

## John-Coster-Newsroom-Origins-001-2021-06-15.mp3

**Rob Watson** [00:00:01] So the idea of this is... What day is it... It's the.

**John Coster** [00:00:05] Fifteenth.

**Rob Watson** [00:00:05] Fifteenth of June, I'm here with John Coster, and, just to talk about the origin and the concept, and how you got the idea for the newsroom model. Do you want to tell us a bit about what it is, what is a newsroom, and how we develop the idea?

**John Coster** [00:00:31] Well, a newsroom is an opportunity for people to come together, to be able to capture their experiences, either their lived experiences, or to share some information about a particular subject or theme. And of course, the real thing with the pandemic is, it provided the opportunity to do them online, as well as, kind of, physically. So the physical aspect would be, you know, me or someone, or yourself, sitting in a room, you know, with a, with a laptop, a connexion from the Internet to something like Facebook Live, or using Zoom, or YouTube. To be able to, either do one solid period of time, like an hour conversation, if you like. That is then live streamed. Talking about a specific theme. World Photography Day. Or, there's an opportunity, which is something that we do now, is to be able to act as the catalyst for the conversation, with maybe one or two people who join in the Zoom live. So kind of, come in, in almost like they're coming into a conversation, and then leaving. Which needs a bit of instruction, normally, on how people they should do that, because most meetings end. Whereas, you have to say to people, thanks for joining us. And then the expectation is they have to leave. And then we will just play smaller clips from longer pre-records. So, this morning I sent a link to someone for a two-hour event, and said to them that we played the clip from our twenty-seven minute pre-record for fifteen minutes at this point, so they can look at it. And so, really, it's an opportunity for people to come together, share their information. And if it's a three-hour event, we try and break it down into smaller chunks now. Like a forty minute section. A Facebook Live, with a twenty-minute break. Then join us again at the top of the hour, and stuff. So it's kind of evolved, really. You're able to make it different for different people.

**Rob Watson** [00:02:29] Talk us through an example of what you did earlier on.

**John Coster** [00:02:33] OK, so they vary in length from an hour, through to twenty-four hours. So we've done some twenty-four hours. But I'd say the basic model that we have now is two to three hours. In the first forty minutes, we will meet the people that are behind the project. Why it started? Some of the stats. Some of the highlights of the project. Then we'll take a twenty-minute break. Then we'll come back at the top of the hour, and we'll play content from pre-records that we've done. Possibly one live. So that might be two schools. We did some pre-records for an event recently. And we played the teacher and two children. We couldn't see the two children. Whereas the other one, we had to talk to a teacher, a couple of teaching assistants in a classroom of kids, that was quite interactive. And we... One member of staff joined me for that, and we linked together those conversations for forty minutes. I think it really surprises people how quick it goes. And then in the final section, we made it international. So we spoke about that project being part of a national and an international project. And that was an opportunity to speak to two people live. One was from, one was in Denmark, I think was in Copenhagen. And one in the north of England. And that was just me talking to them, putting it into, into context. And then got their staff to join us again in the last fifteen minutes for a bit of a bit of a round up.

**Rob Watson** [00:04:08] Why the 'newsroom'?

**John Coster** [00:04:11] I think it's, again, it goes back to the days of the community media news agency Citizens Eye, really. Which was always focussed around identifying groups of people that were on the periphery or the margins of the mainstream media. Now that is either as consumers of that news. Because they didn't consume any mainstream media news. Too busy for whatever reason. Through to people that were from communities that were reported on, or spoken about, by the mainstream media. And community

media, for me, doing Citizens Eye, and the work that we've always done, has always been about people being able to own and shape their own narrative, you know. Get the skills to tell your own story. If you don't like how you're reported on, then how can you change that perception with people through your own newspaper, podcasts, YouTube stream, and stuff like that. And what we've realised is that as the world has become more shaped and dominated by, particularly corporate marketing and PR. Whether that's from the local authority, down to charities. There's this, kind of, drive to be more, sort of, you know, 'on message', 'on brand', on that. And of course, what happens then is it tends to affect the voice of the service users. The people that are supposedly being helped by these organisations or, you know, services done too. Normally on behalf of, but they're normally done to. So something like a newsroom really gives you that equity when it comes to talking to service users, either live or pre-recorded, in that they've had the opportunity to have their say, as opposed to someone using their words on their behalf. Because, you know, taking a photograph of you, and getting a quote from you that I then use as a caption, ultimately, you have no real control over it. Once you've said your words, they're out of your mouth and they're gone, and they can be manipulated or misquoted in that way. Whereas, in fact, when you're talking to someone, I think, live, as much as we talk about beforehand, you know, don't libel anybody and don't upset anybody, and all that sort of stuff. But there's a certain freedom that comes with that. In that you feel as if you're able to articulate your experiences. And I often say, you know, don't talk about negative experiences, talk about things that maybe didn't work as well as you'd like them to have worked. Because saying to someone I'm not happy with that, is one thing. But to then articulate how it could have been done better means that you're trying to improve services for people going forward.

**Rob Watson** [00:06:51] And what's the difference between the newsroom approach and, say, a webinar?

**John Coster** [00:06:58] That's really interesting, actually, because people ask, you know what I mean. You know, is it a webinar, or is it sort of an online meeting? Is it a Google meet? Is, is it this, and this and that? And I think from my perspective, a webinar is more about something that's informational. It's a way of sharing information with a body of people, whether that's professionals or interested parties, or students, talking about your particular area of interest. So I might run a webinar about the Doc Media Centre, or Citizens Eye and its role in community. A newsroom would be very much about someone coming on, or viewing that, finding out about how I do it, and what it is that we're doing. And so the production side of it. Yeah. So it's very, you know, you won't come on to a newsroom and hear me talking about the Doc Media Centre being an independent museum, archive and library, and who we work with, and Parallel Lives Network. You won't get that in a newsroom. That's what a webinar would be

**Rob Watson** [00:08:03] And what kind of feedback that you have from people that you've been working with?

**John Coster** [00:08:07] Positive. Yeah, I think there's always... There's never a hesitancy based on it won't work. It's the fact that they can't really conceptualise it. And of course, it doesn't really help showing ones that you've done before, because it's only when you've been immersed in it that you do it. And I tell you, it's evolved, actually, from doing a couple with a local cycling organisation. They approached us and said, we've got one for Clean Air Day, and we've got five schools that are involved, and we want to know what it is that you can do for us. So before with them, we've done a one-hour newsroom that they've been part of. With some live pre-records with their staff. And we'd also done a two-hour event with them as well. So two separate things which we've got some funding for. So she said, what they'd like to do, and how much will we charge for filming, and all that to put something together? And what I did, really, was I looked at the email, and then realised what they were after was a film that was fifteen minutes, that could be played for assemblies in school. So, you know, I'm not a film editor, you know which I mean. I don't have the skills to do that kind of stuff. So what I suggested was, well actually, you guys have got a session in the morning, a session on the afternoon for Clean Air Day. You've got four or five schools, where they closed the streets, and sort of stuff. You've got enough staff that are going to be each one. Why don't you take some photographs, capture some audio, and then just capture some sort of sixty, forty, ninety second clips, scanning round, getting a group of young people to like, you know, thumbs up, you know, cheery night kind of stuff. Just capturing the essence. At the end of the day, send it through to us. Yeah. And what we'll do is we'll

load it up to YouTube, and then we'll arrange a time where we do a Zoom call, where all the people that participated that... The staff from the organisation. And we will get them to introduce a clip each that we can then play. And so the Zoom call, we will record for fifteen minutes, and then we'll hand them the MP4 that they can then turn around and say, well, actually, the schools that it's played at will recognise one of the four or five members of staff that are on there from the organisation, and they'll recognise the little clip of what they've got. And it's an MP4, and they you put it on, on the school website if they want to, or some of the content. And she was like, well that's fantastic. That's, that's an even better solution than we thought. And I said, well, the trouble is, you get so caught up then in making a film that ultimately, it's the time scale that's important. It's the fifteen minutes. Well, the best way to do that, to make sure that you have your say, particularly if you're not going into an assembly now, is to make something that's, like you're there, but talking about it. Well that's not a film, that's just great a zoom thing where we are having that kind of conversation. But I sold that to them on the back - and they pay for it, you know - on the basis that we'd done the newsroom. Because they understood the value of those conversations. And it's like, well, I really enjoyed that. You know, I thought it was going to be like this. And this is that this is the danger with the mainstream media. It dominates everything that we do. We don't realise, actually, that particularly working with young people, they watch YouTube and go, well, I can do that. You don't get an adult watch the news and go, well I could read the news, you know.

**Rob Watson** [00:11:24] The Zoomification... The pandemic has forced people to be in online meetings a lot. So how, how has that helped or changed? Obviously, it's helped in terms of changing people's expectations about the accessibility of the process. It's no longer so distant from them. They're just engaging in Zoom call effectively.

**John Coster** [00:11:47] Absolutely. And I think this has been one of the positives that will come out of it, out of the whole kind of pandemic scenario, I think. Obviously, it's a terrible situation and people have lost their lives, and it's not taking away from that. But when it comes to the hesitancy that people have now for doing things online, digital or even live, to an account, to an extent, are gone. Because they are used to accessing, you know, watching things live. A band, are being live streamed, watching a concert, watching a book reading, you know. So you've got, like, Netflix, Amazon, streaming iPlayer, on demand elements of it. You've then got, you know, Zoom, Skype, Facebook Messenger, people being able to participate in something live where they've not necessarily had their camera on before. Now they feel quite confident in having their say. And then it's managing their expectations of what the newsroom is about. That's been quite useful. So that kind of the Zoom element. I mean, certainly, the work that we've done over the years with schools, they have always been happy for us to go in and do anything that's media related. Now, they're happy for us to beam-in live to schools, to have a chat with a classroom of kids. To set the parameters for a project. And that's great, actually, because now it's increased. Next Wednesday, we're going into a school for the first, kind of, feedback session, and they are, kind of, delighted that we're going in, because they're happy for people to come and visit now, because everything's been online for a while. So I can see some real positive aspects to it as well. Particularly with museums, smaller independent museums. Looking at how they engage audiences. Maybe the role of volunteers will change as well. So it's not longer, no longer about volunteering at a museum. It's about, I'm halfway around the world, but I'm interested in that subject. So could I run the social media for that museum? I think they'll change it.

**Rob Watson** [00:13:42] It's tied in with institutional expectation change about making institutions more porous. So we did a, a newsroom together for criminal justice, and we were talk to practitioners, and they were talking to prisoners. Which they wouldn't normally have done something like that. So, is it... How, how, how much more porous, and how easy is it to get through, tunnel through those barriers, do you think?

**John Coster** [00:14:09] Well, I think, also, using that porous analogy, the barriers aren't as solid as they used to be. From that, from an extent of using young people to write the business case for you, as to why your museum should have an Instagram. Whereas before it would be done on the fact that, you know, controlling the brand, the image, and that kind of stuff, the messaging. Whereas, in fact, because we need people to revisit and engage in something like that, then young people are actually a new audience. So, I think,

it's not older people talking about how they could use Facebook Messenger Live more to get involved with the museum. You're talking about young people going, well, why wouldn't you bring your collection alive using Instagram? And that's where collections and the Digital Persona Project comes in. You've also then got the element of, that porosity, that porosity, you were talking about, where suddenly it's like, well, why can't I have my say? Why isn't what I'm saying important? No one's actually... Funny, we were talking about a project the other day, and it said there was, like, one point two million people in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland for this particular project. And I said, but that's great, isn't it? Because no one's hard to reach. Because there's a geographic boundary. So we just need to now make sure we're going to the right places where those people go, and have a digital element, as well as a physical, come and meet us element. So there is actually no one that is hard to reach. We can't hide behind that anymore. Particularly if you look at something like Build Back Better, and you go, well, if we're going to build back better, what we need to acknowledge is the fact that, you know, how it was before is, we weren't engaging with people because we were hiding behind the fact that they were hard to reach. Well, they're not hard to reach, actually. That now needs to be translated into 'couldn't be bothered' to engage with those people before. And I think once you immerse yourself in that low level, grassroots, front line, whatever you want to call it. You know, where the rubber meets the road, type thing. Where community media exists, you suddenly discover that all of those people that are hard to reach are being serviced, but are being serviced by organisations and community radio, and Facebook pages, and stuff like that. That the corporates or local authorities wouldn't normally engage with, because they're not seen as traditional. And so really, I think the pandemic is probably sped up. If we look at 2008, 2009, when we started Citizens Eye, and got our first iPhone Threes, and you know, and, you know, people like the BBC started engaging us with community media, and then the mainstream media invented User Generated Content as a way of trying to control the narrative of citizens journalists, and stuff. That we're still in that tsunami of change when it comes to the media. Which had been pretty static for two hundred years. Newspapers and... Radio had then come along a hundred years ago. And then, you know, television came along fifty years ago, sixty years ago. It's crazy that the coronation in 1952, 53 was the first time most people had access to television. Well, you know, that's only five or six years older than I am. And I'm fifty-four, so, you know, sixty, sixty-five years ago, television never existed. So we're in this tsunami of change where suddenly, you know, you can pick what you want to watch on the mainstream broadcaster like the BBC. And you've got YouTube and choice. And you don't need a television licence anymore, because you can watch that stuff. Or you don't need that stuff anymore. So I think we're still in this ten, fifteen years in, from 2008. We're still in this tsunami of change with the media, where people are still hankering and keeping hold of the traditional. And in fact, the sooner we let that go, or stop, maybe stop using the term mainstream... But just, what media is servicing that market? Maybe we need to look at some of the terminology and the way that we promote things.

**Rob Watson** [00:17:54] Last question. The push towards digital? Is this, and I think you've hinted at this, is this an entirely digital process?

**John Coster** [00:18:01] No, not at all. God, no, no, no. I think, in fact, the way to actually push it into a corner would be to make it about digital. What we need to do is keep it right in the middle of the room, if you like. In the spotlight. Because suddenly that's the best way of fighting misinformation, and mal-information, and disinformation... Is by keeping it in the middle of the room where there's no light, there's no shadows, if you like. And, and, just be very transparent about what the agenda is of what the person is that's created it. You know, what was the purpose? Well, my purpose of telling you about this is this is my lived experience as a service user or as a worker or as a volunteer. Well, that's much more truthful than, than some of the stuff that we get at the moment. Obviously, there's your version and there's my version. But as for the right version, the only version and the real version, well, that's all open to... That probably doesn't exist. It's both...it's our interpretation of the same thing. So therefore, it's just about being very honest about how you're presenting that to people.

**Rob Watson** [00:19:05] And one very last question.

**John Coster** [00:19:06] That's fine yeah.

**Rob Watson** [00:19:10] The, the topic, the nature of choosing a topic. How, how important is that in terms of what people value and what people care for and about?

**John Coster** [00:19:21] Yeah, I think. Well, I'll give you an example, there was an event recently that we got asked to get involved in, and they said we want to make it about this particular subject. And I said no one will come. Okay. Because the very nature of what that subject was, which is a particularly painful lived experience, people aren't going to come to an advertised event that's in a public space. So what we need to do is, kind of, to make it quite neutral what it's about. So therefore, it is about, you know, it's about a particular agenda and their access to particular services. And then hopefully what will happen is someone will come in, and that is one of their lived experiences. Because most people don't have one lived experience when it comes to something that's traumatic, it tends to come in twos and threes, you know. Sort of, you know, revolving door of criminal justice, addiction, sexual abuse, whatever it is. You know, you're almost lucky to have one. You know, I mean, most of these things, they tend to it tends to come in a package of, a package of abuse and suffering. And then find someone there that can then access you to the group of people that they've got in other support services or other organisations they go to, that are going to benefit from what you do. And that's the trouble. We live in a very results driven society. And when people say charities and third sector organisations need to be more business-like, that doesn't mean it needs to be targets and managers, big meetings and all that. What it just means is more professional in the approach as to how we go about collecting some of that stuff.

**Rob Watson** [00:20:56] And making a difference.

**John Coster** [00:20:58] Yeah, because doing something obviously is better than doing nothing. But what you tend to find is that for every action there's a reaction. So therefore do something, and then something will happen. So many people want that to be the answer. And of course, it's driven by, well, how many people came? Two! Well, okay, I was expecting more than two people. What for the first event for a new service? Well, that's the reason why we're doing six and we've spaced them out over every two, two weeks. Because that way you've got more chance of finding the people and getting them to promote it to the right people that are going to come along. And finally, at the end, in the six and final week, after three months, you might actually find that there's five people there. But, you know, those five people's lived experiences are the evidence that you need in order to identify the funding to provide that service. You were never going to get that in one meeting. Because no one turned up, and they wouldn't, would they, because it was in public place, I don't really want to talk about it. And I think it's, that, that's, what we have to fight, which is, you know, them constantly trying to control. We did that once. No one was interested. Really? Who did you ask? How did you promote it? Well we put it in the newspaper, we put it on the radio. We put it on the TV. Well, the people you were trying to invite don't engage with any of those kinds of things, you know? (Coster, 2021).

Coster, J. (2021, 15th June 2021). *John Coster and the Origins of the Community Media Newsroom* [Interview]. Decentered Media. <https://decentered.co.uk/decentered-media-podcast-117-john-coster-and-the-origins-of-the-community-media-newsroom/>