

RE(IMAGINING) CAMPUS NEWSPAPERS AS COMMUNITY MEDIA: THE CASE OF A STUDENT-RUN PUBLICATION AT A STATE UNIVERSITY IN WESTERN VISAYAS

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ABSTRACT

Campus newspapers play a vital role in universities, serving as a training ground for future journalists and providing students with relevant academic and institutional information. In Industry 4.0, student publications shifted from printed to digital formats. Forum-Dimensions Online (FD Online), the official student-run publication of West Visayas State University, was launched in 2011 on Facebook. It has become the main source of information and a hub for seeking connections. FD Online has undoubtedly created a community, but whether it fits the bill of being community media is the question. This study aims to assess FD Online and its online content and articles using the community journalism scale and evaluate its potential to become community media. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-method research design, a content analysis of 50 purposively selected FD Online Facebook posts was conducted using the adapted community journalism scale. The data gathered from it were used to guide the series of interviews with selected members of the student body to make sense of the quantitative findings. Results indicate partial but positive alignment with all three principles of community journalism, specifically 57.14% alignment in revealing community structure, 57.14% in encouraging diversity of viewpoints, and 66.67% in integrating feedback, with an overall alignment of 60%. Themes from the interview showed that respondents value FD Online's reliability and visibility but see the need for it to evolve beyond a news outlet toward a truly participatory and inclusive community medium. Overall, FD Online possesses the values and principles that lean more towards community journalism rather than conventional journalism in terms of gathering, interpreting, and distributing information. This study can provide evidence in the discussion of reimagining the roles of student-run publications in universities and promote their role in community-building.

Keywords: *critical media literacy, community media, community-building, development journalism, journalism education*

Introduction

Student-run publications are a crucial component in higher education institutions, and even the Philippine government recognized their importance through the enactment of the Campus Journalism Act of 1991 (Docallas, 2025). For decades, campus journalism has been a building block of the educational and political landscape in the Philippines, as it became an avenue for developing students' journalism, critical thinking, and civic engagement skills (Docallas, 2025; Pante, 2018).

Student-run publications have a dual function. The first one is to foster future journalists (Hapney & Russo, 2013). Active participation in campus journalism has allowed the younger generation to integrate media and information literacy in their daily lives as student journalists, which allows them to question and evaluate the content they consume and produce through experiential learning (Albardia et al., 2025).

The second function is to provide information to the academic community it serves (Hapney & Russo, 2013). For the community of students, their student papers played a vital role in providing them with relevant updates and announcements—academic or otherwise (Huerta & Jozwiak, 2008). There was a time when the relevance of student-run publications had fallen due to the declining interest in journalism as a career, disinterest in innovating and advancing journalism education, and the shift in lifestyle and information source preferences of many students (Davaadorj, 2025; Finneman et al., 2022). In the wave of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Industry 4.0), school publications have shifted online and experienced a renaissance, marking their role as the official space where students can communicate and exchange ideas (Chyi, 2012). Trust and engagement in digital versions of the student newspapers were observed and even filled gaps that traditional mainstream media left, including student-centered and localized discussions of issues (Finneman et al., 2022).

Forum Dimensions is the official student publication of West Visayas State University (WVSU), a government university situated in Western Visayas, Philippines. The paper, formerly known as *The Normalite*, has a long history dating back to 1939. The operation of the student publication is in compliance with Republic Act 7079, also known as the Campus Journalism Act of 1991, and other related Philippine laws (Forum Dimensions, n.d.). With the tagline “For the truth, by the truth,” it stands as a beacon among other publications in the university and provides the student body with a platform for information, education, and entertainment. The publication is vital for students, providing them with substantial news updates and academic announcements that keep them informed about significant happenings and milestones. Furthermore, the publication promotes a sense of pride and recognition within the university community by recognizing the efforts of students, teachers, and staff, as well as exhibiting the institution's successes. Forum Dimensions is an excellent tool for students looking to remain informed and develop deeper connections within their university premises. In this regard, Forum Dimensions serves a “community” of students within a university, which fits the description of a ‘physical space or location with organized systems and settlement patterns’ (Taylor et al., 2000).

Recognizing the need for a digital presence, the campus newspaper launched Forum-Dimensions Online (FD Online) in 2011 on Facebook as a social media arm of the publication. It has since become essential for WVSU students, especially during the global pandemic in 2020, as it has become the main source of much-needed information and updates. Subsequently, it has even become a hub for seeking connection and belonging. The platform provides students with an easy space to communicate and exchange ideas, building a sense of proximity and support even when they are physically apart. Through the years, the definition of community has shifted and is no longer limited to a group of people marked by physical or political boundaries. A community can be ‘imagined,’ which means that a group maintaining interactive discourse through shared symbols, focusing on common endeavors and shared interests, is considered a community (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). In this context, FD Online has created a community where students can share ideas and concerns regardless of whether the WVSU student body shares the same geographic space or not.

In the field of development communication, a medium that serves a specific community must be citizen-centered, participatory, inclusive, and democratic (Demuyakor, 2023; Sáez, 2013). Community media has varied definitions and parameters, depending mostly on the socioeconomic status of a nation. In Europe, community media is generally labeled as “local media,” whereas in a developing nation, such as the Philippines, it is typically dubbed “participatory media.” This means that it usually operates on a non-profit basis and allows members of the community to participate in the

production process (Rennie, 2006). Traditionally, community media serve as platforms that delve into alternative topics that are not usually covered by the mainstream media, particularly stories of communities from far-flung areas where mainstream media outlets overlooked or lacked the capacity to cover. Most of the time, the media products are produced using native languages. Community media practices empower local groups and communities by allowing them to decide the agenda pushed for policymaking, allowing them to decide what media they will consume through co-creation of media products, and providing opportunities for feedback (Ahmad & Babatunde, 2020). Despite their importance, community media often face financial and legal challenges as national media laws often limit their operations (Milan, 2009). Community media have, in the past, been excluded or marginalized on the grounds of spectrum scarcity, meaning that it would be a waste of channels that could potentially be reserved for commercial or government use. With more channels available, this argument is less convincing. Community media will probably be better accommodated in the new media environment (Rennie, 2006). This is why many community media thrive in the current digital age. The current landscape gives them a free medium to operate and reach audiences as long as they have access to the internet. This justifies the premise of this current research of investigating FD Online on Facebook rather than its physical paper.

Under these contexts, this study recognizes the power of student publications as a tool for community-building through interactivity, collaboration, and inclusivity among the students. It can build a strong, engaged, and informed student community (do Amaral, 2013; Lymn & Jones, 2020). Student-run publications, such as FD Online, have undoubtedly created communities in their respective spaces, but a gap in the literature remains as to whether student-run publications fit the bill of being community media.

This study aims to assess the characteristics of FD Online and its contents using the framework on community journalism fundamentals developed by Lowrey et al. (2008) in an article *Toward a Measure of Community Journalism*. This framework explores the intricate aspects of community journalism, clarifying its fundamental characteristics and its functions in promoting identity and community involvement.

Methodology

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design with a postpositivist lens. This approach aims for the researchers to stay close to the data, using a limited framework and interpretation for explaining the data, and cataloging the gathered information into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). To guide this study, the framework of Lowrey et al. (2008) in the article *Toward a Measure of Community Journalism*, a study that developed a summated scale to evaluate the extent of service a media outlet delivers to its target community, was used. It highlighted the three characteristics that community media should have in order to fully function as such: it should reveal a community structure, listen and encourage diversity of viewpoints, and integrate feedback into a cohesive representation. To conduct a systematic baseline assessment, the criteria within the framework were operationalized using a binary coding scheme (1 = criteria were evident; 0 = criteria were not evident). However, the framework created by Lowrey et al. (2008) explicitly mentioned that community journalism is a continuous and multifaceted construct. With this, qualitative student perspectives were gathered alongside the binary audit to enrich the discussion, thereby enabling an explanation not only of whether specific criteria were evident but also how student readers experience and negotiate these coverage gaps and strengths in practice.

The subjects of the study were purposively selected posts from the Forum Dimensions Facebook page for five months, from January to May 2023. The articles were limited to those written by regular staffers, which means that shared posts from other Facebook Pages were not included. Following the inclusion criteria, 50 articles published by FD Online were selected for analysis and evaluation. Meanwhile, the interview participants were purposively selected WVSU students being of

legal age (18 years old and above), enrolled within the semester of data collection, and possessed prior readership and active engagement with FD Online.

A tally sheet and codebook, adapted from Lowrey et al. (2008) and validated by experts, were used to collect the quantitative data. Meanwhile, a semi-structured interview guide was used to gather interview data. It was then transcribed and coded using Saldana's (2015) first and second coding techniques to generate themes.

Results and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the findings on the extent to which FD Online characterizes community media by the definition of Lowrey et al.'s (2008) community journalism framework.

Revealing a community structure

Under this characteristic, it aims to identify if a media outlet successfully delivers usable and relevant information from community sources, offers insights into community services and how to use them, and provides information on local and relevant events. Findings showed that out of seven criteria of the community journalism scale, FD online possessed four of the characteristics that contribute to its ability to reveal a community structure within the university (Table 1). The publication provides useful information sourced from community leaders (e.g., student council and organization leaders), offering insights into community services and institutions, helping the community understand how to use services, and providing information on local and relevant events and festivities. The contents of FD Online cover key university announcements, from cascading information from the university administration regarding the full implementation of the radio-frequency identification (RFID) system upon entry to the school, as well as in requesting all official university transactions, to assisting incoming student applicants regarding the submission of requirements for admissions.

Table 1

Characteristics possessed by Forum-Dimensions Online that reveal a community structure

Criteria	Yes (1) / No (0)
Forum-Dimensions Online provides the community with contact information for community leaders, officials, experts, and community organizations.	0
Contents of Forum-Dimensions Online provide information from community leaders, officials, experts, and community organizations that is usable and relevant to community members.	1
Forum-Dimensions Online provides information on community services and institutions.	1
Contents of Forum-Dimensions Online help the community understand how to use services and institutions.	1
Forum-Dimensions Online provides information on clubs and organizations.	0
Contents of Forum-Dimensions Online help the community understand how to get involved with local or relevant clubs and organizations.	0

Forum-Dimensions Online provides information that helps the community take advantage of local or relevant events and festivities.

1

Results	4 of 7 (57.14%) Positively aligned
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To support this, themes from the interviews with selected members of the student body indicated that FD Online is their “reliable and primary information source.” One of the participants shared:

FD [online] has been a platform of freedom, ensuring relevant information [circulates] both within the campus and online. A publication serving both factual information and student-centered articles, [it serves] as a haven for campus [journalists] and a pillar for us students.

In addition, the publication has fostered community engagement through “student-centered” content. A participant shared that FD Online “gives [the] students a chance to be heard, stay informed, voice out concerns, and [make an] impact on the issues that matter most.” This cemented the role of the student-run publication as the informational backbone of the student community, which facilitates the process of negotiating and making meaning among the student body (Lowrey et al., 2008).

Table 1 also showed the gaps where the student-run publication underperformed, specifically in promoting interaction, participation, and network visibility within the university. These criteria include providing the community with contact information of community leaders, officials, experts, and community organizations; providing information on clubs and organizations; and helping the community understand how to get involved with local or relevant clubs and organizations. Within the ecosystem of the university, this can be justified, as many university-wide and college-based organizations have their own active social media presence, which forms their own communities. However, using their reach to empower and lift the voices of smaller organizations can help in covering a broader range of perspectives (O’Connor, 2025). In fact, one of the themes that emerged from the interview data revealed that the publication can amplify more alternative student initiatives. These gaps highlight that FD Online’s community structure is informational but not yet relational (Moore & Hatcher, 2019).

Listening and encouraging diversity of viewpoints

This characteristic postulates that a newspaper should play a two-pronged role by listening to the community’s needs and leading by providing cohesive and coherent representations of the said community (Lowrey et al., 2008). Table 2 shows that FD online is positively aligned with this characteristic, possessing four out of the seven criteria. The postings showed that the publication invites community members to voice opinions on issues, showcases human-scale events and stories, reports conflict within the community, and demonstrates awareness of alternative sources. The posts that reflected this were the articles that talked about multiple student-led protests, including an opinion piece that echoed the disappointment of the student body on the delay of the university student council elections. It is also important to note that the university has an open-to-all submission portal for press releases, which encourages students and other school organizations to submit and contribute content. This showed that the student-run publication aims to contribute to the development of the student body by reflecting their values, interests, and dynamics, which is a true making of a community media (do Amaral, 2013; Metula, 2023).

Table 2

Characteristics possessed by Forum-Dimensions Online that listen and encourage diversity of viewpoints

Criteria	Yes (1) / No (0)
Forum-Dimensions Online invites community members to air opinions on community issues and news content.	1
Forum-Dimensions Online provides space or time for community members to air opinion on community issues and news content.	0
Forum-Dimensions Online provides the community with a way to directly access news decision-makers (e.g., feedback forms and letters to the editor).	0
Contents of Forum-Dimensions Online reflect coverage of the community's minority or marginal viewpoints.	0
Contents of Forum-Dimensions Online reflect coverage of human-scale events and stories.	1
Contents of Forum-Dimensions Online reflect reporting on conflict within the community.	1
Stories reflect awareness of non-official sources (e.g., anecdotal).	1
Results	4 of 7 (57.14%) Positively aligned

Meanwhile, the gaps were found in the following criteria, including providing space of time for community members to express their opinions, offering mechanisms for direct access to news decision-makers such as feedback forms and letters to the editor, and reflecting coverage of minority or marginal viewpoints within the community. Themes emerged from the interview data from the student body that supported these gaps, including “underrepresentation of diverse voices,” which means that there are prevailing mainstream and hegemonic narratives.

Based on the emerging themes, FD Online has highlighted academic and organizational achievements while leaving out grassroots stories, everyday student realities, and non-academic achievements. One of the participants shared the struggles of students affected by Typhoon Dante in July 2025:

The recent tropical cyclone caused extreme flooding[,] leaving many communities severely affected[,] yet this reality remains largely uncovered by [campus] publications. In the midst of this crisis, students [were] still being required to comply with schoolwork, even as their homes [were] submerged in water. Representation of these communities is important[,] as it holds the power to amplify their voices and place their struggles at the center of public attention. However, this representation remains lacking, further deepening the invisibility of their hardships in times when they need support the most.

This can be attributed to the internal culture of the university that influences the editorial choices made by the student-led newspaper. Although the publication has engaged and featured social and political issues, the tension between institutional control and students' freedom of speech

is still prevalent in the type of content posted on its online platform (Crain, 2015; Gutsche Jr & Salkin, 2011).

Integrating feedback into a cohesive representation

This characteristic refers to the degree to which a media outlet integrates feedback that can strengthen community cohesion by connecting problems with potential solutions (Lowrey et al., 2008). There are six criteria under this dimension, and FD Online achieved four out of the six, showing positive alignment (Table 3). The contents of the student-run publication were localized, reflected the most pressing community agenda, and provided leaders with context of ongoing issues. The post that reflected this was the multi-series articles about the college admissions examination, from updating incoming applicants regarding the “gradual” release of results to immediately providing information on the college-level admissions. At the same time, an opinion piece was published to provide solutions regarding the call for a better system of announcing the college admission results. This is the very practice of community journalism, as it is usually guided by its priority of focusing on local, community-specific issues and offering possible solutions (Holt & Karlsson, 2015; Sobel Cohen et al., 2025). However, it has yet to be felt by the student body, as it is perceived that FD online functions more like an “informational platform” instead of being an “interactive community space.”

Table 3

Characteristics possessed by Forum-Dimensions Online that integrate feedback into a cohesive representation

Criteria	Yes (1) / No (0)
Contents of Forum-Dimensions Online focus on local issues, events, institutions, and people.	1
Contents of Forum-Dimensions Online reflect efforts to present a consistent, manageable, ongoing agenda of the most pressing community issues.	1
Contents of Forum-Dimensions Online provide readers with background/context on ongoing issues.	1
Forum-Dimensions Online proposes specific solutions to community problems.	1
Contents of Forum-Dimensions Online connect those who have problems in a community with information from those who are potential problem solvers.	0
Forum-Dimensions Online provides information from beyond the community that helps community members make sense of community issues.	0
Results	4 of 6 (66.67%) Positively aligned

Selected articles have not shown content that connects the student body who have specific problems to potential problem solvers or even provide information that helps community members make sense of community issues. One participant shared that the publication “*often fails to offer concrete solutions to the problems it presents.*”

Themes from the interview data mentioned the “*lack of coverage on lived experiences of students,*” as respondents have pointed out that local issues such as the persisting waste problems within the university, learning challenges during instructional modality shifts during typhoons and heat indexes, and the plight of working and other minority students have received minimal visibility. Past

literature indicates that student newspapers experienced a global dilemma of news preferences, particularly on what constitutes news (Chen, 2004; Netzley & Banning, 2011). Another factor that may have affected this practice is the possible lack of socioeconomic diversity within school paper staffers across the globe, as students belonging to low-income backgrounds are less likely to engage in extracurricular activities, including student media. Studies have indicated that they would rather spend time earning extra income through part-time jobs or focusing on their domestic roles (Park et al., 2013; Ramburuth & Härtel, 2010). In the case of FD Online, if the problems are invisible due to limited representation, solutions for them would not be put forth.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, this research concludes that FD Online has the makings of a community media. Whether deliberate or not, the content they produce served the needs of the community and possessed critical characteristics of what makes a publication community media. FD Online emerged as a valuable asset within the educational and social landscape of the university, offering a vital conduit of information that benefits both the university as an institution and the community. Operating both physically and virtually, it serves as a strong platform for exchanging discourse, fostering community bonds, and enriching the experience of students, faculty, and staff within the university community. The dual nature of the publication underscores its importance in building a sense of community at West Visayas State University.

The positive alignment of Forum Dimensions Online with the characteristic of revealing a community structure implies that there are traits that indicate the presence of such a structure at West Visayas State University. This also suggests that the publication is making a purposeful effort to connect and serve the needs of the university community. The positive alignment of Forum Dimensions Online with the characteristic of listening to and encouraging the diversity of viewpoints implies that the publication has taken an approach to expand its narrative, as evidenced by its efforts to reflect the coverage of minority perspectives as well as provide tools for community members to express their opinions. Similarly, its positive alignment with the characteristic of integrating feedback into a cohesive representation demonstrates ongoing efforts to engage with its audience and improve content relevance. By addressing community concerns and proposing solutions, the publication enhances its role as a responsive and accountable online media platform within the university.

The student body believes that the FD Online fulfills its role as an “information hub” for the university, as it provides timely and relevant information and even encourages the participation of the community as it provides a platform for open dialogue. However, the respondents also see underrepresentation of many marginalized voices within the student body, including working students, non-academic achievers, and students from low-income backgrounds. These unmet criteria can be attributed to the fact that campus newspapers, not just in Western Visayas but across the globe, apply mainstream journalistic conventions of objective and detached reporting. Studies have critiqued the traditional journalism way of teaching in academic settings and proposed focusing on building critical media literacy in journalism education. This can be done by going beyond teaching professionalized, market-driven, procedure-based journalism and equipping students to question ideologies, power relations, and proper representations (Mensing, 2010; Sen, 2017). By allowing the campus newspapers to foster a new breed of journalists, it can usher in a more informed citizenry who analyze, questions and actively participate in societal development and practices, and responsible media consumption.

Student-run publications can contribute towards development by reflecting and fostering the values of the student body. With their function of fostering a sense of belonging, promoting critical thinking, and empowering students’ voices, they can be a tool for community-building.

Recommendations

Student-run publications could take the results of this study as a basis to optimize content if they deem that being a “community media” for the student body they represent is part of their overall mission. Drawing on the research of Lowrey et al. (2008) and other scholars can serve as a reflective framework to assess the editorial policies and guidelines of the newspaper. It could implement a section dedicated to students’ voices and letters to the editor. These can ignite conversations on grassroots issues such as mental health and socioeconomic struggles.

In addition, campus newspapers have been a solid training ground for future journalists. Training student journalists in building a development-oriented journalism approach can allow them to connect information with action and community empowerment. Shifting from dominant “Western” news values to more inclusive and deliberative journalism (Chalkley, 1980; Chua, 2019; Robie, 2013).

Lastly, this research recommends reforming journalism education to be realigned from an industry-centered to a community-centered model (Mensing, 2010). This shift can help student newspapers focus on community engagement and participation, making their journalism more relational and impactful.

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