

Making the Connection: Q&A with Joe Ames

Many journalists no longer live in the same communities they report on, as they did in the '20s, '30s and '40s, Ames says. As a result, reporters have lost the connections they once had with the people and places they cover. That, he says, needs to change.

Q. How do reporters tap into the community?

A. I think good reporters instinctively know where people gather, and where people are, and where they can find people who really know what's going on. It's well beyond public officials and it's well beyond "leaders" in the community. If you are only talking about so-called leaders in the community and public officials, then you are inevitably late in my view, because by the time the mayor knows about it, somebody else has known about it for six months or a year.

Q. Bearing that in mind, how can reporters cover their beats more effectively?

A. To be effective, you have to think about and understand the way American society has become kind of striated and structured and really Balkanized. Once you get that the city is not the mayor or the city is not the City Council or the city is not the school district, then you sort of get what's going on.

The classic example is: Am I going to cover a city or am I going to cover a building, City Hall? From my perspective, that's a non-starter question; I'm going to cover a city. And what happens is that City Hall may be completely irrelevant. Are you going to cover process or are you going to cover issues? Are you going to cover process or are you going to cover people? Are you going to cover what the zoning commission did? Do you want to write boring stories or compelling stories?

If you take your reporting out of the commonplace pipelines, city halls, major businesses; take it out of the power structure – it doesn't mean you ignore it – and add sterling writing to that, then you really have something.

Q. So there is a need to move beyond the “power structure” as sources. How can reporters really get to know the people and places that define a community?

A. It depends on the community. I think you have to be very flexible in your definition of what a community is. If you are covering tech companies, that’s one kind of community. If you are covering a specific city with political boundaries, that’s another kind of community. But within that, there are multiple communities. There’s the antique-selling community and there’s the antique-buying community, the cat-people community and the dog-people community.

Q. What else do journalists need to understand?

A. People. I think it all comes down to that. What are people really after? What do they really care about ... I think one of the things journalists need to do is become a great deal more knowledgeable and have a broader base of knowledge and experience, because if you are really going to go talk to members of the community, you need to have a pretty good working knowledge of medicine, education, economics, government, nonprofits, religion, all the things that make up the parts of the community.

So, when you walk in and talk with the Presbyterian minister, you better understand what a Presbytery is. And you better understand what that person’s jargon is. When you go talk to a banker, you better understand what the Fed is. And if you are going to talk to a doctor, you better understand what an MRI is.

So, I think there’s almost an eclectic education that journalists must have, and it all doesn’t come from school. I think good journalists have to be voracious readers and very curious. And I’m not sure all journalists are, actually.

Q. What are some of the other basics of good community coverage?

A. I think there is a lot of expertise in the media, particularly in investigative journalism, trends and all those kinds of things. There’s a lot of sophistication. I think the key is applying that sophistication to the smallest communities and the smallest stories, not just the biggest communities and the biggest stories. I think that’s the trick, because the small communities are where we really live. They deserve that sophistication, too, and will appreciate it.

Now let me say one more thing. Most news organizations are not organized that way. The least sophisticated practitioners are covering the smallest communities. So, if you really believe this is what you have to do, well, a lot of things have to change. You have to pay the person who covers the community of 8,000 as much as you have to pay somebody who covers Congress, if not more, because it may be more important.

Q. How do journalists find time to fully reach into their communities?

A. I don't think it's a time-management issue. I think it is your job. If you are going to say, "Oh, I've 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.