

Professor leading study on connection between student journalism, civic activity

April 16 2014, by Mike Krings

While anecdotal evidence supports a link between journalism and civic activity, a University of Kansas professor is leading a study to determine whether that is in fact the case among high school journalists and to determine how civically active students who take part in school media plan to be in the future.

Peter Bobkowski, assistant professor of journalism, landed a grant from the Spencer Foundation to gauge civic-action journalism in Kansas City high schools. The study will gauge a number of factors about student media, addressing three primary questions: How prevalent is civic action journalism in Kansas City-area schools? What contextual and personal factors accompany civic-action journalism? To what extent is civic-action journalism associated with student journalists' anticipated future civic engagement?

"My goal is to see the extent to which high school journalists recognize and can identify issues in their schools and whether they can address them with their media," Bobkowski said.

The study will examine both digital media and traditional, print school newspapers. To address the primary questions Bobkowski will ask students about what is important to them, the extent to which they use their involvement in media for change, how long they've taken part in high school journalism and their engagement outside of journalism in areas such as their classes, government and involvement in community activities.

Bobkowski will also gather information from the schools about their journalism programs to see whether some are more inclined to support civic-action journalism, or whether certain advisers place more emphasis on the idea. He will also examine program characteristics, such as how they are funded, whether the adviser is full- or part-time, whether it is part of a class or an after-school activity and others.

By basing the study in the Kansas City metro area, Bobkowski said he hopes to get a diverse picture of high [school](#) media. The study will focus on about 80 to 90 schools in 10 counties in both Missouri and Kansas. The districts represent a wide cross-section with schools located in high- and low-income areas, some of the best programs in the country and diverse student bodies. Kansas has laws protecting student journalists while Missouri does not, which Bobkowski plans to examine to determine whether that makes a difference in students' willingness to take on certain topics.

Students in the study will be asked how civically involved they are now as well as how involved they plan to be in the future. The survey will ask how likely they are to vote and whether they plan to take part in community issues. Bobkowski hopes to follow up with the students in several years to see how their involvement compares to their current plans.

While that anecdotal evidence indicates a link between [high school](#) journalism and [civic engagement](#) exists, Bobkowski said he wants to provide empirical evidence one way or the other. Regardless of what he finds, the results can help shape and improve journalism education and potentially provide justification for funding programs and potentially provide guidance for schools to improve civic education for all students, not just those in journalism programs. If the survey shows there is not a link it will provide educators a chance to determine what needs to be improved in journalism education.

"If there is a connection, I think the study will help legitimize journalism education to principals and administrators, showing that journalism is not just about writing about the latest music or the homecoming dance," Bobkowski said. "It's about learning skills students can use to carry forward in their civic lives."

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Professor leading study on connection between student journalism, civic activity (2014, April 16) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-04-professor-student-journalism-civic.html>

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