Reinvigorating local journalism

ANNUAL REPORT

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DeWitt Wallace Center for Media & Democracy
SANFORD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY
Dean Baquet, the executive editor of The New York Times, made headlines recently when he said, “The greatest crisis in American journalism is the death of local news. Their economic model is gone.”

Here in the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media & Democracy, our faculty, students and staff are analyzing the difficulties that news organizations are facing and providing resources for more local reporting.

Phil Napoli, the James R. Shepley Professor of Public Policy, is conducting research to assess how much original and substantive content is provided by local news organizations. This fall, he hosted a conference of local news researchers and news professionals at Duke. Phil Bennett, the Eugene C. Patterson Professor of the Practice of Journalism and Public Policy, is helping to lead the new $4 million Local Journalism Project for PBS’s “Frontline.” The project will provide grants and editorial support for local investigative reporting.

In the Reporters’ Lab, our students cover local news for our 9th Street Journal website. Cathy Clabby, manager of the lab, is leading a team covering city and county government, while students in my Advanced Reporting class are reporting on the Durham courthouse. Stories from The 9th Street Journal are often published by local news outlets, which gives our students valuable clips. And several of our students have worked on the North Carolina Fact-Checking Project, a joint effort of the Lab and The News & Observer.

The state of local news can be discouraging. But I’m heartened by the diverse work in the Center. The number of students involved in our programs has nearly doubled from five years ago. Even in these difficult times, students are more inspired than ever about journalism.
Politics is a year-round sport in North Carolina, so students in the Reporters’ Lab — and the bots they’ve built — have been working hard to help voters get the facts.

Students have been taking part in the North Carolina Fact-Checking Project, a partnership between The News & Observer, PolitiFact and the DeWitt Wallace Center. It was funded by a grant from the N.C. Local News Lab Fund.

The students have been involved in every aspect of the project: finding claims by the state’s politicians; researching and writing articles about the claims; and promoting the fact-checks to new audiences throughout the state.

During the 2018-2019 academic year, fact-checkers from the Raleigh-based N&O and the Lab examined more than 100 ear-catching claims by state politicians, and their parties and campaigns. After being published by The News & Observer and PolitiFact, the fact-checks were shared for free with print, online and broadcast newsrooms across the state.

Students in the Lab took part by scouring campaign ads and social media for checkable claims. Student programmers led by senior Asa Royal built bots that monitored claims by the politicians on Twitter and emailed fact-checkers with suggestions. And Duke senior Bill McCarthy, who had interned at PolitiFact, was one of the reporters who wrote the fact-checks, publishing about 25 articles over the school year. (He won the Center’s first Fischer-Zernin Award for local journalism for his work. See page 7).

Lab manager Cathy Clabby and TruthBuzz fellow Matt Riley (Duke ’18) reached out to newsrooms across the state to encourage them to use the fact-check stories for free. Public radio station WFAE-FM Charlotte, the online news site Carolina Public Press and newspapers such as The Citizen Times in Asheville used the content. Find the reporting at www.politifact.com/north-carolina/

Bill McCarthy, ’19, PolitiFact NC reporter

DWC
By the Numbers

| Events hosted or co-hosted by the Center | 34 |
| Faculty | 19 |
| Staff | 6 |
| Student researchers and TAs | 24 |
| Journalism/Media Studies certificate students, 20 seniors graduated in 2019, 21 in class of 2020 | 66 |
| Courses offered | 20 |
| Alumni Events (San Francisco, New York, Durham) | 4 |
| Students who received internship grants | 16 |
The Tech & Check Cooperative
An ambitious project to automate journalism

Every tech project seems to have a catchy code name that managers use until the project is ready for public release. So the leaders of our Tech & Check Cooperative decided to name their automated fact-checking project after a vegetable: Squash.

In keeping with the spirit of a code name, the first test of Squash back in early February was supposed to be a secret. But the results were so encouraging that project director Bill Adair decided to go public.

The goal of the new app, which will work on TV and web videos, is to squash falsehoods at the moment they are first uttered. Squash, developed under the direction of lead technologist Chris Guess and Project Manager Erica Ryan, detects what politicians say and instantly displays related fact-checks on the screen.

Although the early results leave lots of room for improvement, people who have seen Squash say it shows great promise.

Journalist Jonathan Rauch wrote in The Atlantic that it showed that “live, automated fact-checking is now demonstrably possible. In principle, it could be applied by web browsers, YouTube, cable TV, and even old-fashioned broadcast TV. Checker bots could also prowl the places where trollbots go and stay just a few seconds behind them.”

The instantaneous matching is made possible by a database of thousands of previously published fact-checks. That database is the byproduct of another Center project — the Reporters’ Lab work with Google and Schema.org over the past several years to create an opensource tagging system that helps search engines and social media services combat misinformation that spreads on their platforms.

Squash is part of the $2 million Tech & Check Cooperative, funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Facebook Journalism Project and the Craig Newmark Foundation.
The News Measures Research Project
Assessing the health of local news

James R. Shepley Professor of Public Policy Philip Napoli expanded into the News Measures Research Project in 2018-2019. Napoli’s project creates tools to assess local news content, probe what news audiences want and need, and check the health of local news outlets.

The project’s 2018 report “Assessing Local Journalism: News Deserts, Journalism Divides, and the Determinants of the Robustness of Local News” exposed how some local outlets produce no local content over a weeklong news cycle. The startling finding sparked wide press coverage. The research earned Napoli and his collaborators three awards from the Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication in 2018.

In 2019, the Democracy Fund renewed funding for the News Measures project, allowing Napoli’s team to develop automated tools to make studying local news easier and, he hopes, more common. The grant also supported a conference for local journalism producers and researchers that Napoli hosted at Duke in October 2019.

Napoli also researches media regulation. In this age of internet publishing, existing regulations apply to a shrinking share of media companies. In 2018 Napoli published the Federal Communications Law Journal article “What if More Speech is No Longer the Solution? First Amendment Theory Meets Fake News and the Filter Bubble.” At a congressional briefing in the fall of 2018, he described a potentially effective model of self-regulation for social media platforms.

Columbia University Press published Napoli’s second book, “Social Media and the Public Interest: Media Regulation in the Disinformation Age,” in August 2019. A two-year fellowship Napoli received from the Carnegie Corporation of New York supported Napoli’s research, which he has discussed at conferences in the United States and abroad.

The Rutherfurd Living History Project
Going digital

In 2018-19, the Rutherfurd Living History program increased its online archive to almost 50 interviews with prominent public figures spanning more than six decades. Led by Professor Philip Bennett, Eugene C. Patterson Professor of the Practice of Journalism and Public Policy, the program has converted almost 100 interviews from analog originals to interactive versions that allow people to navigate, curate and share video interview content.

Student researchers were instrumental in publishing these interviews by adding extensive annotations to in-depth oral histories. The Public Broadcasting System continues to use InSite, the open-source technology pioneered by the Living History program, to publish online source materials for documentaries online.

Transcripts and videos of 39 interviews completed for the PBS “Frontline” documentary “Supreme Revenge,” for instance, were posted in May. In the coming year, the project will finish migrating Duke’s Rutherfurd archive to the InSite platform. The team will also add more original interviews, launch a blog about interviewing and oral histories, and feature additional student work.

The program is also helping create an oral history archive commemorating the 50th anniversary of the founding of what is now the Sanford School of Public Policy. Rutherfurd interviews and associated research can be viewed at livinghistory.sanford.duke.edu.

Carly Stern (‘18) is a reporter for OZY Media in the San Francisco Bay area...
When a lethal gas explosion leveled a block in downtown Durham in April, Duke student journalists ran toward the chaos.

By day’s end senior Katie Nelson and sophomores Cameron Beach and Alex Johnson published a detailed report filled with witness accounts, strong photos and a startling video that other news outlets did not have.

Such is the power of The 9th Street Journal.

DeWitt Wallace Center Director Bill Adair created the online news site in the fall of 2018 for his advanced reporting class. He wanted to give students practical experience covering government and provide their stories to local outlets in this age of newsroom staff cuts.

The students quickly discovered some great stories.

Julianna Rennie used public records to detail just how late Durham’s night owl mayor, Duke alum Steve Schewel, emails his City Hall team. Ben Leonard exposed how city emergency alerts failed to reach everyone in flood-prone neighborhoods. Senior Hank Tucker detailed deficiencies in a smartphone app designed to steer people from high-crime neighborhoods.

Reporters’ Lab Manager Cathy Clabby became co-editor in the spring and directed a new staff of volunteer student reporters. Beach revealed that a local transportation project used smartphone data that tracked people’s movements, likely without them knowing. Sophomore Jake Sheridan wrote about community outrage over a progressive Catholic school disinviting a gay alum to a campus program. Junior Abby Kingsley captured the one-of-a-kind atmosphere of a Durham City Council meeting, where members of the New Black Panther Party brushed shoulders with junior Girl Scouts.

This fall, Adair’s class is covering the Durham County courthouse. Inspired by the Serial podcast’s revelatory reporting on Cleveland’s judicial system, Adair wants students to explore what happens in Durham’s criminal justice system. Reporters’ Lab students will file too, on everything from the latest news in City Hall to fallout from gentrification sweeping the Bull City.

Read along at 9thStreetJournal.org and @9thStJournal on Twitter.
Annual Journalism Awards Dinner

Students and alumni were honored at the annual DeWitt Wallace Center awards dinner in April.

**Melcher Family Award for Excellence in Journalism:**
Julia Donheiser ’19 and Riley Griffin ’18 shared the award for articles about sexual assault.

**Fischer-Zernin Award for Local Journalism:**
Bill McCarthy ’19 for his fact-checking of North Carolina politics

**Futrell Award for Outstanding Achievement in Communications and Journalism by a Duke alum:**
Susan Taylor Martin ’71

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**Student Internships**

Cameron Beach ‘20, Asheville Citizen-Times

Ben Leonard ‘20, Tampa Bay Times

Emily Liu ‘20, New York Times

Kristi Sturgill ‘22, Charlotte Observer

Erin Williams ‘20 and Julianna Rennie ‘21, NBC News

reported on allegations of price-fixing among competing generic drug makers...
Events

Yamiche Alcindor of the PBS NewsHour and Frank Bruni of the New York Times spoke at the Zeidman Colloquium.

NBC’s Chuck Todd discussed changes in political coverage with Bill Adair.

Mark Mazzetti of the New York Times, left, visited campus to discuss the documentary “The Fourth Estate.”


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Alumni:
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https://alumni.duke.edu/groups/dukejournos