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# RECIPROCAL (AND REDUCTIONIST?) NEWSWORK

An examination of youth involvement in  
creating local participatory environmental  
news

**Robert E. Gutsche Jr., Susan Jacobson, Juliet Pinto, and  
Charnele Michel**

*This paper builds upon previous research that examines participatory forms of "reciprocal journalism" and "public communication" led by high school and college students in Miami, Florida, USA, in the fall of 2014. In this study, the students' assessment of local and national media coverage is used to reveal greater details inherent in examining participatory methods of newswork. Collectively, students said that media coverage emphasis on local and national public officials instead of residents and community members who experience sea-level rise first-hand, combined with a lack of scientific explanation of and solutions for sea-level rise reduced the event's potential to build reciprocal relationships with younger audiences.*

**KEYWORDS** environmental journalism; local news; participatory newswork; public communication; reciprocal journalism

## **Introduction**

In October 2014, 70 college journalism students from Florida International University and high school students from MAST@FIU BBC, a science-based magnet school, took to the public streets of Miami Beach, Florida, USA, to measure the effects of local sea-level rise on one of the days of the year marked with having the highest tides—King Tide Day. Armed with water sensors that they had built to measure the salinity of water expected to flood city streets, the morning's experience was one of "event journalism"—a blend of participatory journalism and public relations—to bring attention to the region's changing climate. As part of a project (eyesontherise.org) funded by the Online News Association's 2014–2015 Challenge Fund for Innovation in Journalism Education, the students had spent weeks promoting a press conference and public environmental event to tell stories about local environmental issues and to educate citizens about the potential involvement of youth in examining rising seas. Overall, students had several goals: to inform journalists about their efforts to examine local environmental issues through student-led sensor journalism (Wikipedia 2015) and to influence news coverage of the public event in order to educate audiences about the science behind sea-level rise, to introduce solutions to combat its effects, and to empower citizens to become involved in a public discussion

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about local ecology, a tenant of environmental journalism (Lester 2010; Lester and Cottle 2009).

Students spent three weeks prior to the public news event promoting the activities of the day, combining efforts of strategic communication and journalism. Promotional efforts included live-streamed rallies, public displays of the students' water sensors, and updates to the project's website related to the events and issues, which were also spread across social media. These efforts garnered early press attention and contributed to the turnout of the October event, which attracted high-profile speakers, including two US senators, the White House-appointed administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, and dozens of national and local journalists (Warrick 2014). Students also gathered a wealth of data that they used in the following weeks to study the salinity and water quality gathered from flooded streets and along sea walls.

Several weeks after the event, 20 high school and college students involved in the journalism event participated in three focus groups during which they analyzed two television news reports from local news media and two television news reports from national outlets. In this analysis, students discussed the degree to which the press operated as inclusive and open to non-official sources and perspectives and examined how well the news media helped them achieve their goals, outlined above. To conduct their analyses, students evaluated the "participatory" nature (Singer et al. 2011) of the event in terms of the degree to which they could identify their influence on the media messages, which included what they believed was a "reciprocal" (Harcup 2015; Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014; Sankaranarayanan and Vassileva 2009) relationship with some journalists and media outlets, since early involvement with the press and public officials highlighted their efforts and suggested students and public participation in local science investigations were at the center of the story (Stone 2014).

Students also discussed the degree to which local and national news coverage correlated with "best practices" of environmental journalism, which are discussed further in the paper's methodology. Whereas previous research examines participatory forms of journalism as social constructions that are influenced by a multiplicity of social roles and in which the participants create media, messages, and meanings (Paschalidis 2015; Raetzsch 2015; Robinson 2011), this study applies students' assessment of and attraction to their participatory journalism event and the coverage it received to reveal greater details inherent in the creation of "reciprocal," participatory methods of newswork and public communication. Indeed, students collectively said that the news coverage of the event focused more on comments of local and national public officials rather than those of residents and community members, did not discuss the science or solutions related to sea-level rise, and created a lost opportunity to attract new and younger audiences by slighting the students' involvement in the story. As one student said, "[M]aybe young people don't watch the news, but if they would see students, they would be more interested in it."

This paper begins with a conceptual discussion of recent participatory journalism movements before presenting scholarship related to environmental journalism and the role of social politics and influences in the construction of newswork. Following a description of the study's methodology, the paper engages in an analysis of students' commentary related to news coverage of their public event. Findings from these focus groups indicate that students involved in this particular project were aware of the science and civic details surrounding rising seas, the purpose of the related public communication and event journalism, the "best practices" associated with presenting environmental journalism, and

notions of reciprocity inherent in public and “reciprocal journalism.” The paper ends with a practical and conceptual critique of reciprocal relationships among public officials, journalists, scientists, and youth so as to inform future practice and research.

### The Rise of “Reciprocal Journalism”

Journalism based in audience participation began, most recently, when newspapers in the 1990s used their wealth to extend into hyperlocal news and categories of journalism that focused on the “public good” (for review, see Singer et al. 2011). Throughout the decades, and with the move of the news to the internet, notions of participatory journalism have largely focused on ways to engage with audiences as print and traditional television broadcast news outlets have suffered significant drops in audience numbers (for review, see Picard 2014). Online efforts have since focused on user involvement in the creation of news, as well as promoting online discussions about the news (Rosenberry and St. John 2010; Usher 2012), contributing to several dominant characteristics of what can be considered effective community and participatory journalism (Couldry 2004; Raetzsch 2015).

Nip (2008), for example, presents six major elements of public/civic journalism that identify means by which citizens have been able to participate in newswork, including: (1) inviting citizens to help shape the news agenda through public events; (2) providing a venue for “ordinary people” to share their perspectives in which they appear as sources alongside politicians and celebrities; (3) covering stories to stimulate citizen discussion and involvement by framing a “master narrative” in the news that is focused on communities’ involvement in solving local issues; (4) engaging audiences through language, graphics, and types of information that encourages them to become part of the public discussion surrounding issues in the news; (5) encouraging audience members to problem-solve with journalists and public officials; and (6) collaborating with media outlets, across mediums, to deliver news.

Participatory methods of journalism as community building have come to be represented, in part, by the notion of “reciprocal journalism,” which involves various components of participatory approaches to creating “lasting forms of exchange that deepen collective trust, social capital, and overall connectedness” (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014, 230). Approaches to engaging news audiences in reciprocal relationships with news outlets have increased in number in both online environments and physical landscapes, and research—by and large—focuses on long-term, project-based journalism and newswork among joint organizational collaboration, not necessarily participatory acts within everyday journalism (Paulussen and D’heer 2013; Singer et al. 2011). In fact, journalism scholarship continues to call for more understanding relating to the role of audience need and involvement in newsmaking (i.e. Picone, Courtois, and Paulussen 2015), and researchers continue to investigate the journalistic ethics and professionalism of citizens who supply information and create content (Holton, Coddington, and Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Loke and Grimm 2015; Robinson and Deshano 2011) as well as to develop theoretical interpretations of audience/user-created journalism (Peters and Witschge 2015).

Robinson (2011), for example, examines participatory journalism in terms of the shared labor among professional and citizen journalists. In that project, she specifically identifies work environments and types of work of professional and citizen journalists as a means to argue for approaching participatory journalism as being “a process” as much

as being “a product.” It is the process, then, of designing and executing public, participatory journalistic opportunities that this paper is interested in exploring, in this case through public communication about environmental issues. Certainly, however, an initial, single case of event journalism, such as that around which this paper revolves, cannot be considered a silver-bullet to creating a permanent collaboration—even if the project relied on weeks of communication and collaboration on the event with local students and scientists, journalists, and banked on the many previous relationships between members of the local media and event organizers. However, this paper relies on a single event and commentary from its student organizers and participants to set a scene for an analysis of types of participatory public communication from the perspective of citizens in terms of examining how to measure the openness of mainstream legacy media to participate with the public to shape the news.

### The Social Construction of (Environmental) News

Journalism is said to be a product (and process) of social and cultural influences that are negotiated by journalists as they turn information into socially and culturally recognizable explanations of daily life (Cottle and Rai 2006; Gutsche 2014). Although specialized, science and environmental news operates amid similar social processes as non-science-based news (Coleman 1995; Peters et al. 2014). Science and environmental news was a popular fixture of early journalism in the United States, with news focusing on the development potential of land and water (Hansen 1991; Lester 2010; Neuzil 2008). Today, science and environmental journalism, however, continues to be subject to specific types of social and cultural politics, particularly issues of climate change, global warming, and related environmental effects (Donsbach 2004; Fahy and Nisbet 2011; McComas and Shanahan 1999). Additionally, because of the level of expertise or specialization required to interpret and explain the science behind environmental journalism—as well to balance the complications of political and cultural differences in interpretation of science and environmental news—these news genres also share a history of having difficulty in making headlines (Badenschier and Wormer 2011).

In turn, environmental and science news—particularly at the local level—tends to appear in times of political and governmental decision-making as well as in times of natural disasters during which audiences turn to the press for explanations of environmental meanings or scientific discoveries (Allan 2011; Artz and Wormer 2011; Boykoff and Boykoff 2007; Hansen 1991; Shanahan 2011). News specific to climate change and related environmental effects—such as sea-level rise, of which this study is concerned—tend to hold a particular set of news characteristics (Anderson 2009; Antilla 2005; Cottle and Rai 2006; Ekman and Widholm 2015; Fengler et al. 2014). As Howarth (2012) argues, for instance, news outlets tend to present science and environment news through opinion pages and columns or in news that highlights the polemics and passions of observers at the center of their news rather than explanations of science. One study of climate change coverage in the United States and South America, for example, found that environmental news is often plagued with an “overreliance on government sources and a failure to adequately include impartial expert voices that may facilitate the understanding of a complex scientific issue” (Zamith, Pinto, and Villar 2012, 351).

Additionally, news audiences frequently struggle to ideologically connect issues of the environment to their everyday experiences, particularly in terms of local influences

of climate change (Gibson et al. 2015), presenting the creation of science and environmental journalism that engages the public as a recent focus for journalists and scholars.

### Using “Public Communication” to Influence News

Increasingly, scholarship related to public consumption of science and environmental news recognizes the ability of using strategic communication through events and campaigns to engage audiences to address social issues through public involvement (Lovink 2002; Raetzsch 2015). Effective efforts using these approaches include: (1) identifying stakeholders who could be involved in communication related to a specific issue or event; (2) using news processes to cultivate and deliver messages related to the issue or event; (3) building “alliances” with concerned citizens and civic leaders who contribute perspectives and suggestions about news coverage; and (4) defining everyday meanings associated with the topic or issue being covered and possible solutions for social problems (Anderson 2003; Davis 2003; Manheim 1998). Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014) write efforts resembling aims of such journalist–audience collaborations are vital forms of communication for building trust, social capital, and a sense of community—outcomes that have been a key function of community-based journalism. The potential “sustained reciprocity” that can emerge from these interactions further transform journalists into community-builders and can lead to “better community and, indeed, better journalism as well” (236).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, by turning to local efforts in Miami that have drawn increasing media and public interest related to sea-level rise, this study extends above practices and scholarship of participatory public communication to examine the following research questions:

**RQ1:** In what ways did this example of event journalism allow students to interact with journalists to influence news coverage of local sea-level rise in terms of examining sea-level rise science and expressing the agency inherent in youth and public participation in shaping news.

**RQ2:** To what degree did students perceive resulting news coverage as a result of their abilities to influence media messages?

**RQ3:** What meanings can be culled from students’ analyses of media reporting and their own involvement in event journalism, and how may these meanings influence future practice and research of event journalism?

### Methodology

This study is based on data gathered from focus groups of 20 college and high school students. Because the focus groups were considered part of the normal forms of assessment that students experience in their classes, researchers received exempt status from the university’s Institutional Review Board. Potential high school participants were randomly selected from a list of 35 who participated in: (1) a public media event in September to garner media attention for the October 2014 event, (2) a training by local environmental experts who spoke specifically to the purpose of the October event and related science and journalism, (3) several sessions of building water sensors to be used during the October event, and (4) participation in the journalism event itself. Of the 15 high school students

who agreed to participate in the focus groups, 8 identified as male and 7 identified as female. In terms of race, high school students identified themselves as the following: Latino/Hispanic (6); African American (3); White (3); White Hispanic (1); Haitian American (1); Middle Eastern/American (1). Of the five college students who had been approached based upon their involvement in the above events and who agreed to participate in focus groups, 4 identified as female and 1 identified as male. In terms of race, college students identified themselves as the following: Hispanic (3); African American (1); Russian (1). Students were assigned pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality of their identity.

Each focus group occurred in a classroom at Florida International University and lasted for 90 minutes. Discussions revolved around three main areas: (1) the levels and types of students' involvement in preparing and explaining to media the environmental issue and event; (2) the degree to which exemplars of related news coverage performed "best practices" of environmental journalism, discussed below; (3) the degree to which students believed the coverage represented their experiences and expectations of the event's potential to examine local effects of the environmental issue. To begin, students discussed their participation and preparation for the October event in ways that examined their understandings of the event's purpose, the science involved in the environmental issue at the center of the event, and the role and function of inviting members of the media to cover the issue and event. Students were then asked to share what media coverage of the environmental issue and event they had viewed before participating in the focus group when students would be asked to analyze four examples of local television news coverage from the journalism event.

Television coverage was selected for students' analysis because the medium has a history of involving audience through several methods in terms of environmental issues (Lester and Cottle 2009) and the coverage was easily accessible. (See study exemplars at [eyesontherise.org/focus](http://eyesontherise.org/focus).) Before viewing television news exemplars, students were presented with key terms and concepts related to "best practices" of environmental journalism for both print and television (Anderson 2003; Artz and Wormer 2011; Boykoff and Boykoff 2007; Shanahan 2011), which include: (1) providing a diverse range of sources from public officials and scientists to "average citizens" and activists; (2) the personification of environment to make the environmental issue more personal to audience members; (3) presenting news with compelling visuals and descriptions related to the environment and environmental issues; (4) maintaining factual accuracy; (5) delivering news stories through narratives of conflict; (6) empowering citizens to address solutions related to environmental issues through potential solutions. Participants were encouraged to use a rubric supplied by researchers to measure the degree to which they believed journalists: (1) accurately presented information about the environmental phenomena, (2) encouraged members of the public to become more interested in understanding the environmental issue, (3) presented possible solutions for combating sea-level rise, and (4) represented the youth's involvement in the news event. Students expressed that these elements were also important to them as news consumers. The exemplars were presented in this order:

- Local report 1 (L1): In this live 2-minute, 26-second report by Local 10 in Miami, a male journalist stands before a harbor; anchored sailboats float in the background. The report includes footage of past effects of sea-level rise in local environments and highlighted comments from US senators and one of the student's professors. Two residents

speak about their challenges dealing with rising seas; no students from the journalism event appear.

- National report 1 (N1): Two days following the press event, this 2-minute, 31-second report aired nationally on NBC's *Today*, the female reporter having traveled to the location for the students' event. The piece showcases images of rising seas and includes interviews with local scientists, a business owner, and politicians. Students from the journalism event are shown gathering water from a flooded street; one discusses the water's high salinity level before the report focuses on the new pumps that the city installed to remove water from streets.
- Local report 2 (L2): This 2-minute, 24-second report by Miami's NBC 6 features a male reporter who walks a city street as he talks about local infrastructure that has been upgraded to deal with sea-level rise. The story's sources include federal and university officials speaking about political elements of combating sea-level rise during the journalism event. Students from the journalism event are shown gathering water from an adjacent bay; none are interviewed.
- National report 2 (N2): A male reporter for cable's The Weather Channel presents a 1-minute, 57-second package related to local effects of sea-level rise and the science of how high tides influence rising seas. The package includes a story of a resident living with more water in his neighborhood, comments from a university professor about the effects of rising waters in the city, and interviews with city officials. Students are shown gathering water on a city street; none are interviewed.

After viewing and discussing the exemplars, students were asked to describe how they might have covered the environmental issue and event as journalists as a means to both better understand their interest and abilities to communicate science and local issues related to sea-level rise. The final part of the focus group dealt with students discussing the role and function of public communication and event journalism in communicating environmental issues to audiences. All discussions were audio recorded while a graduate research assistant took notes of students' comments. Researchers listened to audio transcripts multiple times and transcribed the conversation for data analysis, which is presented below.

### **Public Involvement in Participatory Communication**

In addressing the first research question, which asked in what ways students interacted with journalists to influence news coverage of sea-level rise, students from each focus group indicated that they (1) recognized a common purpose amongst themselves to communicate to the press and public science involved in understanding sea-level rise, (2) struggled to balance their own involvement as student scientists and journalists with directing members of the media covering the event, and (3) believed themselves to be qualified to critique news coverage of an environmental issue and event that they had come to shape within the tenets of both event journalism and public environmental communication (Neuzil 2008; Rosenberry and St. John 2010).

In these ways, students appeared to hold a clear set of expectations for the news event and recognized their multiple roles of conducting their own journalism, capturing data, and guiding professional journalists through a narrative of meanings related to the event journalism and the related issue of sea-level rise. As Marcus, a 16-year-old high school student, said, the event was meant to discuss



effects that sea-level rise could have on our immediate future: what we went down there for was to see how the future might be like, because the tide rises on that day, so we wanted to see a preview of what our future might be like.

Marcus said that the future might involve areas of the region that would be uninhabitable by humans without significant alteration to the landscape, without massive development, by changing expectations for how people might live there, and by investing in curbing the potential causes of climate change. "In our future," he said, "we might have to have more pumps out there, or we might need to move away from this area that will be flooded."

Collectively, students said that they wished to relay to the general public issues of sea-level rise through stories of their own and of local residents that could lead these messages to become part of public discourse about the changing environment. Journalism school senior Nadene, 24, said students spent time preparing for the media event in order to focus on attracting "the media [and] getting the word out there to the community and letting them know what was really going on." Indeed, students noted the important role of media in shaping local discussions and decisions about sea-level rise, stating that building an "alliance" with media to share information among partnerships with local scientists, citizens, and civic leaders could help define the role of sea-level rise in everyday life and provide possible solutions to combat rising seas, to outcomes consistent with best practices of environmental journalism (Paulussen and D'heer 2013; Peters and Witschge 2015; Robinson and Deshano 2011).

Students said that they had been shown through their event journalism that certain public practices could draw public attention to the issue and hold potential as a new form of communicating to audiences through media. Katrina, 25, a journalism school senior, said that the group's coordinated T-shirts and large numbers attracted attention of both journalists and the general public:

[P]eople who were passing by, they were asking what we are doing, and what the problem was. And, everyone got interested in it, so it was such a good idea to go out and to figure out what was going on. And also to try to attract media and also the community, to inform the community about what's going on.

These passersby became an avenue for students to discuss the issue of sea-level rise, students agreed, with students and residents often standing together in mini-press conferences as journalists recorded their thoughts and comments. Students said these interactions with residents validated their efforts to turn the journalism event into a form of public communication; however, the students found that even three weeks of preparation, which included building water sensors, learning about the causes and effects of sea-level rise with the intention of explaining the science to reporters, and conducting dozens of media interviews in preparation for the day's event, did not necessarily increase their comfort level when executing the journalism event. With "newscast[ers] everywhere, cameras everywhere," Nadene explained, students immediately felt the "pressure" of being on-camera and talking with civic leaders. Reporters' questions came quickly, she said, "and everyone wants to speak to us to see, 'Oh, well, what is it that you are doing?' 'What do you think?' 'How do you think this will help?'"

Students said that by themselves being news sources, they began to better understand the dynamics of reporting and the necessity of balancing providing journalists

with facts of the story with tales of human experiences. The students believed that this understanding of the human side of the story helped them answer journalists' questions, students said, but also could improve the chances of audience members personally becoming interested in environmental problems and solutions. "Where we got interviewed by the [N1]," said Sheri, a 15-year-old high school student who talked with reporters alongside local business owners who had stopped by when camera crews arrived, "you could tell that the people were really frightened." Speaking to participants in her focus group, Sheri asked:

Do you remember the one lady? There were like sandbags piled up in her doorway, because she said, "Oh yeah, the King Tide happens every year. The water floods in and destroys the restaurant." I think that's crazy, like to be able to rise so far in the street that you're flooding in the stores.

Students said that if such stories were combined with information on the science and impact of climate change behind the humanization of the journalism, their event journalism might fulfill the aims of participatory communication (Anderson 2003; Hansen 1991; Lester 2010; Nip 2008; Raetzsch 2015). Students said that during the journalism event they were challenged to keep journalists focused on the science and the humanization of the issues of sea-level rise as journalists seemed to rather focus on politics. Matis, a 23-year-old journalism school student, explained that when it became clear that journalists wanted to talk to politicians, students found themselves altering their duties during the event:

We were told beforehand that we were going to operate in a more journalistic capacity in order to interact with the students and sort of mention [the sensors] but also tell the story of what they were doing and tell the media, or at least come up with our own way of telling the story. And then when we were actually there, I felt like we were more like, "OK, well this is now secondary, and now you kind of have to play around with these sensors, and now you're, pretending to know what you are doing for the cameras and for the media."

In the end, students said that while their involvement may have drawn public and media attention by involving audiences (students, passersby, and business owners), news coverage largely ignored the science behind sea-level rise and slighted the students' involvement as event organizers, citizen journalists, and scientists. After viewing representative examples of news coverage of their event, students said that the reporting on the day was limited to the basics and to comments and perspectives of politicians who spoke about political and economic investments in combating sea-level rise. Said Isabel, 25, a journalism school student:

[Journalists] asked basically the same question: What are we doing, why, what can we expect from whatever you are collecting, why are you collecting water. Basically, that's it. They didn't want anything opinion. They just wanted fact-based [information]. I guess that's how they operate. They don't really want opinion, 'cause they'll create their own opinion, so they'll write that. And then, they just use the facts that they got.

While not all students involved in the focus groups said that journalists would insert predisposed opinions about the news event, students agreed that journalists were likely more interested in opinions of politicians than those of students. Students also agreed that news coverage of the event and of science related to sea-level rise was limited, in

large part, because of the types of questions asked by journalists and by the journalistic needs and pressures facing reporters, such as an expectation of telling news stories through particular types of sources, such as politicians. Students were surprised that despite the visual and participatory nature of the journalism event, reporters preferred to (1) air images of politicians speaking at a podium, (2) showcase, at length, city infrastructure that was being installed to deal with rising seas, and (3) run images of previous manifestations of sea-level rise that showed flooded streets. These approaches to reporting on the journalism event, students said, seemed to run counter to “best practices” of environmental journalism (Lester and Cottle 2009; Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014; Shanahan 2011; Usher 2012) perhaps, students suggested, because journalists were not prepared, though they were informed of the visual opportunities in advance, to tell a more complex story that focused on science and solutions. “A lot of the [journalists’] questions were really repetitive,” said 15-year-old Joseph, a high school student.

Most of them would ask the same set of questions over, like the who, what, when, where, and why. Most of the interviews just touched on the general information of what the event was and what we were doing and who are we.

Students suggested that the news coverage limited the appeal to a small audience, reducing the effectiveness of the press to influence local discussions about environmental issues that students had hoped for given the partnerships the students had secured with journalists, scientists, and officials to produce the journalism event. Also, as discussed in the next section, students noted that their experience observing elements of the event’s production and interactions with journalists made them uniquely qualified to critique the journalism that emerged.

### **Public Involvement and Shared Responsibility of Communication**

Our second research question examines the degree to which students perceived that news coverage related to the event journalism reflected their abilities to influence media messages about local sea-level rise. Just as students acknowledged the difficulties in balancing their own tasks of collecting data related to rising seas, reporting on the issue and the journalism event, and engaging with journalists who attended the event, they suggested that their experiences with journalists and resulting news coverage reflected that (1) journalists may not have been well informed about the environmental issue around which the event was set, (2) students may not have been considered to be citizen journalists or scientists or engaged youth directly affected by the environmental effect, and (3) resulting news coverage seemed to speak to an older audience, which was not provided scientific explanations for the environmental effect and who were then left without receiving possible solutions to combat sea-level rise.

In general, students expressed frustration in their ability to communicate to journalists that they wished to share in a sense of responsibility to create “public communication” (Lewis 2012; Manheim 1998; Picone, Courtois, and Paulussen 2015) about sea-level rise that extended beyond economic and political aspects. Said college student Matis:

[Journalists] were very focused on the event, but a lot of times they did not even really talk about the people that were involved or the kids that were doing the science and how they might eventually influence future generations to actually make a change.

College student Isabel agreed that journalists from each of the representative examples shared commonalities in terms of sources, narratives, and visuals that did not allow for narratives rooted in science or youth engagement. She said:

There's nothing really original about the coverage. I mean, they know what they are supposed to be covering, and that's what they cover. They don't really go with what they want to do, necessarily, I mean, I don't know personally. But maybe they just, they see a story, they see it a certain way, they shape it that way, and that's how everybody does it. So they don't really have, like, any creative way of covering the story.

Also while students were asked to apply their media critiques to identify whether national and local journalists covered the journalism event differently, students agreed that only coverage from one of the national broadcasts (N2), a specialized news channel, seemed to address sea level in terms of its science, daily influence on the average citizen, as well as the political and economic outcomes. Said Nadene:

The Weather Channel was the only one—the only one—who spoke to people. They humanized the story a bit, they spoke to residents, and a lot of the newscasts lacked that. I did not see any residents being spoken to. Because [journalists] are trying to . . . make the story as if, "Oh it's a fixed problem, so, if we fixed it for now, you don't need to worry about it."

Because of their preparation for the event and their own scientific and journalistic research on the environmental effect, students said that they believed they had become experts on sea-level rise in Miami and the potential solutions that can be enacted to slow the issue's effect on local geographies. Students said that they felt comfortable helping to guide journalists through the scientific basics of sea-level rise. According to Sarah, a 15-year-old high school student:

climate change is a whole chapter in our [text]books, and I'm pretty sure that that wasn't in our parents' books or anything, because climate change is fairly recent. So, we know more about it than our parents or, like, anybody who, like, just graduated college maybe or something.

Asked by the focus group moderator whether Sarah thought students had particular solutions in mind that could be shared with the community, she said: "If everybody does something little, it will have a greater effect, like if everybody switched to electric cars or solar panels, or something like that that produces air [and] wind power, because we are over-using coal and non-renewable sources."

Interpretations that journalists were merely covering a "pseudo news event" and not the issues or even the students' involvement—which many students said that they thought would become "the story," because, as one student put it, "we are always being told that children are the future"—appeared across all focus groups. Several students, including high schoolers Sarah and Maria, 16, expressed frustration by what they considered to be a lack of knowledge of and interest in environmental issues among journalists and the inability of journalists to consider seeking solutions and comments from students about their involvement. For example, high school student Sheri said that journalists' questions to her and other students seemed "rehearsed." She spoke while other students nodded in agreement:

[It is] like they were questions pulled out of a standard book, because all of them really did ask the same questions. So they weren't really asking to know, or to get information, they

were just asking because, “OK, this is a question that I have to ask, not a question that would cause us to dive deep into the process, or critical thinking.”

When asked what questions Sheri thought journalists should have asked, she responded: “How will this affect people in the future?” “Or how will it affect people today?” “What is it compared to?” “How are we getting this data?” “What are we going to compare this data to?” “What previous data have we had?”

In sum, students were critical of the journalists’ focus on public officials and said they were generally confused as to why the reporting did not address science and solutions, despite the opportunity to do so. While it is possible that students did not hear questions posed to university and city officials, scientists and politicians, which may have been related to the science behind sea-level rise, students suggested that to effectively inform the public about local environmental issues audiences must be provided scientific, not just political and economic, information. In fact, as Michael, a 15-year-old high school student, said, the selection of sources and the presentation of particular sources in delivering the information by both the local and national news coverage “felt almost just like a promotion, where they are like, ‘Oh, I am helping with sea-level rise.’ They are helping, but they are not fully into it.”

On the whole, students’ comments about their involvement in the journalism event and their potential influence upon newswork represents a sense of collective agency to create change in their communities and to work in tandem with media partners to make this change (Artz and Wormer 2011; Badenschier and Wormer 2011; Neuzil 2008). In the end, students agreed that there exists a potential for wide participation in the creation of news content that can stimulate citizen interest and involvement in solving local environmental issues. In fact, students expressed excitement about the potential to extend one of the benefits of participatory public communication (Holton, Coddington, and Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Fahy and Nisbet 2011). For example, high school student Maria, who identifies as White Hispanic, said that being interviewed by a local Spanish-language television news crew allowed her to speak to the Spanish-speaking community about an issue that she says is not often discussed. “My point of view, and my family’s, as a Hispanic, we don’t know much about sea-level rise and how much it is really affecting us,” said Maria, who added that she was pleased “to be able to speak to somebody from a newscast that is Hispanic and in Spanish so that those people that are in [city name] and in [state name] that only speak Spanish are able to understand.”

It is within students’ reaction to news coverage of the event that they identified particular meanings that may influence future practice and research of public event journalism to meet the approach’s participatory forms and functions, a discussion of which is presented next. Students also indicated that their racial and ethnic diversity and the ability of several students to speak Spanish were of major interest to journalists early on in the project—perhaps as local media attempted to reach new audiences—and led students to be prepared for a sense of reciprocation between journalists and students. However, students said their ability to make relationships and influence news through their attempt at reciprocal journalism might not have been strong enough to outweigh what they considered the best, well-established reciprocal relationships—those between politicians and the press.

## Discussion

This section addresses the study’s third research question, which asks how students’ comments collected for this study can inform future participatory and reciprocal journalism

research and practice. First, however, there are several factors that likely contributed to the event journalism that are not necessarily taken into account by focus group participants: (1) students were involved in a project under the direction of university and high school administrators and faculty who used institutional means of communicating the event to media and the public and (2) that students and faculty members had relied upon already-established relationships with journalists and news outlets, and built new relationships, to garner news coverage that would attract increased media attention.

Second, it is important to note that this study is not interested in identifying the specifics of why journalists covered the news event in the ways that they did. While interviews with journalists who covered the event might expand knowledge about how that event was ultimately received by members of the media and presented, we have been interested in examining the responses and activities of those who attempted a participatory and public form of communication. Third, we recognize that this project surrounds an area of news coverage that, as discussed above, is plagued with complications in the levels of specialization required to interpret and deliver accurate and relevant science and environmental news. With these dimensions in mind, we argue for two main themes inherent in students' comments that can provide insight as to the possible forms and functions of community-driven event journalism and related scholarship.

### *Engaging Agency to Attract Audience*

Students' interpretations that news coverage of the journalism event focused more on politics and economics than on science and solutions appeared to be rooted in critiquing journalistic qualities of the coverage itself and the lost opportunity to attract and engage younger news audiences. More coverage on student involvement, said Nadene, "would have shown people that there are people out here trying to do something about it, and [that] it takes children ... it takes students" to make change by being "informed about [the environmental issue]." Such coverage, she said, would let people know that "you can do your part."

Nadene's comments represent a sense among the students that participatory journalism should hold possible benefits for the media outlets that can include widening news audiences, particularly as traditional news audiences age and younger audiences increasingly turn elsewhere for their news. Katrina said these new audiences might also help influence environmental change:

I think then the audience would change and it would attract more young people. The pieces that [journalists] made [related to the news event] attracted more middle-aged or older population ... Actually, maybe young people don't watch the news, but if they would see students, they would be more interested in it.

Indeed, the fact that the students engaged in this project became aware of building relationships with media because of the potential for creating change through awareness is worthy of future research. Certainly, both Nadene and Katrina might have a unique investment in the future of media industries as they both studied journalism in college, yet high school students also expressed what appeared to be a commitment to the reciprocal aspect of their public communication. Consider this exchange among high school students:

**Jacquie:** I feel like when you have high school students on the site ... they have more of an ability to convey this information to younger people, because we can

understand what their viewpoints might be, or what their knowledge of the situation might be.

**Sarah:** I think if they mentioned us more, it would feel more of an accomplishment —

**Marcus:** Not only if they mentioned us, but if they mentioned what we were doing—

**Sarah:** If they had talked about what we were doing, I feel like we would have ... we would have had more of an impact.

**Michael:** I feel like anybody can be on the news. But, if you, unless you are like stating the cause for why you're on it, then there's no use to be on it. It's just a waste of time.

That students were concerned about reciprocity—including the benefits to themselves, to audiences, and to the legitimacy and authority of media outlets—suggests that increasing and improving collaborative communication between citizens and members of the media is not only important for project-based and joint organizational projects, but also in the creation of everyday, daily journalism.

### *Improving Communication Through Collaboration*

Collectively, students indicated that interacting with journalists who appeared to have more specific interest and knowledge of sea-level rise might have led to both “better journalism” and an increased sense of value and worth on the part of the students themselves. Said Jason, a 15-year-old high school student:

I would have wanted the reporters to maybe have researched the topic a little before they came to us, because when they came to us, they knew nothing at all. That's why they kept asking the same questions. I feel like they should have asked, “OK, what will happen if the sea level does rise and gets into the streets and gets into the sewers?” And move onto, “OK, even into our water system?” Stuff like that.

Students, including 16-year-old high school student Jacquie, said that even though all the high school students were aged 15 or 16 and the college students ranged in age from 23 to 25, as a group they felt treated as though they were “little kids” by journalists and officials. Journalism school student Gabriela, 23, said that by ignoring students' expertise, opinions, and involvement in terms of journalists' reporting and the news coverage that appeared lessened the ability of students to fully engage in shaping news as officials did. “I feel like [journalists] were trying to show how the officials were doing such a great job and [that] they're all like in this together,” she said.

One local news station, Gabriela added, “kind of made it seem kind of like a fairytale, like, “Oh yeah, you know, they [city officials] are doing such a good job,” but what about what they are not doing, and why are they not doing it?” Of particular concern to Gabriela was that journalists did not cover the possible influence that sea-level rise may have on today's youth tomorrow. Still, students said that if these deficiencies were addressed in future collaboration, the public would benefit from more complex and complete messages about their local environments. Perhaps Saleem, a 15-year-old high school student, addressed this point the best: “This whole event showcased a lot of different public

figures, and we were able to bring about a lot of attention" to the work being done by local officials to deal with the environmental effect. He added:

We showed [audiences] that even though the pumps are now taking care of the problem if we can just take like three steps back and maybe look at it, sea-level rise is still an issue ongoing. And I think that while we did make progress and we did bring attention to the issue, there is still plenty left to do when you look at it from that perspective.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study proposed several areas for future research and practice. First, journalists should be encouraged to continue to critically evaluating their use of sources, as students in this study responded negatively to the use of public officials over "average citizens" and scientists. Second, collaborative journalism projects would benefit from evaluative tools, such as focus groups, following the projects, but which could also include textual analysis and participatory methods with journalists, public officials, and participants. Findings from such work could inform journalistic and community practices to identify and influence acts of reciprocity. Third, this study suggests much can be learned from participatory research related to collaborative efforts that influence daily journalism, which could supplement much of the work that focuses on project-based and inter-organizational journalistic partnerships. Lastly, scholars, journalists, and citizens alike could benefit from addressing perhaps the most pointed of questions related to participatory journalism: To what degree do such participatory efforts result in reciprocity for those involved, and how should reciprocal and public journalism be measured in a media sphere that is rooted in lasting rites, rituals, and routines?

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## NOTE

1. In this discussion, intentions of public communication efforts and event journalism should not be confused with notions of the "pseudo news event," such as a press conference and other organized gathering (Berkowitz 1990)—many which revert to preferred storytelling focused on public officials and business leaders—what Lester and Hutchins (2009, 592) refer to as "publicity stunts" that are "meaningless" and "desperate" for media attention.



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