



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Pop-up journalism: the CBC's low-budget solution for under-reported regions

By Zoë Todd

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Introduction: What am I doing?

February, 2018: I shoved a handful of frozen batteries into my armpit and winced as the cold metal bit skin.

The frigid northern Alberta weather had already drained two packs of nine-volt batteries and I had only one left to shoot the story, about a Canadian dogsledder training for Alaska's Iditarod race. I wedged my gear into knee-deep snow, aiming the camera at his harnessed team. A nearby husky lifted its leg and urinated on my tripod.

Not for the first time I wondered, 'What am I doing?'

I shared the anecdote in a recent cover letter, while applying for jobs thousands of kilometers from that snowy, dog-filled field in northern Alberta. Though I've since left the province, the question hasn't left my mind.

At the time, I was running a pop-up bureau for Canada's national broadcaster. A grand term for a remote office in the basement of an apartment I shared with my cat. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) launched the bureau in January 2018, sending a solo multimedia reporter — me — from its Edmonton newsroom to the northern Alberta city of Grande Prairie. For half a year, I lived and worked alone, filing daily news and feature stories for radio, web and television.

The pop-up bureau was intended to improve relationships and reporting in a previously overlooked region of the province. Johnny Michel, CBC's senior managing director for B.C. and Alberta, calls the model "an evolution of a solution." The corporation's way of using new technology to extend its coverage without overextending its budget.

The average pop-up bureau costs between \$50,000 and \$60,000, Michel said. A small sum when compared to the price tag on opening a permanent outpost with multiple staffers, which Michel estimates would cost about \$3-million.

“The desire was always there, certainly on behalf of the CBC to go into unrepresented communities and connect with them and highlight their stories, but the money was not there,” Michel said. “So, we had champagne taste on a beer budget ... Now, if you will, you can actually have champagne dreams and get it done on a budget.”

Mobile Journalism: ‘Great New Movement’

CBC’s current pop-up model emerged in 2016 in Calgary, Alta., through a collision of fresh funding and a newly established mobile journalism workflow. “We were just lucky the two came along at the same time,” said Helen Henderson, the newsroom’s senior director of news and programming.

In prior years, under a 2012 federal plan to excise 10% of the national broadcaster’s budget, CBC Calgary had sustained deep cuts. At the same time, the corporation in Alberta pivoted to a digital-first approach, prioritizing web stories while still demanding regular radio and television broadcasts.

The newsroom in Calgary constricted, even as demand for content remained high. Henderson recalls facing impossible decisions. “When you lose a third of your colleagues, you can’t do what you were doing before,” she said.

As the number of camera operators and editors dwindled, reporters started experimenting with their smartphones. Ever-evolving camera and editing applications meant they could now create broadcast-worthy audio and video from their palms.

In mobile journalism, Henderson recognised a solution for her strained newsroom. “Oddly, out of those dire circumstances, out of necessity, came this great new movement,” Henderson said. “While it couldn’t replicate everything the big cameras could do, it sure came close and for our purposes it would be very successful.”

By the time CBC funding was restored, following Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s election in 2015, mobile journalism had taken root in Calgary. Rather than retiring the model, Henderson decided to invest in its potential.

The budget cut had hit rural news coverage hardest, she said. With renewed funding, she assigned her newsroom’s newly minted mobile journalists to run a series of temporary bureaus outside the city. Equipped with smartphones and laptops, the reporters embedded in the most under- served towns, villages and First Nations communities of southern Alberta. They advertised the initiative as “pop-up bureaus.”



Tweet posted by the author on her first day at work in Grande Prairie. Image: Twitter/@ZoeHTodd

The idea quickly spread to other CBC newsrooms — prompting management in Edmonton to open its first pop-up bureau in Grande Prairie — and inspiring a national strategy to launch 15 new pop-ups across Canada starting in 2020.

This paper will assess CBC’s pop- up model, using the bureau in Grande Prairie as a case study. I take my original line of questioning beyond “what am I doing?”, to examine the ethics, resources, risks and rewards of pop-up journalism.

The result hangs between a field guide and a field journal of pop-up bureaus in Canada.

The definition: ‘Painfully simple’

Pop-ups are small, temporary bureaus within the coverage zone of existing news agencies. Each bureau is staffed usually by a single reporter, embedded in a community that otherwise would have been under-served by the main newsroom.

Unlike a stringer, a pop-up reporter is a full-time employee with daily news duties. Lasting three to 12 months, pop-ups occupy the space between parachute journalism and permanent satellite operations.

In essence, the model is a new form of mobile journalism in which solo multimedia reporters file stories across platforms for months at a time, without ever stepping foot in their home newsroom.

At CBC Calgary, pop-up journalism has become so well-established that one reporter, Dan McGarvey, has been able to realign his career with the movement. As a pop-up journalist, McGarvey immerses in all the places that have been skimmed over by mainstream media.

“It’s painfully simple,” McGarvey said. “You just turn up and talk to people ... Cutting out the newsroom is amazing. To work from the car or from the field, it’s just opened doors and made covering places possible that weren’t possible before – or not possible in the same time frame.”

Though pop-up reporters are based in a single village, town or city, their work naturally extends into the surrounding region. The bureaus not only deepen coverage of under-served communities, but also cut time in breaking news situations. Moreover, reporters are positioned to uncover valuable sources and exclusive stories, while building relationships and trust with the communities they serve.

Pop-ups therefore are especially useful in geographically vast places such as Canada, where newsrooms may struggle to reach remote areas.

Above all, pop-ups are temporary. Their transient nature allows a newsroom to shift and reallocate limited resources between the communities in need of attention.

When one bureau closes, another can pop up elsewhere. Ideally, a bureau will leave behind an afterglow of meaningful coverage because the main newsroom is at once more conscious of the community, and more knowledgeable of its sources and stories.

The motivation: ‘A different frame of reference’

In addition to boosting coverage of under-reported regions, pop-ups are meant to build trust. Fred Mattocks, CBC’s former general manager of English local services, goes so far as to say that newswriting isn’t an objective – it’s a side effect.

“The core goal of pop-ups is presence,” Mattocks said. “It’s being in places, being part of people’s lives, developing relationships with those people so that then we can tell their stories.”

The model also allows time for a reporting tool elusive to parachute journalists and even stringers: Serendipity.

Some stories and sources can only be uncovered with patience and presence. And though a pop-up may have been motivated by the newsworthy topics a community offers, there will invariably be days that need to be filled with stories reaching beyond the obvious. On those days, local characters step into national headlines uttering the delicious words, “I’ve never been interviewed before.”

Grande Prairie, for instance, is a hub for Alberta’s energy and natural resource economy. A pop-up bureau in the city was expected to turn around stories about lumber, agriculture, oil and gas. The assignment also revealed an overburdened primary education system, an ambitious police chief and mayor, as well as the province’s longest-serving city councilor — a husky-voiced radio host elected by acclamation in 1979, after her boss entered her name into the race without her knowledge.

In this way, the bureaus offer the CBC an opportunity to reconnect with communities that have lost faith in the public broadcaster, Mattocks said. To that end, the corporation updated its strategic plan in 2019 to prioritize local connections through national reporting that remains relevant to smaller communities.

Pop-up bureaus fit into the strategy, sending multimedia reporters into Canada's most underreported regions. The relationship is symbiotic, Mattocks said. A shot at trust in return for a national platform: something remote communities otherwise might only receive for bad, spectacular, or spectacularly bad reasons.

In his role overseeing local services, Mattocks helped push the pop-up model beyond Alberta and into other provinces with a new set of internal pop-up bureau guidelines. Mattocks said he wanted to extend parachute journalism. Stay on the ground.

"The internal challenge is to move our organisation at a very seminal level past our own comfort zones," he said. "We want to go to communities that we don't already serve."

Although the CBC can't afford to open permanent satellite bureaus in every community that deserves the coverage — and there are plenty — Mattocks said the pop-up model allows Canada's national broadcaster to stretch its dollar into each under-reported region in turn.

The ideal assignment is at least six months long, he said, after which a bureau should move on to a fresh location. Ideally, the pop-up reporter will use the time to establish and cement relationships that outlive the bureau.

"There is no world in which a pop-up that meets the guidelines is a parachute operation," Mattocks said. "Parachute is what we used to do. Parachute was back in the days when we had the classic journalism paradigm — and this is all journalistic organisations — of 'we're the experts and you're not', 'we're the voice and you listen'. 'We tell you what the news is'. That's the old paradigm of journalism and of news. Very authorship driven. In a way, very elitist. Pop-ups are based in a different frame of reference. They're based in a relationship between a community and a media organisation."

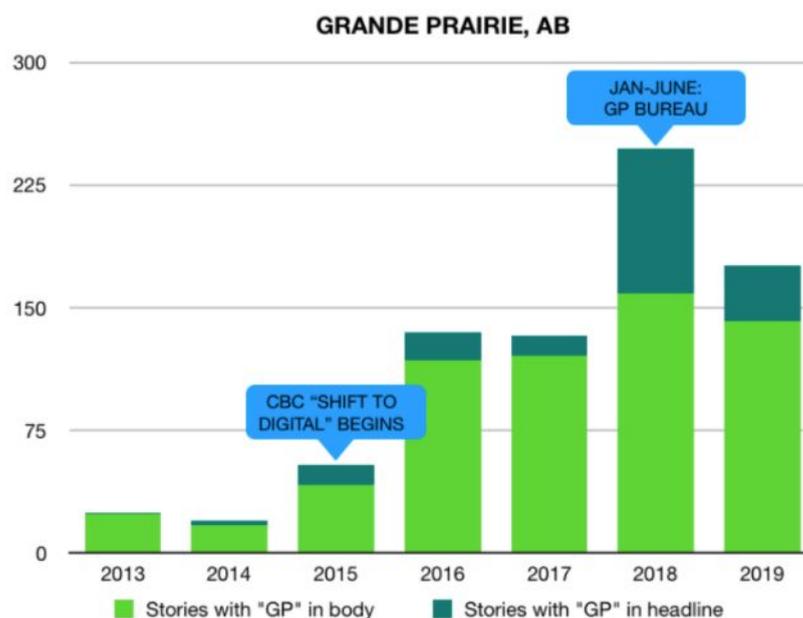
Once a newsroom has rotated through the communities that most need attention, which Mattocks said could take years, a pop-up bureau may reopen in a previously served

region. In the future, Mattocks said he also envisions more ambitious temporary bureaus staffed by two or three people.

The assessment: What happened in Grande Prairie?

The Grande Prairie pop-up bureau operated for nearly five months, from Jan. 8 to June 2, 2018. During that time, the bureau produced 66 web stories with a byline identifying the pop-up initiative. This does not account for bureau stories without bylines, such as hard news copy about Grande Prairie. Based on CBC workflows, each story also would have aired on either radio, television, or both.

The bureau contributed to a significant increase in web stories with “Grande Prairie” in their text in 2018. While overall CBC coverage that named Grande Prairie had already increased in 2015 and 2016 (in line with the corporation’s digital-first strategy in Alberta) it jumped 55% during the year of the pop-up bureau: from 133 stories in 2017 to 247 stories in 2018.

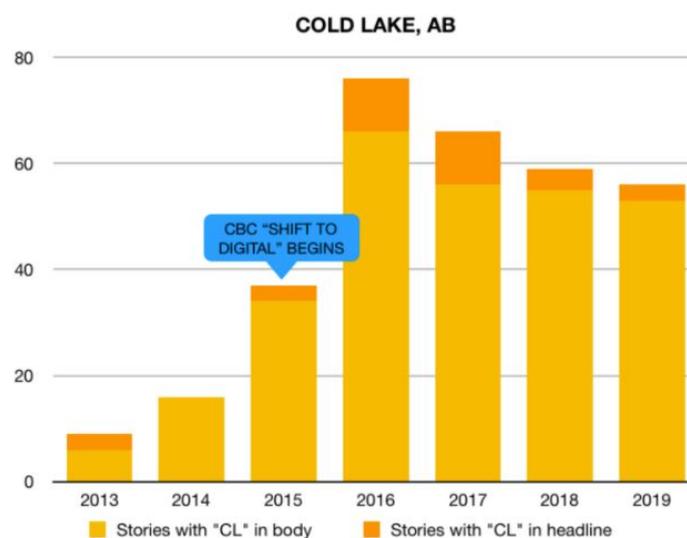


Graph detailing shifting trend of Grand Prairie coverage, 2013-2019

This measure includes stories that refer to the city in passing, for example by naming a politician’s riding or in web links to stories about Grande Prairie. More tellingly, the count of stories using “Grande Prairie” in headlines multiplied more than sevenfold in the same timeframe. Not only do Grande Prairie headlines indicate meaningful coverage of the city, they are also search-engine optimised for readers looking for news about the city. Interestingly, there was a shift in 2018 to naming Grande Prairie in headlines, instead of referring to the community only vaguely as a “northern Alberta city.”

Again, the number of Grande Prairie headlines started rising in 2015, correlating with CBC’s digital-first strategy, but then held steady at 12 to 17 stories a year. The year of the pop-up bureau, CBC produced 88 stories with “Grande Prairie” in the headline. Exactly half included a byline identifying the bureau. The number remained elevated in 2019, with 34 headline stories, suggesting an afterglow, even once the bureau closed.

The similarly remote city of Cold Lake acts as a control within the same CBC coverage zone. Although much smaller than Grande Prairie, Cold Lake offers comparable and newsworthy topics such as a prominent energy industry and vibrant Indigenous communities — in addition to a Canadian Air Force base and air weapons range.



Control group: Cold Lake experienced the same bump with CBC’s shift to digital, but coverage has declined since 2016

As was the case for Grande Prairie, the number of web stories with “Cold Lake” in their text increased in 2015 and 2016, reflecting CBC’s digital-first strategy. Yet there is no spike in 2018. Instead, the number of stories about Cold Lake has gradually decreased since 2016.

Drugs, death and dinos

The Grande Prairie bureau not only increased but also diversified CBC’s coverage of the area. In previous years, words with negative connotations, such as “drugs,” death” and “murder,” had dominated headlines. A minority of stories showcased topics unrelated to crime, emergencies or fatal accidents – namely, dinosaurs and fossils, in connection to a local paleontology museum.

While the number of negative headlines increased in 2018, so did neutral and positive coverage. Headlines are here judged by whether they would influence a reader to think more negatively or more positively about Grande Prairie. “Crime is down, the economy is up and a northern Alberta city is back in business” is an example of a positive headline. “Opioid crisis takes toll on Grande Prairie frontline workers” is an example of a negative headline.

Notably, negative headlines published in 2018 alluded to solutions more often than in previous years. For instance, headlines in 2018 included “Grande Prairie business owners tackle unseen opioid crisis”, whereas a similar 2017 headline stated only that “Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray lead province in per-capita fentanyl deaths.”

In all, the pop-up bureau contributed half of CBC’s Grande Prairie headlines in 2018. The most common topics included community services, infrastructure, education, as well as politics and the economy.

In addition to hard news, the bureau produced numerous profiles of people living in the region. The bureau also introduced audio, video and photography of people and places previously absent from the CBC media archive.

Almost a third of the bureau's 66 stories featured digital video. All but three included original photography.

Of course, the bureau did not serve only Grande Prairie. Nearly a quarter of stories filed from the bureau involved surrounding towns and villages – as far away as the hamlet of La Crête, 480 kilometers northeast of Grande Prairie.

La Crête is virtually inaccessible to daily news reporters in the main Edmonton newsroom, requiring a 14-hour round-trip drive. The Grande Prairie pop-up bureau therefore expanded and deepened CBC's reporting in northwest Alberta, especially within a 200-kilometre radius of the city.

Back to basics

A pop-up assignment can also reinvigorate reporters tired of being deskbound by computer and phone cables. The bureaus offer an escape from the newsroom. A vacation to a fresh beat and untouched stories. "The less time you spend in newsrooms, the better," said McGarvey, who for years has hardly sat behind a CBC Calgary desk.

As a pop-up reporter, McGarvey said he feels as though he has returned to the ideals that propelled him through journalism school. Even though he works for a national broadcaster, he can indulge in the intimacy of local reporting. Door-knocking, boots-on-the-ground, shoe-leather work.

"I think sometimes you lose sight of that as a reporter and you want to do the big stories and you want to do, you know, the serious news," McGarvey said. "I know some journalists might snub some of those smaller stories and community stories, and I might have done that myself a few years ago, but having done them now, I realise that they're actually really important.

"It's changed my work life completely. Made me happier in my own life. Not having to go to work in the traditional sense every day is amazing. I do my own thing. I think it's a

blessing that I picked up the tools and learned how to use them and it's been nothing but good – but it's not for everyone ... It can be hard to find new issues. It's a grind. It's hard. But the thing that makes it worthwhile – the reward – is that independence and doing something that you love. Like I really love doing it. I believe in it.”

McGarvey has carved his niche as a pop-up reporter, turning a novel approach into his de facto beat. But a pop-up assignment should go to anyone willing and capable of the task, says CBC senior MD for B.C. and Alberta, Michel. To that end, in western Canada at least, Michel said the CBC won't designate people as pop-up reporters unless they have built a brand around the model.

The resources: ‘Bureau in a bag’

At minimum, a pop-up bureau requires a laptop, smartphone, reliable internet connection, and a vehicle. Additional funding may be necessary for short-term accommodation, which can double as an office.

Paid-for accommodation will relieve financial pressure on pop-up reporters who must temporarily relocate in order to run the bureau. In the same vein, newsrooms should consider the costs associated with relocation, vehicle maintenance, as well as the necessary data, internet and smartphone application fees.

Depending on a reporter’s skillset, as well as the newsroom’s needs and resources, the pop-up toolkit can and should be supplemented with gear that improves audio and video quality. Investing in the right equipment — and the training required to use it — empowers multimedia reporters to deliver their best-possible work.

Ideally, newsroom managers will consult with the prospective pop-up reporters before finalising the assignment, as multimedia journalists often have preferences for gear.

Longtime CBC reporter Erin Collins, for instance, prefers to work almost exclusively from his smartphone. He also uses a variety of microphones, a tripod, monopod, smartphone clamp, portable light and headphones. Collins calls it his “bureau in a bag.”

He has spearheaded entire broadcasts from his smartphone and in 2018 piloted one of CBC Calgary’s first pop-up bureaus.

“If you’re going to call it a pop-up bureau, it has to be lean and temporary and for a purpose,” Collins said. “I think this is the future: A way to get at these underreported communities. You just send someone there. Just go there. Live there. It takes all the travel out of it; it takes the infrastructure piece away.”

Equipment recommended by Collins and other CBC pop-up reporters includes:

Audio

- Lapel microphone and wireless audio pack
- Shotgun microphone, windscreen and cable
- Omnidirectional microphone, windscreen and cable
- Audio adaptors for various inputs and outputs
- Stand and mount for microphones
- Quality headphones
- Relevant batteries and chargers
- Audio editing software and applications for phone and laptop

Video

- Smartphone add-ons
 - Lenses
 - Tripod and smartphone mount
 - Power bank
- DSLR and/or ENG camera
 - Variety of lenses
 - Relevant camera mounts
 - Tripod and/or monopod and camera mount
- Relevant batteries and chargers
- Light kit
- Mobile transmitter, such as a Dejero GoBox
- External hard drive with adequate storage space
- Video/audio editing software and applications for smartphone and laptop

Pop-up reporters must be able to carry their gear and may need a laptop and camera bag, a backpack or even a dolly cart.

Other fundamental but easily overlooked tools are notebooks and office stationery, bungee cords to secure equipment in vehicles, newsroom logo stickers or decals, as well as vehicle basics.

The Grande Prairie bureau, for one, nearly launched without a desk. And on a memorably muddy spring day, early in the assignment, the company car ran out of wiper fluid. I was forced to stop in a highway pullout, trucks roaring by, to empty a water bottle onto the windshield. I then flopped across the car's hood with a fistful of tissues and scrubbed a porthole into the mud-caked glass.

As much as the right gear, pop-up bureaus need the right reporter. At CBC Calgary, Henderson acknowledged there's a balance between experience and the flexibility to relocate short-term — which she said seemed to be easier for her younger employees. But “you have to be really confident that it's one of your up-and-comers,” she said. “You're not just going to, honestly, take the first volunteer. And if the people who volunteer aren't right, you're just going to have to wait.”

The reporter should be familiar with the newsroom's expectations and workflow, in addition to knowing how to file across its platforms. Regardless of age or experience, Henderson said the candidate must be enthusiastic about the assignment. By nature, pop-up bureaus are isolated. Working solo in an unfamiliar community can feel lonely and exhausting. It takes time for the reporter to adapt, build relationships with new sources, and act as an ambassador for the newsroom and its brand.

In doing so, the pop-up reporter may be held responsible by the community for any negative coverage and could face backlash. The reporter therefore should be prepared for the outward-facing nature of pop-up work, Henderson said. “The smaller the community, the harder it is,” she said.

Even the strongest candidate will require additional training to run a pop-up bureau. Some fundamental aspects of the job — research, news gathering, interviewing and

writing — don't differ from reporting in a newsroom. The remote workflow, however, requires preparation and practice.

Pop-up reporters will pitch and file from the field, in isolation, for months at a time. They should learn to troubleshoot, but must also know who to call if (or, realistically, when) their gear fails, their vehicle breaks down, or their story falls through. Additional safety training may be necessary. To that end, daily check-ins are important to ensure the reporter has returned safely from each assignment. To streamline communication, it may be helpful for a dedicated editor to work closely with the reporter for the duration of the pop-up assignment.

One useful exercise is to run a mock bureau from an isolated corner of the newsroom in the weeks ahead of a pop-up assignment. By simulating a remote workflow, newsrooms can smooth any problems before the assignment begins. During this time, simple tasks such as remotely ingesting video and audio — or even filing expense claims — can be clarified with the reporter.

The risks: One size does not fit all

When done properly, pop-up bureaus benefit newsrooms, their reporters and the communities they serve. But there are various risks and considerations involved.

Pop-ups are medium to long-term niche assignments that can slow the churning output of a multimedia reporter to a trickle if stories run dry. And of course, the project could flop altogether. The financial risk alone may prove insurmountable for some newsrooms. The pay-off of relationships in far-flung places may not be worth the pay-in of launching a bureau.

Canadian private media, pitched into a downward financial spiral, have already abandoned many of the communities in which they can't turn a profit. More than 330 local news outlets across the country have closed since 2008 due to mergers or direct shutdowns, according to the Local News Research Project¹. Less than half that number have sprung up elsewhere, the organisation found. "We're losing the battle in terms of people having diverse sources of news that they can rely on, and not having to rely all on one news org – or maybe none, depending on the community," said principal investigator, Prof. April Lindgren.

Lindgren researches not just the news deserts left behind where coverage dries up, but also so-called "news poverty," which can exist even in places with newspapers, radio or TV stations. Though she welcomes experimental approaches such as pop-up bureaus, Lindgren said communities need rich and granular reporting from diverse perspectives in order to be considered well-served.

Certainly, the national broadcaster has a duty to step up in places without private media, she added. Yet she questioned whether a sole outlet can meet the needs of a community, much less a solo reporter.

¹ April Lindgren and Jon Corbett, 'Local News Map' (Local News Research Project 2020) <<https://localnewsresearchproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/LocalNewsMapDataJune2020.pdf>> accessed 6 August 2020.

“The definition of what it means for a community to be underserved and whether there’s a role for the CBC there is actually a pretty complicated question,” Lindgren said. “If a reporter comes in there and is basically mandated to tell stories to appeal to a national audience, you’re not serving the local community in the way that a truly local — a good local news outlet would. That is, as a forum for really working through local issues and trying to find a way forward for them.”

At CBC Calgary, Henderson says choosing the right reporter to cover a community is a step toward better serving its people. Her newsroom in late 2018 hired Indigenous journalist Livia Manywounds to run a pop-up bureau for the Tsuut’ina First Nation, of which Manywounds is a member.

CBC Calgary has long struggled to reach its surrounding Indigenous communities, Henderson said, much less their stories. In North America generally, mainstream reporting about Indigenous issues is so mired in stereotypes, the Native American Journalists Association in 2017 released a facetious bingo card for clichéd stories, with fields such as “spirits or ghosts,” “dancing,” and “a reservation.”

At the time of her pop-up assignment, Manywounds said she didn’t know any other Tsuut’ina journalists and that she believes she’s the first member of her nation to work for a mainstream media outlet outside of an Indigenous unit.

“I get to put these stories on a mainstream network, where everybody can come and watch,” Manywounds said. “It’s not always going to be the bad story of a missing or murdered Indigenous woman or a man. It’s not always going to be about child welfare or things like that or Indigenous offenders or victims. It’s more.”

But as a pop-up reporter, embedded in her own community, Manywounds said she also found herself weighing critical reporting against the risk of backlash from people who knew where she lived and worked.

Other CBC pop-up reporters have voiced similar concerns about moving to small communities. The loss of big-city anonymity can be draining, as reporters are treated as spokespeople for an entire newsroom and as lightning rods for public ire against its brand.

While working in Grande Prairie, both on and off duty, I frequently interacted with people who expressed disgust for the CBC. Even in a city of more than 60,000 people, I was stopped at the grocery store or approached in the gym with vaguely ominous opening lines such as “are you the girl from the news?”

In addition to financial and coverage risks, it is therefore important for editors to take into consideration the mental health and safety of their pop-up reporters.

Finally, a newsroom must be clear that its pop-up bureaus are temporary – or risk souring their newly acquired relationships with abandonment issues.

Novel approaches

The pop-up bureau on the Tsuut'ina First Nation was the first of its kind and for Manywounds presented an opportunity to share stories about her community, both positive and negative, on a national platform.

Her assignment raised landmarks for CBC Calgary, inviting people who had not previously trusted the broadcaster to connect with someone who was daily in their community and dedicated to covering its concerns and triumphs, as well as its failures.

Once CBC announced the pop-up bureau, Manywounds said “word got around quick; it was like wildfire” within the Tsuut'ina First Nation. Still, she struggled at first to find leads. The internet wasn't a reliable source, Manywounds discovered. There simply wasn't enough mainstream coverage for her to tap into. Exasperated, she drove into her community, “talked to one person and it led to one story and then another and it kind of had a ripple effect.”

Within weeks, tips from community members crammed her inbox and her coverage zone quickly expanded to include at least four other First Nations communities near Calgary. “I had that vantage of being Indigenous,” Manywounds said. “People trust me to tell their stories.”

The trust she gained rubbed off on other reporters, Manywounds said, recalling a particular event she covered with colleague Erin Collins. Manywounds said she briefly left Collins alone, returning to find him joking and laughing with a group of Tsuut'ina leaders. “All of a sudden there's this white guy sitting at the head of the table with all these Indigenous elders,” Manywounds said. “That's a first.”

Manywounds said she knew the bureau had reached maturity when CBC Calgary carried a story about the election of a First Nations chief with the same depth and nuance it would any municipal vote. “When you report in diverse communities, you're going to get an

abundance of stories that were never told before,” Manywounds said. “Not only was I able to tell stories of Indigenous people, but it was kind of like a view into First Nations people’s lives that non-Indigenous people never get to see, right?”

The CBC has also adapted and scaled its pop-up bureaus to accommodate other communities that may not have been well-served by the original model. Again, the Calgary newsroom is something of a pioneer, expanding one pop-up assignment into a roving system and contracting another to a single neighborhood within the city.

Mobile journalist Dan McGarvey piloted both. He launched the corporation’s first roving pop- up bureau and joked that for months he became the “littlest hobo of reporters,” travelling between virtually anonymous hamlets and villages in southern Alberta. “I just turn up somewhere and leave every day and go to a different place,” he said.

Frosty receptions in places where the CBC is not “particularly well-liked” often thawed to cautious conversation, McGarvey said, once he explained his assignment. After all, who isn’t tempted by the unsolicited prompt to tell me about yourself?

By tweaking McGarvey’s assignment into a series of mini pop-ups, CBC Calgary was able to spread its limited resources between communities that on their own wouldn’t have sustained a pop-up bureau.

Within its own city, the newsroom tested a different approach. Reporters had, for some time, struggled to access a neighborhood in northeast Calgary. The area included a growing immigrant and refugee population, which McGarvey broadly defines as “newcomers.”

Many of the newcomers had arrived in Canada from countries with poor press freedom, or where the media was a government mouthpiece. Managers at CBC Calgary suspected the lack of trust in foreign media had carried over to the Canadian broadcaster, which is why in 2018 they assigned McGarvey to run a special pop-up bureau in northeast Calgary.

Instead of driving to the newsroom each morning, McGarvey would set up in public venues such as community centres, libraries and coffee shops. He wore CBC apparel and laid out his gear, essentially fishing for sources. The bait worked. McGarvey soon secured invitations to community events, family dinners and even funerals.

The stories followed and McGarvey's assignment morphed into a city beat, recognisable as a pop-up bureau only because he rarely visited his newsroom. "It's been just like a cool little journey that's all been made possible because of an iPhone," McGarvey said. "It's actually way more rewarding as a reporter, for me, to do this type of journalism."

The conclusion: What I was doing

More than two years have passed since I stood shivering in knee-deep yellow snow, trying to thaw frozen batteries in my armpits.

The bureau closed four months later and I returned briefly to CBC Edmonton before leaving the corporation to pursue a Master's degree at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

To this day, I still receive messages and story tips from people in and around Grande Prairie.



The author's final tweet in her capacity as pop-up bureau journalist for Grande Prairie. (Image: Twitter/@ZoeHTodd)

Despite its unglamorous moments, the bureau remains my proudest achievement. The experience tested my skills and storytelling ability. At times, I felt intense frustration, isolation and the pressure to deliver. More than once I wondered, “What am I doing?”

I knew the corporation was clear in its mandate and dedication to local news, but couldn't afford to be everywhere. Yet as a public broadcaster, the CBC was uniquely positioned to take risks on this new expression of mobile journalism.

A closer look at the bureau in Grande Prairie, and its measurable effect on CBC reporting, proved the potential of pop-up journalism. In practice, the bureau allowed Canada's national broadcaster to stretch its dollar into an underreported region.

Before and during the assignment, I understood the hypothesis that pop-up journalism – as conceived by CBC management – was meant to improve relationships and reporting in underserved regions. Today, I consider the hypothesis proven.