initiative where 1300 teens per year from under-resourced communities across the USA are trained in audio, video, print, and web journalism skills and encouraged to report on the realities of their lives. The teens' news stories and commentaries are broadcast worldwide via a variety of media outlets including CNN.com, iTunes, and the NPR programs *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*.

Community-oriented journalism programs are ideal models for reaching students who, because of their race and/or social class, do not have access to or do not feel comfortable in high school journalism programs. A crucial aspect in attracting participants is the neighborhood location of the reporting, which dissuades teens from

thinking that journalism is a 'White thing' or a 'wealthy thing'. Radio and television formats encourage a variety of students, rather than simply the best writers, to participate. The teens we interviewed received many of the benefits students typically gain from working at high school newspapers, in terms of improved writing, interviewing, and technical skills. But, more importantly, journalism work provided them with something that is scarce for low-income youth – a vehicle through which to gain a sense of themselves as social actors. This research contributes to arguments that journalism programs can help high school students develop collective sensibilities (Clark and Monserrate, 2011), and that effective civics education needs to teach youth about democratic processes in ways that are authentic and motivating rather than formulaic (Bennett et al., 2009). While not a substitute for structural changes needed to address the daunting inequalities faced by low-income people of all races, community-oriented journalism programs are particularly important for youth from disenfranchised communities, if they are to believe that citizen participation can make a difference.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. A term used by social service agencies and funders to describe youth who, because of their socio-economic situations, are considered at higher risk than most for engaging in crime, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, poor academic performance or suicide.
2. Z-Journalism Program at ZUMIX Radio, 1630AM, hosted by the youth organization ZUMIX, in Boston, MA.
3. Learning Lab youth video documentary journalism program, hosted by public TV station WHYY TV 12 in Philadelphia, PA.
4. The remaining 13 percent were from working-class families with parents who had better paying full-time jobs such as administrative assistant, bus driver, store manager, telemarketer, teacher's aide or teacher, but were by no means affluent.
5. When asked whether they had newspapers at their high schools, only three teens replied in the affirmative. This indicates that 27 of the 30 students either had no school newspaper or were unaware of whether their schools had papers, illustrating the point made earlier that low-income and minority youth are marginalized from high school journalism programs.
6. Measured by reviewing these programs' websites and captured anecdotally in discussions with youth, their parents, and program staff.

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