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Fall 12-13-2021

Working with West African Hair Braiders in NYC

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?Houeidja Tall
Practicum Final Report

Reflections on Working with West African Hair Braiders in NYC

My community throughout my time at Newmark has comprised West African hair braiders in Harlem. They come primarily from Francophone countries and find their way to braiding because it is work that does not require extensive formal education. The women work in salons. Because they spend so much time together, often 12+ hours per day, and they share the common experiences of trying to navigate a country in which they face many disadvantages, they form a close community. In one woman I spoke to for [an article I wrote](#), a braider told me that being in the salon with the other women “is the closest I get here to being in Africa.” Through my project, I wanted to ease the effort it takes for braiders to navigate social services, such as applying for welfare, and keep up with news that affects their livelihoods.

Most of the women in this community migrated to the United States in the early ‘90’s-early ‘00s. Through conversations with the braiders, I’ve learned that most of them did not have a detailed plan as to what exactly would happen once they arrived in the US. Hair braiding is a job that requires skill but is not difficult to acquire. These women send remittances home to their families, where the dollar is more powerful than the local currencies, namely the CFA. This is a community with which I am intimately connected; my mother is a hair braider from Mali and I spent much of my childhood and adolescence accompanying her to the salon, where I would watch her attend to her customers and take part in the various conversations that occurred in the room, primarily in Bambara, which is main language spoken in Mali, but is also spoken in various dialects by people in surrounding countries. In these conversations, women would speak about issues ranging from politics to their home lives, to pop culture.

I was a good candidate to become acquainted with this community because it is a community I was raised in; my mother is a hair braider from Mali so I’ve known many of these women since I was a child and they trust me.

These women have different needs, but they include keeping in the loop with what is available in terms of [social services](#) such as housing, transportation or health insurance, which can be overwhelming to navigate when it’s all in English. The forms and the technical vocabulary can be complicated to figure out for native English speakers, let alone the braiders. I know this because often my mom comes home with paperwork that her colleagues have asked her to fill out because they do not understand what it says.

There are constantly news and policy developments that are occurring that may affect them. For example, [this](#) law that will come into effect next year regarding payment apps and transactions may affect them when it comes to filing taxes, which is particularly important because that is a process that is already complicated enough. One braider I spoke to from Mali about the law told me that she was not aware of it, so one concrete way to use my WhatsApp group chat was to notify braiders of news like this. [This](#) topic has been discussed at length among hair braiders,

but has there been any progress made towards making it an actual law? This is the sort of thing my project aimed to clarify, to help put braiders' minds at ease or connect them to resources that would allow them to be certified if necessary.

For my practicum, which is identical to the product I created for Startup Sprint, I decided to create a WhatsApp group that connects NYC-based braiders with social services and keeps them abreast of news concerning their livelihood. I sent out weekly posts detailing resources that are available for residents of New York City and notifying the braiders of news that is related to their line of work.

I noticed that many of the braiders used WhatsApp; it is an easy way for them to stay connected with their family in West Africa and with their coworkers. They use WhatsApp to share life updates, news and memes. I figured that whatever I chose to create for my practicum should involve WhatsApp in some capacity.

So far, seven women have joined the group. Since creating the group in early November, I made five posts. The first post I created was about how to find out if one is eligible for Fair Fares, which is a NYC program to receive half-fare MetroCards. In the post, I mentioned that braiders can have their children help them if they need assistance because most of the braiders have children who are fluent in English and are computer literate. One braider, from Côte D'Ivoire, told me that the posts were useful because they "help me find what I need." This group was a way for resources to be in one, easy-to-find place.

I learned more about the braiders by simply listening to them. I visited salons along 125th Street, the main artery of Harlem, and spoke with braiders about how they get news and some of their concerns. I struck up conversations with them while they were braiding and while they took breaks between customers.

My practicum's strength is that it is hosted on a platform that is used by all of the braiders I encountered, so it was not necessary for them to take extra steps like downloading a new app. One weakness is that braiders were not very active in the group. I could check and see who had read the messages I sent and when I sought out feedback I got positive responses (one woman told me that she got her son to help her apply for Fair Fares after reading my post, for example), but within the group, I did most of the talking. I figured this is because since all of the women knew each other already, they had their own salon-specific WhatsApp groups and chatted there.

Throughout the semester I was in contact with [African Communities Together](#), which is a Harlem-based advocacy organization for African immigrants living in the city. They have expressed interest in taking over the group after I graduate, and they have far more resources than I do.

In addition to my practicum, I was able to write articles with input from hair braiders on 125th Street. In April, I published an article for Documented about how COVID affected the hair braiding industry. I spoke to braiders who were concerned about customers being afraid to

return to salons due to the impossibility of distance between braider and client and how many braiders did not have a financial safety net. The piece ended on an optimistic note about how braiders believe that the industry will eventually recover. I am currently working on another piece for Documented about hair braiders who sustain work-related injuries and how that is complicated by lack of financial and medical stability.

I looked at creating my practicum and working on my articles as ways of giving back to a community that helped raise me. Creating the WhatsApp group was a project that I really enjoyed and I'm happy that it was useful for my community. Writing articles for Documented, which centers immigrant narratives in New York City, was a unique opportunity that allowed me to be published, but it was largely for my community.

[Here is a link to my Medium post.](#)

APPENDIX OF DEGREE HIGHLIGHTS

[This story that I wrote for Documented](#) is the piece that I feel best showcases my reporting and newswriting skills. It was my first published article and one that required me to speak to people in my community. I really put the skills I learned from various classes to use in this piece.

[This news value](#) that I created for my Introduction to Video class was challenging because video is not a media form I am well-versed in, but I found it rewarding. The video focuses on Black women and hair care. It is a very large industry and I was curious about what various womens' routines were like, so I spoke with a few and put this video together.

[This story that I wrote for Harper's Bazaar](#) is one that I am particularly proud of. I spoke to a number of Black reproductive healthcare workers about how they took care of their clientele during the pandemic, the challenges they faced and how they were able to adapt. I pitched it to one place who accepted it and later turned it down after I submitted a draft, but then Harper's Bazaar found the piece timely and accepted it. I am proud not only because it was a significant byline, but because I did not take the first rejection as a no; I persisted and eventually found a home for my story.

[This project for Introduction to Data Journalism](#) was a piece of work that involved data. For this project, I used data from the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment to create a graph and write a story about how film permits decreased sharply during the pandemic but are slowly recovering.

I used [Twitter](#) for callouts and to share my work; it was by far the most successful platform that I used.

These are the ethical guidelines I developed for my community in the Law and Ethics course: In order to protect the people in the communities I am covering, I have been using pseudonyms when I discuss things that make them even slightly uncomfortable. I don't believe my story is worth compromising their sense of safety. For example, I recently wrote a story about hair braiders who have taken up an extra job in the midst of the pandemic. A number of the women expressed concern that this could get them in trouble, so I told them that I would use pseudonyms, which instantly made them more comfortable. I hope this doesn't lessen the legitimacy of the work I do, but rather shows that I care about my community feeling safe around me.

[This worksheet](#) was a major assignment in Startup Sprint. It helped us understand what our community's needs were and how we could address them.

Through my time in j-school, I learned that listening is an ongoing process that never ends. People change, and communities change. My community is growing older and will eventually be replaced by younger women, or women may decide en masse to learn how to braid their own hair and my community may become obsolete. If I had to do this process all over again, I would maybe start the WhatsApp group earlier in the semester. It took so long for me to start the group because I really wanted to come up with a way to serve my community that had not been done before, and I know newsrooms such as Documented and journalists such as Maritza L. Félix have used WhatsApp groups before. However, I should have realized that if it's a method that is not broken, then rather than trying to create something entirely new, I could take what has been done and customize it to my community.

This program required a lot of creativity, especially as we were doing it in the middle of a pandemic. My community in particular was difficult to reach, as I could not go to salons to speak with braiders until around March 2021. Best practices for my community are as follows:

1. Use pseudonyms if possible
2. WhatsApp is a great way to communicate with them, but if possible, meet them in the salons. Seeing how the braiders interact with each other and customers really helps inform the conversations.
3. If possible, offer to help them so the conversation does not seem purely extractive. For example, I would offer to assist helping the braiders finish the ends of the braids while speaking with them.

If I had to offer advice to someone who was just starting out in serving this community, I would say to dive in! It seems much more intimidating than it actually is, and speaking with people and figuring out which questions to ask becomes easier the more you practice doing it. It's not a perfect science, but it does become less nerve-wracking.