



*Speech delivered Feb. 9, 2006, "The Emerging Mind of Community Journalism," sponsored by the Knight Community Journalism Fellows program, Anniston, AL.*

## **From Facebook and back – to face-to-face**

**By Peggy Kuhr, The University of Kansas**

Good morning. I'm very happy to be here, and see wonderful familiar faces and meet so many new people. This is indeed a grand occasion. Thank you, Chris, for making it happen.

I'd like to start by telling you about my grandmother, who lived in Chinook, Montana, a little town – 2,000 people at the time – on the High Line of North-Central Montana, about 30 miles south of the Canadian border.

In the last years of her life, my grandmother, Hulda Burns, was a widow. And two of her neighbors were widowers. All of them lived alone, in their homes on Pennsylvania Avenue.

They didn't really socialize much with each other. But they did depend on one another.

My grandmother, for example, subscribed to the Great Falls Tribune – published 120 miles down the highway. She'd read it first thing every morning, fold it back up, and then leave it on the front stoop for her neighbors, George and Severin. She would cook casseroles and leave some of that food on the front porch as well.

Next door, was George Mundt, a retired rancher. My mother tells me that he was the one who picked up the mail for all 3 at the post office.

Across the street, Severin Sivertsen had the garden. In the summer, he supplied them with raspberries, and then with homemade raspberry jam. In the winter, Severin shoveled the snow off the sidewalks for Hulda and George.

And, Severin had a car. On Friday, he'd drive them downtown. (They didn't take George's big pickup because my short grandmother couldn't climb into it.) My grandmother would have her hair fixed. They'd lunch at the senior center. Then stop at the bank and the grocery store.

Severin drove a 1936 Chevrolet sedan and they always went down the alleys. By this time, they were in their 80s and they didn't want people to think they shouldn't be out on the roads.

These three neighbors watched out for one another. They looked to see if the lights went on in the morning. If they didn't see a light, they checked.

Now this was a network of interdependence. And this interdependence allowed these three neighbors to be independent – to live alone in their own homes.

This goes on all the time in neighborhoods – and in churches and other places - around the country. It's what we need to be thinking about – the Chinook, Montana's, the face-to-face relationships, in our lives – as we teach, and practice and do research in journalism.

**We talk a great deal about journalistic independence. It's a bedrock value, going back to this country's founding. I believe that a news organization, however, can be independent only when it figures out how interdependent it must be with the communities it serves.**

And this requires a change in traditional journalism's thinking ... so that we're truly outside the box: outside the box of the newsroom or the classroom, and even outside the "box" we call a computer (or a PDA or a cell phone).

Hodding Carter (former president and CEO of the Knight Foundation) has been much more eloquent about this. During his 2004 speech in Toronto to accept the Gerald Sass Award for Distinguished Contributions to Journalism Education, he scolded journalists and professors:

He said, "We in journalism and in the academy have been playing the wrong game, the game of separation from our own society.

"We complain because 'they' don't read what we write, appreciate what we teach, understand the fundamentals of our trade and our society – but we complain at arms' length, from on high, from the sidelines."

Hodding called for action: "A press is as free, its offerings as valuable, as the value the 'rank and file' public put on both. So, too, higher education. That means we have work to do, missionary work, the saving of a civilization work."

**Our task here is to move that call for action from the ideal to the real, to the practical of our lives, our colleagues' lives, our students' lives. Here is a handful of suggestions for doing that:**

**In the academy, (and in news organizations) we can develop partnerships with non-journalists.**

It's important to get beyond the world of journalistic thinking.

I'm very fortunate because one of my key partners is Rich Harwood, who led off our session this morning.

What I love about Rich is that he does see himself as doing missionary work. He understands *Listening*. And he's listened to people across the country explain why they've turned away from the media and other institutions.

Rich spent a decade working with newspaper journalists in the 90s. He was an outsider to newsrooms, but an insider, as a citizen concerned about civic discourse in this society. Some of the tools and techniques that he and the journalists developed have stuck and are used in newsrooms today; some have not.

What Rich and I are doing today – thanks to the Knight Foundation – is taking lots of information from the research The Harwood Institute has done over the years – and breaking it into practical, relevant pieces of information for a web site.

Our project is called: Covering Communities: Expanding What We Value.

By next year, we'll have a web site: [www.coveringcommunities.org](http://www.coveringcommunities.org) with a practical goal: offering tips for understanding such things as: how communities work; where to find true community leaders; how to ask questions that open people up rather than close them down and divide them into opposing camps.

We'll model how to hold a face-to-face community conversation among college students – so journalism students can learn how to listen from their peers. And we'll have sample class lessons and curriculum.

What Rich brings to our partnership is years of research into communities; what I bring is the practical thinking of a former managing editor and now a professor: OK, how would this really work for us *today*? And my graduate students on the project bring a skeptical, and younger, eye. Just last week, we were looking at our early, proto-type web pages. One page, they immediately described as "hideous."

Another page had this headline: "Be thoughtful when you enter a civic space." I asked my graduate research assistants: Do you know what that means? The first replied: "Peggy, I've working on this project since last April and I've read all the Harwood materials and I have no clue."

The second student guessed: "Is a civic space a school board meeting?" The third guessed: "A park?"

On this project, the students are the reality check for language and approaches that work. If we professors let them, students will get us quickly grounded into their reality.

**Here's another strategy for us to practice and teach interdependence:  
Connect with expert listeners in your community.**

You don't need a grant, or pay big dollars to do this. At my former newspaper, The Spokesman-Review, one of the most useful presentations I saw was when the company invited police officers, including some SWAT team members, to explain how to talk to the public when they're hostile towards you. Most of the people in the audience, unfortunately, were not reporters and editors. They were the customer service folks – people on the front lines who often are given no clue about why the newsroom does what it does. What I was struck with is that police get more training in how to talk to, and how to listen to, the public than journalists do.

**Another way for journalists and student journalists to get out and listen to the public. Plan a credibility roundtable, be part of a project started by the Associated Press Managing Editors.**

The Credibility Roundtable idea is simple: a news organization hosts a community discussion about a topic that in some way has raised credibility questions about its – the organization's – news coverage. Topics have been broad: bias, accuracy, diversity; but most often they center on a particular story or series, a particular photograph. Since 2001, more than 200 news organizations have held a Credibility Roundtable.

When I came to KU in 2002, I wondered: What if my students ran such a community forum for a local newspaper? Could they handle it? And most important – what would they learn?

Now we know: KU students have held four credibility roundtables – the most recent was in December, about story comments on the online web site – [ljworld.com](http://ljworld.com). Seven other journalism professors, including Len Witt who's here today, have had a class where their students have convened the public on a credibility issue for a neighboring newspaper.

What practical lessons do students learn as they listen to the public talk about local coverage? Some of what they learned, I'm sure, the professors had told them over and over. But our words just don't stick as tightly.

Meagan Brown, at Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre said: "I just thought people picked up a newspaper, read it and put it down.... I never really thought that people thought about the credibility of a newspaper."

She said: "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."

Sarah Herbert, also at Wilkes University: "I learned to always keep it simple. ... People don't want to read big long stories ..." "I learned that when they pick up the newspaper, they're drawn to big headlines and photos, and the first paragraph or two."

For Angie Dasbach at KU, it was important "to see how much [readers] really cared. I could hear it in their voices. I could see it on their faces."

Angie, who had worked as a reporter for about three years before going to graduate school at KU, said: Doing a forum like this will "make any story more human – or humane."

"I felt like I was doing what I'd set out to do as a journalist – be involved in some way in my community," she said. "I cared about them as people – not just as sources."

At the University of Texas, doctoral student Tania Cantrell discovered that members of the public really were experts:

"They know what they're doing. They demand respect and they want coverage," she said.

That surprised her.

And, she discovered something else: "In the academy, we try to connect theory with practice," she said. But that's a linear relationship. "A missing component is the public. A Credibility Roundtable allows for a triangular relationship."

**Another strategy for fostering interdependence for those of us at universities: Develop new friends on campus.**

As one example, I'm designing a new class for next fall semester called: "Citizen Journalism and Community Work." Journalism students in my class will partner with students in the School of Social Welfare on projects in Kansas City, KS. And they will work with younger students, likely at the middle school level there.

The journalism students will coach writing and they will listen. What I hope is that they will learn about a community that's much more diverse than Lawrence, Kan., and that they'll see how it works from the eyes of fellow KU students who want to be social workers. One plan is for 8<sup>th</sup> graders to serve as experts on their community: and to give the journalism class a view of their world.

**These examples are all about face-to-face learning (and getting out). But ... how practical – and how necessary – is it in these days when we can email and blog and get and send news from our cell phones, our I-Pods?**

We can reach thousands more people and develop vital, challenging and comforting online communities.

The latest report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project showed how the internet is transforming community – and in a good way: expanding and strengthening social ties.

The technology is convenient, it's exciting, and it's what younger generations are growing up with. University students may have Facebook, but face-to-face is still so critical for community and for journalism.

Without face-to-face, we wind up with what my colleague Patty Noland calls "surveillance video." It's what she sees when students shoot their first television B roll. It looks like it's been shot from across the street, or the back of a police van. Students aren't comfortable getting up close to their sources, for a picture or an interview.

Without face-to-face you miss out on what my Spokane colleague Rebecca Nappi, a columnist and a blogger, calls "accidental learning."

The value of face to face, she says, is seeing people in their milieu. And of meeting "surprising people who will be accidentally there."

Sounds good. Do we have time for that today? One of my graduate students was asking Joe Ames, formerly with The Orange County Register about getting out into the community face-to-face. It takes a lot of time, she said.

He was pretty blunt. "I don't think it's a time management issue," he said, "I think it is your job. If you are going to say 'Oh I got to go talk to people in the community anyway' that sounds like an add-on.

"It's not an add-on; it's your job."

Indeed it's not an add-on. It's our job, and it can start here – today.

We define community in many ways these days, not just geographically, but the key is connecting with others and that means being interdependent, and that means keeping a high value on face time – and especially for students, whose first response is to go to the internet.

As my office neighbor Carol Holstead says about her neighbors – the neighbors who have a key to her place and who let the cat out when she's going to be late getting home – "I don't know what I'd do without them."

May the world of the community and the world of journalism feel the same way about one another.