

4 Pop-Up Public

Weaving feminist participatory media into public radio

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Public radio was founded in large part to reflect the diversity of our nation, to be an electronic tool for addressing national concerns, solving local problems, and meeting community needs – especially among underserved audiences (Public Broadcasting Act of 1967). To many of us working in the National Public Radio (NPR) network,¹ the 2016 US presidential election issued a resounding wake-up call: Huge swaths of the electorate do not know who we are, see themselves in our stories, or trust our reporting. To make good on our public service mission, not to mention thrive in a media ecosystem filled with social media silos, fake news, and “alternative facts,” we need to create new approaches to engaging diverse audiences. We must expand the range of voices we broadcast and connect with broader audiences in ways that are relevant to them.

This essay describes a pedagogical experiment that I led involving students in an upper division design course at the University of California Davis, staff from Capital Public Radio (the NPR affiliate in Sacramento, California), and Sacramento community leaders. We worked together over three months to prototype *Pop-Up Public*, a mobile storytelling unit that collaborates with neighborhood groups to host face-to-face conversations and produce community level reporting. Together we envisioned a new approach to public radio production by braiding together design thinking, feminist group processes, and community-engaged journalism. In the process, we generated a unique form of feminist participatory media pedagogy and innovative responses to the challenges facing public radio.

Public radio was established to explore the diversity of our nation, “broadcasting reports on the whole fascinating range of human activity” (Johnson 1967). Our mandate includes “utilizing electronic media to address national concerns and solve local problems” with programming that “involves creative risks and that addresses the needs of unserved and underserved

audiences” (Johnson 1967). However, it currently serves a narrow demographic of older, white, affluent professionals who live in urban areas.²

As Capital Public Radio’s (CapRadio) Senior Community Engagement Strategist, my job involves developing new and better ways to connect with our audiences. To do that, I wrestle with some big questions: How do we listen to and reflect back the public’s needs and interests? How can we diversify the voices we share to better represent the communities we serve? And how do we connect with new audiences in ways that are valuable to them?

These questions are important to me not only because of my current position in public radio, but because of my long history in the US community media movement, which aims to democratize the airwaves by sharing tools and access to communication channels and helping residents produce programs that reflect their lives and worlds. My media making methods align with participatory documentary: “an inclusive and collaborative process that engages communities in designing and carrying out the collection and dissemination of their own story” (Sandy Storyline 2018). I bring to this work feminist commitments to equity, multivocality, and reciprocity and weave these values into my participatory media projects by sharing power, drawing on lived experiences, and facilitating group processes so that they are beneficial for everyone involved.

A new approach to community-engaged journalism

To discover the needs of different communities, diversify the voices we share, and connect with new audiences in meaningful ways, I knew CapRadio would need to do three things: Become visible to people living in the far corners of our region, create spaces to learn about resident’s lives, and involve them in our reporting process.

I started envisioning a way to collaborate with neighborhood leaders and community groups to generate hyperlocal stories. I imagined a Storymobile that brought journalists to neighborhoods underserved by CapRadio where they would discover residents’ interests and aspirations. I pictured a brightly colored vehicle stuffed with fold-out couches, a multi-media recording studio, and a pull-out stage. We could bring residents into the editorial process through neighborhood convenings, inviting them to prioritize the stories they would like to see covered and whom they’d recommend as sources. The Storymobile would roll up to parks and parking lots, engaging people of all different backgrounds in storytelling activities and public conversations. We would facilitate community media production alongside more traditional public radio reporting, bringing both together through a media-rich



Figure 4.1 Concept drawing for *Pop-Up Public*

website, social media channels, and a podcast. I called this concept *Pop-Up Public* (Figure 4.1).

Pop-Up Public addresses the power imbalance in traditional public radio reporting, where journalists determine what's newsworthy, parachute into neighborhoods, and broadcast reports to listeners who may or may not live in the area. It creates opportunities for residents to participate in how their community is represented and carves out real estate for community voices on CapRadio's media channels. This approach lowers the barriers to public radio, building street-level networks and community capacity along the way. CapRadio benefits by having a physical presence in these neighborhoods, creating street-level forums where residents can share experiences directly with public media reporters.

To translate this vision into a reality, I needed a planning methodology bold enough to involve wildly diverse stakeholders in a collaborative process that was mutually beneficial. It had to be credible to hardscrabble journalists, accessible to a wide array of residents, and aligned with my feminist participatory media principles.

Enter design thinking

Design Thinking (DT) is a popular way of generating innovations, and there are many different approaches to it. I gravitate toward the Stanford Design School (dSchool) model, which views DT as “a methodology for innovation that combines creative and analytical approaches, and requires collaboration across disciplines” (Stanford dSchool 2016). The dSchool approach encourages diverse perspectives, group process, experimentation, and iteration. Its 5-step process – empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test – requires learning from people’s lived experience and collective problem solving to create mutually beneficial outcomes (Stanford dSchool 2016). In this way, DT makes affordances for participatory media and feminist practices.

I enlisted UC Davis Landscape Design Professor David de la Peña and Community Development graduate student Megan Mueller to assist me in developing the *Pop-Up Public* concept through a design thinking process. David and Megan had led a variety of community design processes and were excited to apply the dSchool model to a public radio project. I spearheaded all aspects of the three-month endeavor – from project planning to stakeholder involvement to group facilitation to project documentation. David worked with me to co-teach an interdisciplinary undergraduate design course and Megan teamed up with me to involve community leaders and support student designers.³

Design thinking, meet feminist pedagogy

DT is structured to unleash creative problem solving and generate innovations that work for end users. But it is not necessarily set up to address power relations within collaborative group work, foster critical self-awareness, or ensure that each person involved in the design work engages in a way that is meaningful to them.

That is where feminist pedagogy becomes useful. Feminist teaching approaches involve activities that promote self-reflection, shared responsibility for learning, attention to interpersonal dynamics, and critical thinking. “Feminist pedagogy promotes transformative learning by replacing the ‘banking model’ of education, in which students are viewed as passive receptacles of information, with a ‘partnership model’ which constructs students as co-producers of knowledge” (Barrett 2009). Feminist educational strategies embrace personal experience as an entry point for creative production and intellectual inquiry. They also make room for examining and shifting power relations, whether in public radio representations, neighborhood amenities, classroom dynamics, or who benefits from collaborative efforts.

Before we launched into the dSchool design steps, David, Megan, and I (the Teaching Team) established a feminist pedagogical framework for the undergraduate course. We started the first class, for example, with a lively interactive exercise in which students rotated through different dyads to explore what participation means to them and what makes it effective. We used their discoveries to develop guidelines for group work and for engaging with community members and public radio staff. Students then made individual inventories of their skills and life experiences as a prelude to a group discussion of how we might tap into their different backgrounds as we collectively designed *Pop-Up Public*. After that, we invited students to pair up and interview one other about their hopes and expectations for the course. Each team presented their aspirations, and then the full group generated a shared set of course goals.

The Teaching Team crafted the rest of the course curriculum around the students' goals. Over the next few classes, we engaged the group in exploring participatory media case studies and mind-mapping exercises to identify key inspirations, questions, and recommendations to fold into our design process. These activities drew on students' personal experiences while developing a critical understanding of the challenges facing different communities, and how storytelling might make a difference. Then we segued into the dSchool's design thinking process – explicitly weaving in feminist pedagogical practices along the way.⁴

STEP 1 – EMPATHIZE: Students began by forming fieldwork teams, selecting a Sacramento neighborhood to explore, and brainstorming information to gather (e.g., demographics, issues, assets, stories). After exchanging tips for conducting site visits, the teams led community interviews to explore how *Pop-Up Public* might function in various neighborhoods. Back in class, students collectively synthesized their research. Their findings informed a stakeholder convening, where 27 community leaders representing neighborhood associations from ethnically diverse areas expressed their likes, concerns, and ideas on how to structure the project to benefit their neighborhoods. Afterwards, I met with CapRadio staff to discuss their wishes for *Pop-Up Public*. What journalists really wanted was a vehicle for remote broadcasts, so we could take our daily talk show on the road or cover breaking news on location.

STEP 2 – DEFINE: Based on the community and station input, the Teaching Team picked three project components for students to design: the Storymobile, project props (signs, seating, and story-making materials), and a process to engage the neighborhood. The vehicle needed an interior recording studio, storage for props, and exterior branding. The engagement process encompassed how and how long to interact with neighborhoods. Students broke into three interdisciplinary⁵ design teams, each focusing on one of the

components. To foster an equitable learning community, each team developed a set of ground rules for communication, decision-making, and work allocation.

STEP 3 – IDEATE: The student teams met weekly to design the vehicle, props, and engagement process. During these sessions, we flattened the traditional teacher–student hierarchies by having students engage in peer-directed learning. For the first half of class, the three student teams would scatter to different corners of the room to brainstorm, gather information, and sketch out their visions. A Teaching Team member joined each group to listen and provide support. Teams then rotated through short presentation/feedback sessions with each other, posing questions and sharing experiences to refine the designs. To wrap up, the Teaching Team engaged the class in group reflection exercises and identifying next steps.

STEP 4 – PROTOTYPE: The students combined ideas generated by community leaders and CapRadio staff with feedback from their peers into 3' × 4' illustrated renderings of the Storymobile, props, and neighborhood engagement process – complete with technical specifications, color palettes, and participatory activities. They presented the prototypes at a “Pin Up,” a facilitated review session with community and station stakeholders, to get critical feedback. Each student guided part of the team’s presentation to reinforce collective leadership and distributed knowledge. Team members shared authorship of their work as well as responsibility for addressing suggested changes.

STEP 5 – TEST: Students then presented revised prototypes at a reconvening of neighborhood leaders and CapRadio staff, which generated even more feedback as well as group bonding. Their designs were further tested in CapRadio staff meetings and neighborhood association gatherings. Each presentation generated additional input and, more importantly, fostered clear buy-in from the two different groups of end users.

Participatory process works

The *Pop-Up Public* design process, anchored in feminist participatory pedagogies, generated different outcomes among community leaders, radio staff, and students. For neighborhood leaders, it helped them articulate both the need for *Pop-Up Public* and how to make it a success. They grounded the project in community aspirations and made us aware of possible pitfalls. Along the way, they conveyed an appreciation for CapRadio focusing attention on their less-advantaged communities. The new relationships built through the process resulted in a core group of grassroots leaders committed to helping implement the project.

The CapRadio staff got excited about *Pop-Up Public* as a “listening post” where we could hear and share diverse stories and become a presence in communities that are underrepresented in our reporting. They saw the value of creating new ways to make good on our public service mission, especially now when audiences want a more active role in sharing their stories. Reporters did, however, wonder how their daily demands would mesh with a community storytelling initiative that requires them to leave the newsroom for extended periods of time.

Students learned how to combine community-based design and participatory media through a feminist perspective, although they did not describe their learning in those exact terms. Their initial fieldwork revealed disparities among neighborhoods that caused them to consider the systems that produce inequality. Engaging with community residents created a space for them to access and empathize with stories they might not otherwise hear. Collaborating with neighborhood leaders also improved their prototypes, reinforcing the value of community participation in the design process. Learning about public radio in the context of neighborhood storytelling pushed them to think about the power media wields to shape people’s knowledge and worldviews. Prior to this class, students were unfamiliar with Capital Public Radio and none associated it with community building. Their feedback helped us to feel confident that the station could garner interest and support from millennials, a much sought-after audience.

The way forward

By the end of the three-month design thinking process, *Pop-Up Public* had generated tremendous enthusiasm among community leaders and a commitment to raising funds from CapRadio leadership. But when I poured over the prototypes, I realized certain elements were not feasible. My analysis revealed gaps between organizational capacity, journalistic practices, and community wishes. The engagement process that community leaders wanted, for example, called for embedding me in each neighborhood for six months to develop and lead each project. That was not realistic given my other job responsibilities. It also required neighborhood associations to come to the project with significant organizing capacity, which might be a stretch in the low-income communities with which CapRadio had planned to partner. While the community storytelling aspects of the process were well-defined in the prototypes, the frequency with which journalists would report stories via *Pop-Up Public* and the format they would use (feature, spot, two-way) remained unclear. Although a handful of hurdles remain, *Pop-Up Public* has captured the imagination and support of all of its stakeholder groups and continues to move forward toward implementation.

Pop-Up Public's unorthodox integration of Design Thinking, feminist processes, and public radio project development generated a unique form of feminist participatory media pedagogy. We drew on students' diverse experiences moving through the design process as opportunities to cultivate learning – about ourselves, traditional coursework, public radio, and community life in different parts of Sacramento. We also drew on community and radio staff knowledge to guide our work and provide reality checks on the design teams' assumptions and biases. In the process, we modeled valuing different kinds of knowledge and how public radio initiatives can involve and reflect the diverse perspectives of the community we report on or those whose voices are often left out.

Design Thinking, in particular, introduced a way of structuring collaboration within a pedagogical experience. It provided a very concrete set of steps that students and faculty were interesting in exploring, and it had credibility among CapRadio staff. In this way, DT provided a methodological framework and legitimacy to weaving participatory media practices into public radio project development. DT's affordances for a feminist approach – learning from lived experience, embracing multiple perspectives, group process, distributed knowledge, reciprocity – not only sync up with my own values but also created a meaningful experience for students and community leaders alike. The participatory and feminist possibilities of DT enabled me to bring together three stakeholder groups from vastly different contexts and facilitate a learning experience for all.

The *Pop-Up Public* experiment offers insights into how public radio can respond to the challenges we face in reaching a more diffuse audience. We learned that by developing a mobile storytelling unit, CapRadio could reach beyond our core audience to places that are underserved, where our community is most diverse, and where we can forge connections with those who don't yet know or trust us. Creating a mobile unit that partners with neighborhood groups to surface and develop stories helps ensure that the voices in our stories are more reflective of communities in our region. It also helps confirm that our reporting addresses public needs and interests, making our work more valuable and relevant. By involving community stakeholders in the *Pop-Up Public* design process, CapRadio reinforced the deeply democratic idea that everyone's story counts and showed how we might more effectively engage the people we serve as co-creators and active participants in our reporting. The collaborative design process produced effective methods for connecting with new audiences, building a rich network of sources and relationships along the way. More importantly, it signaled how bringing together reporters and residents to collectively tell stories might

generate journalism that strengthens communities. This kind of public service journalism, grounded in creative and respectful face-to-face encounters, is key to building the support needed for public radio to flourish in a climate where legacy media is increasingly distrusted.

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Notes

- 1 National Public Radio is a network of listener-supported, non-profit radio stations funded in part by the US government via the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.
- 2 According to NPR's Profile 2017, our news audience is 87% white, and 63% are over 45 years old with a median household income of \$98,300. Nearly 70% are college graduates. Over half are white collar workers, with 32% working professional and related occupations and almost 19% conducting management, business, or financial operations (nprstations.org).
- 3 I point this out to underscore the importance of having a team when taking on university-community engagement projects. Managing the moving parts of instruction, community relations, and production is a lot to take on and, in my experience, is most successful via a collaborative effort.
- 4 Our DT process involved three stakeholder groups: neighborhood leaders from around Sacramento County, Capital Public Radio staff, and UC Davis design students. The project end users – neighborhood leaders and CapRadio staff – engaged in project planning, while an interdisciplinary design class created visual mock ups of project concepts. Over three months, these stakeholders moved through the five steps of the dSchool design thinking cycle.
- 5 The class consisted of 13 students from graphic design (4), sustainable design (4), and landscape design (5).

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