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**American Public Journalism:  
Could it work for the CBC?**

by David C. McKie, B.J.

A thesis submitted to  
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Journalism

School of Journalism and Communication

Carleton University  
Ottawa, Ontario  
May 30, 2000  
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acceptance of the thesis**

**American Public Journalism:  
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**Submitted by David McKie, B.J.**

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**Ross Eaman, Thesis Supervisor**



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**July 4, 2000**

## **ABSTRACT**

**Public journalism became an official movement in the United States in 1993. Its advocates hail the movement, which aims to facilitate social change, as a practical way of helping to restore the ideal of participatory democracy; detractors counter that public journalism smacks of a brand of activism that weakens the Fourth Estate's credibility. Nevertheless, the movement has taken hold in dozens of mid-sized cities in the United States and shows few signs of waning. Emerging research credits public journalism with, among other things, restoring citizens' faith in the institutions – including the news media – that they used to distrust.**

**It is for this reason that the CBC, which is yet again in search of a way to make itself more distinct from the private broadcasters, should take a serious look at what the movement has to offer. Public journalism may help Canada's public broadcaster infuse new meaning into a mandate that, in part, calls on it to enlighten and inform.**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**This thesis would have been impossible without the support of a number of people. I would like to thank my supervisor, Ross Eaman, for his sharp analytical sense that challenged me every step of the way. I am grateful to my colleagues at CBC Radio who lent me a sympathetic ear as I struggled to explain a concept that made more sense each time I was able to voice it out loud. A special thanks goes to Jay Rosen, the American journalism professor credited with helping to pioneer public journalism through its initial rocky course. Jay showed immense patience in answering my many questions with precision and humour during numerous conversations over the telephone and in person. And finally, I would like to extend a special gratitude to my wife, Deirdre. This project took me about three years to complete. She demonstrated immense patience and understanding as I withdrew from family life on weekends and evenings to read, write, think, then write some more.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The ideal public sphere of a liberal democracy is...a field of speech through which informed citizens engage, debate, and reach consensus. In this ideal form of polity, the journalist serves as arbiter in an exchange of information that produces an enlightened and decisive citizenry.

-- A Companion to American Thought<sup>1</sup>

The above concept of the public sphere underlies the traditional raison d'être for the Fourth Estate. The concept of a public sphere as a liberal democracy regards the journalist as the arbiter of a space that is conducive for citizens to gather and discuss ideas deliberatively. Yet polls reveal that citizens have shied away from the kind of discussion that should take place in this ideal public sphere. In part, this is because they have not been given enough opportunities. People have become less interested in deliberating about issues that affect their everyday lives, even though they have access to an unprecedented amount of information upon which they can base key decisions. Indeed, people are apparently telling pollsters that they lack the kind of information necessary for meaningful participation in the public sphere. At the same time, however, they are also saying that, given the opportunity for such participation, they would become more involved. For example, an Ekos Research poll found that 46 per cent of Canadian adults want to be actively engaged in government planning, while only 33 per cent were satisfied with the more traditional consultative role.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of people told the pollsters that they felt it important that federal and provincial politicians take an active role in discussions about important issues such as the delivery of government services. It was clear from the answers that people believed it was important to be given a chance to deliberate and they were troubled by their inability to take part in meaningful discussions. This inability led the pollsters to arrive at a paradoxical conclusion: that the more disenfranchised citizens felt, the more they craved to be involved in discussions that governments would take seriously.

Yet news-gathering organizations are more likely to assume, as Walter Lippmann did, that the public has no interest or inclination towards getting involved in meaningful debates or decision-making. Citizens are displaying their frustration, not by complaining to media outlets and demanding better service, but by tuning out. In a sense, they have become the silent majority whose views are seldom reflected in the Fourth Estate's account of daily events. In Yesterday's News, Ryerson journalism professor John Miller reflected on this state of affairs:

In my eighteen years as one of the top editors of the Toronto Star, I directed coverage of such events as Watergate and the Vietnam War. I loved the daily rush of covering world-shaking events. I felt what I was doing was vital to society. It was only when I left to run the journalism program at Ryerson, in 1986, that the doubts began to set in. I became just another reader, albeit a very informed one. And I began to notice that there was something missing. Newspapers were not delivering what I needed, and every indicator said that they were not delivering what most Canadians needed. Years of success had made them arrogant, they had fallen out of touch with concerns of their readers and they had let themselves be hopelessly bound by traditional ways of identifying and writing the news.<sup>3</sup>

Although Miller does not go into much detail about what information people need and how it should be delivered, he does spend a good deal of his book recounting his experiences working for a small-town newspaper in Shawville, Quebec. There he was able to reconnect with citizens by telling stories that reflected their concerns. Miller's

observations typify what many journalists and critics have said about the media's general failure to inform people in such a way as to empower and enfranchise them.

In Power & Betrayal in the Canadian Media, for example, David Taras writes that a "healthy democracy depends on open lines of communication and fundamental respect for the views of citizens. Anything less can lead to dangerous distortions and disfiguring of the democratic process."<sup>4</sup> Taras argues that distortion can be seen on television news and current affairs where entertainment and crime stories have supplanted serious deliberation about matters such as politics.

Many American scholars and journalists have reached similar conclusions, albeit for different reasons. In Good News, Bad News, Jeremy Iggers describes how the democratic process is allowed to be distorted. He then explores the questions that inevitably surface when citizens tell journalists they are not interested in what the Fourth Estate has to say. Iggers argues that this cynicism is rooted in the profound contradiction between the stated mission of the Fourth Estate, to provide citizens with the information they need to play an active role in democratic life, and the reality of daily practice, which systematically sacrifices the values of public service.

The loss of connection and trust between the public and the news media is costly to both citizens and journalists. For citizens, the news media are an important gateway connecting them to their government, their communities, and each other. Journalists need the public even more than the public needs journalism.<sup>5</sup>

The time has come to initiate a dialogue about the connection between journalism and the public sphere because a citizenry that perceives no need to deliberate and harbours an unhealthy and dismissive attitude towards institutions has little use for the news media. Some critics such as American pollster Daniel Yankelovich, contend that

this disconnection between the public sphere and journalism is troubling because of the influence journalists can have on citizens.

In an era of information overload, it is the media's judgment of just how important an issue is that makes the critical difference to how seriously average Americans will take it and what action they will be willing to support -- especially if the action involves inconvenience, discomfort or pain in the pocketbook.<sup>6</sup>

Though the degree to which the media shape public attitudes has been questioned over the years, there is considerable evidence to support Yankelovich's thesis about citizens taking their cues from what they read, hear and watch. Scholars such as Jeremy Iggers, argue that the media's characterization of public life, especially the activities of institutions such as governments, has forced people to withdraw from the public sphere. Stories dominated by conflict do little to inspire people to find solutions to their problems. However, there is some evidence that people might be willing to tune back in if stories were presented in a different context. In a study conducted by Ekos Research, people claimed that they would become involved in public deliberation under the right conditions. That is, conditions in which they were guaranteed involvement in give-and-take discussion with fellow citizens, experts -- and even politicians -- that would lead to solutions.

Yankelovich has advanced the same argument in Coming to Public Judgment. Other scholars have added to the discussion by pondering ways to re-energize public life. In the late 1980s, philosophers, journalists, scholars and some publishers began reflecting on the connection between the public sphere and the news media. In 1993 that thinking crystallized into a movement called "public" journalism, so named because its defenders hail it as a *modus operandi* that media outlets must adopt if they are to re-engage a public

that is increasingly turning away from serious journalism and towards entertainment and infotainment.

Public journalism defies easy description. Its major proponents, such as communication scholar, Jay Rosen, and Wichita Eagle retired editor, Davis “Buzz” Merritt, describe it in part as an ongoing experiment that attempts to turn people into caring citizens determined to become more active in finding solutions to some of the problems they face, and determined to make the institutions that govern their lives and their communities work. To accomplish this goal public journalists are encouraged to take a more activist stance as facilitators of social change. Such activism goes beyond the more traditional definition of journalism which regards the reporter as an objective chronicler of public events who leaves it up to citizens to decide what they’ll do with the information they have been given. Merritt and Rosen argue that public journalists must consider themselves activists, not as advocates of a certain opinion or point of view, but as proponents of effective deliberation to empower people to solve problems they share in common and that need urgent attention. This brand of activism has exposed Rosen, Merritt and their many supporters to harsh criticism from journalists who argue that activism crosses an ethical line into the very partisanship they left behind before the days of the penny press.

The two men call their brand of journalism a movement, which is literally defined “as a series of activities working towards an objective.”<sup>7</sup> For the two advocates, the activities in the definition could be the experiments that media outlets – including Merritt’s Wichita Eagle – continue to initiate, and the objective is likely the fostering of a vibrant public sphere.

Discussion of the movement has been tumultuous. An editor of a book that assesses public journalism says that in the thirty years he has been in the business as a journalist, scholar and author, he has never seen an issue as divisive, bitter and controversial.<sup>8</sup> Controversial though it may be, public journalism is characterized, in the words of one prominent American communication historian, as “the best organized social movement inside journalism in the history of the American press.”<sup>9</sup>

The debate is also significant because the proponents of public journalism are among the few who are responding to a problem, that even traditionalists acknowledge exists, by experimenting with different forms of coverage. The results have been mixed. Nevertheless, these experiments prompted Jay Rosen to write the provocatively titled: What are Journalists For? The book was published in 1999. In defending public journalism, Rosen insists that it is far from being a panacea. Rather it is a good idea that is worth exploring at a time when few people have come up with anything better than defending the status quo.

This debate over public journalism has important implications for the Fourth Estate. Rosen and his supporters argue that if people drift farther away from key institutions by refusing to vote in greater numbers, refusing to volunteer their time, and regarding their politicians and other opinion leaders in a cynical light, democracy itself becomes even more dysfunctional. In the process, the news media become increasingly marginalized as untrustworthy and useless institutions. The result could be even fewer people consuming news from the broadcast and print media outlets. But there is more to their argument than mere self-preservation. Rosen suggests that as an institution, the Fourth Estate has a duty to uphold and promote the ideals that make a participatory

democracy possible. Citing intellectuals such as American philosopher John Dewey, Rosen reasons that journalists can no longer assume that there is a public sphere out there waiting to receive information and act upon it. If this is the case, he continues, then it is up to the Fourth Estate to act in three distinct ways: establish the conditions to facilitate the creation of the public sphere; actively help citizens make sense of the information they are given; and help them use that information to find solutions to problems that the community or institution is facing. This brand of activism makes public journalism distinct from more traditional forms of journalism. And that distinction has been the subject of bitter debate in the United States between supporters of the movement and many elite journalists at publications such as the Washington Post and the New York Times.

Thus far, that debate has been largely uninformed with critics erecting straw men to tear down and advocates struggling to convert their admittedly vague theories into practice. In the last few years, some scholars have intensified their efforts to assess the movement's success and called for more research that would allow public journalists to, at the very least, come up with a definition. In his introduction to Assessing Public Journalism, Edmund Lambeth writes:

This book brings together a number of different research projects and reflective essays that assess public journalism. They aim to lower the decibel count, modulate the rhetoric, refine and advance the dialogue, and stimulate research. Given the history of public journalism, these goals may seem overly ambitious.<sup>10</sup>

The goal of this thesis is to assess whether public journalism is feasible for Canadian media outlets, particularly the CBC. For instance, in order for journalists in Canada to embrace the movement, they must adopt the public journalist's notion of a public sphere. "The problem is how to do that?" says Carol Reese Dykers, a



communications professor at Department of Sociology & Communication at Salem College based in North Carolina. “The culture of journalism is so steeped in the ‘outsider’ approach as opposed to covering people participating in public life. The problem is how to raise journalists' awareness of this as news.”<sup>11</sup>

In the first chapter, I will attempt to put public journalism into context by explaining what it is and chronicling its evolution. Chapter two will feature three case studies of public journalism in action, followed by a general analysis of the movement and a specific critique. Chapter three will seek to deepen the understanding even further by critiquing and discussing the philosophy that influences Jay Rosen, Davis Merritt and other proponents. Chapter four shifts the discussion north of the border by looking at the Canadian experience with public journalism with a particular emphasis on two projects, the National Film Board’s “Challenge for Change” and the CBC’s “Eyes on Alberta.” And finally chapter five tackles whether the CBC would find it feasible to adopt the movement as its own.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richard Wightman Fox and James T. Kloppenberg ed., A Companion to American Thought (Cambridge Mass: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1995) 353.

<sup>2</sup> Ekos Research Associates, Rethinking Citizen Engagement (Ottawa, 1998), 3.

<sup>3</sup> John Miller, Yesterday's News: Why Canada's Daily Newspapers are Failing Us, (Halifax: Fernwood, 1998), 151.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted in Media magazine, 6 (no.1, Spring, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Iggers, Good News, Bad News, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Yankelovich, Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 87.

<sup>7</sup> Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, (Springfield Massachusetts, Merriam-Webster, 1985), 776.

<sup>8</sup> Assessing Public Journalism, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Schudson, "What Public Journalism Knows About Journalism and Doesn't Know about Public", in The Idea of Public Journalism (New York, Guilford Press, Inc. 1999), 210.

<sup>10</sup> Assessing Public Journalism, 3.

<sup>11</sup> E-mail interview with Carol Reese Dykers, February 2 1999.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **The Origins of Public Journalism as a Movement that Facilitates Social Action**

In general, some high-profile public journalists argue that what differentiates them from their traditionalist colleagues is their notion of the public sphere, the space in which citizens deliberate, and the role the Fourth Estate plays in that space. These public journalists who take their movement to its most extreme and innovative form assume the responsibility for creating a public sphere if none exists; then motivate citizens to not merely discuss issues, but use that deliberation to find solutions to their problems. In fulfilling these two functions of creator and motivator, the public journalist transcends the traditional model of journalist as mere disseminator of information to a more activist role: facilitator of social change. Facilitation is accomplished by encouraging – and in some cases demanding -- deliberation, not taking sides by advocating one solution over another.

Finding a solution is the public journalist's ideal, just as forcing a government to change or a corrupt official to resign may be the ideal of the investigative journalist. A prosecutorial exposé that fails to hit the mark is still an example of investigative journalism; and a project that fails to help citizens is still an example of public journalism. The point to be made here is that different kinds of journalism are defined by the ideals they embrace but seldom achieve. Such is the case for public journalists who seek an innovative role for the Fourth Estate and advocate a more vigorous role for citizens in the public sphere. The facilitation of social action begins in earnest once citizens are allowed to coalesce around an issue, learn about its urgency and look for solutions. As we shall see in subsequent chapters such an ideal is best attained at the community level, not during large events such as elections.

Public journalism is a product of its times, just as other forms of journalism have been reactions to historical circumstances. To help situate public journalism, let us briefly examine how it differs from investigative and adversarial journalism.

Investigative became *de rigueur* in the 1960s when a number of news organizations such as the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune and the Boston Globe began spending money on investigative journalism, in large part because the Johnson administration had continually lied to the American people and the press about that country's role in the Vietnam War.<sup>1</sup> Reporters who followed federal politics were unwilling to take what politicians had to say at face value. Watergate seemed to provide further concrete proof that politicians were motivated by factors such as greed and power – not the public good. Hungry to uncover the next scandal, investigative journalism, which in many ways resembled the muckraking tradition at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, became a new weapon media outlets tried to use to enhance government accountability. In his examination of investigative journalism's evolution, James Aucoin concludes that by 1975, "investigative journalism had evolved into a mature, viable practice that was part of, but distinct from, conventional journalism. Throughout the 1960s and early 70s, the practice of investigative journalism developed technical skills for investigating public issues and established clear standards of excellence."<sup>2</sup>

Against this backdrop came the establishment of an organization called Investigative Reporters and Editors. The goal of the I.R.E. was to provide logistical and educational support for investigative journalists looking to sustain the practice within their newsrooms and improve their techniques. The I.R.E. also attempted to craft a definition for investigative journalism, but not before surveying journalists. "Slightly more than 89 per cent of the respondents agreed with the IRE definition that investigative journalism is in-depth reporting

that discloses something significant that someone wants to keep secret, and is largely the reporter's own work."<sup>3</sup> In 1996, the definition was reworked to take "the practice into a more pro-active role, uncovering systemic failures and misguided policies."<sup>4</sup>

According to Michael Schudson, the adversarial journalism that arose during the 1960s was another response to the distrust society had of governments and politicians. Where investigative journalists may have been out to unearth corruption, adversarial journalists questioned the very nature of government itself. "For the press, which had long pictured itself as a loyal opposition to government, the stress on 'loyal' was muted, while emphasis on opposition was fueled by, and in turn helped, feed the critical culture arising in the government itself."<sup>5</sup> Schudson points out that the rebellion of reporters, young and old, was a manifestation of a social and cultural movement. The hostility towards authority meant that some reporters, especially at publications outside the mainstream such as the Rolling Stone magazine, were out to expose and challenge not only the corrupt official or politician, but also the very philosophical foundations upon which good government apparently rested.

Although public journalists regard themselves as agents of change, they do not fall entirely in the investigative or adversarial camps. While some initiatives may contain elements investigation and the adversarial spirit, public journalism does not target government or power structures per se. The movement looks for ways to help people restore faith in their institutions, and tries to work with citizens to make those institutions more responsive to societal concerns. In attempting to achieve this goal, public journalists are more likely include public officials in their coverage as participants who also possess answers to longstanding problems that may be plaguing the community.

Public journalism developed in the 1980s and 1990s, a stretch of time when the movement's advocates worried that citizens seemed to be increasingly disengaged from the institutions that governed their lives. Advocates such as Jay Rosen, considered by most observers to be the movement's founding father, felt that it was time for journalists to help revive democracy by turning readers, viewers and listeners into more active citizens. In June 1994, several months after public journalism became an official movement, Jay Rosen delivered a speech at an event organized by the American Press Institute. At the time, the journalism professor at New York University headed up a new organization called the Project on Public Life and the Press. More than 171 newspapers were working with the project, which had recently received a half a million dollar grant from the Knight Foundation. Rosen spelled out his general notion of the journalist as facilitator of social change, all the while insisting that the public journalism movement was a work in progress and subject to a lot of experimenting. "The most important thing that one could say about public journalism I will say right now: we're still inventing it. And because we're still inventing it, we don't really know what it is." <sup>6</sup>

However, as William Woo, former editor of the St Louis Post Dispatch and a frequent critic of public journalism, points out in his assessment, Rosen had "more than just a "vague notion" of what public journalism "might or ought to be." <sup>7</sup> Indeed, Rosen had been writing, lecturing and thinking about public journalism for many years. And the impetus for his thinking about public journalism came from an academic debate that occurred in the 1920s.

## **The Philosophical Origins of the Idea**

Rosen suggests that the seeds of the public journalism debate were planted in 1920s when two high-profile American thinkers advanced their conflicting theories about the nature of the public, the decision-making powers of citizens, and the role of government and the media. In essence, it was a debate about the celebration of human reason that had taken shape in eighteenth-century Europe and America. Enlightenment philosophers had argued that humans were rational beings capable of making up their own minds about the complex issues of the day. But World War 1 had soured Walter Lippman on the Enlightenment ideal. Lippmann, a journalist, social philosopher, and co-founder of the New Republic, had become disillusioned with the propagandistic tactics the federal government had adopted during the war. Such disgust caused Lippmann to, among other things, conclude that citizens lacked the information they required to make decisions about issues that affected their lives. He argued that the world was too complex an environment for people to understand and governments had become too adept at shaping reality to suit their shortsighted and partisan means. In 1922, he expressed many of these views in Public Opinion in which he wrote: "The common interest very largely eludes public opinion entirely and can only be managed by a specialized class."<sup>8</sup> Three years later, in The Phantom Public, he took the argument one step further by dismissing the public as a phantom and the opinions of citizens as irrational forces. "With the substance of the problem it can do nothing but meddle ignorantly or tyrannically," he concluded.<sup>9</sup> And, as the title of the book suggests, Lippmann also felt that there was no such thing as a public.

John Dewey, described as the most significant American philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century, took issue with Lippmann's dour assessment. Dewey called Public

Opinion an indictment of contemporary democracy in which citizens should be able to use reasoned discussion to navigate their way through complex issues. In The Public and Its Problems, which Dewey wrote in 1927, he argued that the public was merely unformed, or “inchoate,” and would emerge only if politics, communities, schools, culture, education and the press did their jobs well. Such an environment would allow people to have a greater say in the way they were governed. And by taking part in such a deliberative process citizens would be more knowledgeable and therefore less vulnerable to the manipulations of bureaucrats and governments.<sup>10</sup>

Back and forth this argument went... What could we reasonably expect of citizens? Yes/no decisions at election time or participation in a fuller and richer public life? Was the public an illusion, an impossibility, or was it merely inchoate, unformed? If we want democracy to improve, should we focus on government and its decisions, as Lippmann did, or should we emphasize the civic climate in which people became a public, as Dewey did. These, it seemed were fundamental questions. They determined your approach to everything, including your approach to journalism.<sup>11</sup>

For Rosen, Lippmann and Dewey had differing visions for the press: the former reasoned that experts in government were the ones who knew best and therefore it was up to them to pass information on the citizens. The news media became the vehicle for that information; and the citizens were the uncaring and passive recipients. Lippmann’s analysis went against the Enlightenment model, which assumed citizens were part of a ready-made public sphere that received the information, then discussed and acted upon it. Dewey disagreed, arguing that the public was inchoate, for some of the very reasons that Lippmann had spelled out. However, Dewey, without specifying how, felt that institutions such as the media had the ability to create the public, and it was the government’s duty to act upon the demands that people formed during their deliberations. Rosen and other public journalism advocates took Dewey one step further by prescribing a more vigorous role for citizens who



would not only deliberate, but actively seek solutions to which governments and institutions would be beholden.

By embracing Dewey, Rosen was rejecting Lippmann's argument that citizens only existed to be spoon-fed information. Nevertheless, Rosen argues that the latter's point of view prevailed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One reason is the rise of opinion polling, which began in the 1930s. The polls give us the illusion that there's a fully formed public on virtually every question. Commission a poll and 'public opinion' springs magically to life. When polling became standard practice in journalism, the questions raised by Lippmann and Dewey seemed to fade away. At the same time the commercial thrust of the news media suppressed the debate about the nature of 'the public.' Clearly there were readers and viewers on the other end of the news: didn't they constitute a public? Why worry about it, as long as you're selling papers.<sup>12</sup>

Rosen also argued that the doctrine of objectivity also had a role to play in silencing Dewey because objectivity is more about *informing* the public, than *forming* it. "That question faded from view when objectivity became the professional stance of the journalist."<sup>13</sup>

However, objectivity was not always a comfortable fit for journalists and, according to some media critics, proved to be inadequate in dealing with serious events including McCarthyism, the Vietnam War and Watergate. In his book, Sustaining Democracy, Robert Hackett argues that objectivity has survived because journalists have been unable to devise a better alternative.

Despite its continued efforts to legitimize itself through its claims of objectivity, the news system itself is at a crossroads. Like Leninism before the Soviet Union's implosion, the ideology of objectivity is beginning to resemble a walking corpse, kept in motion only by the interests vested in it and the absence of a stronger alternative. More and more, thoughtful journalists themselves are raising fundamental questions about the public philosophy and the future of their craft.<sup>14</sup>

Rosen and some of his closest followers suggest that objectivity underwent the most intense scrutiny in the 1980s and 1990s. Simply informing the public did not seem to be

working because people were tuning out and, in the process, becoming disengaged from institutions such as governments – and the Fourth Estate. Democracy was at stake, decried the public journalists, and it was the job of the news media to help set things right by imploring a two-step process: following Dewey’s suggestions about creating the environment for deliberation to occur; then pushing the boundary even further than Dewey would have imagined by encouraging citizens to find solutions. These solutions could either help people solve problems themselves, or be presented to governments and their bureaucrats before they made crucial decisions about important issues of the day.

Well in theory if you had an active and engaged community that was successfully producing the conditions for a democratic debate, then the press could in fact could serve as an adjunct to that debate as an information source. What drove public journalism was the perception that that wasn’t occurring and so it’s a pragmatic judgment made about particular circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

With that assessment, the way was paved for the introduction of public journalism and the vociferous debate that it precipitated.

## **The Evolution of the Practice**

The debate began with what Rosen considers to be the first public journalism experiment conducted in 1988 by a newspaper most people had never heard of. Columbus, Georgia, is a small city about 100 miles southwest of Atlanta that failed to benefit from the economic boom that had swept through much of the South in the 1970s and 1980s. Columbus had depended on the textile industry and a nearby military base for its economic sustenance. The economic base was shifting to more service-oriented companies, and yet the schools seemed unable to provide an educated workforce needed to serve this higher-waged economy.

That was no surprise because nearly 40 per cent of the residents were functionally illiterate, the school system was segregated, and ignorance and poverty prevailed.

Still, there were other problems. The middle-income wage earners lacked access to amenities and civic improvements and the political system was slow to adjust to a changing demographic which witnessed blacks form the majority in the city schools and constitute a third of registered voters. There were also questions about the ability of the community's civic, political and business leaders to meet the needs of blacks and whites.

Jack Swift and the other editors at the daily newspaper, the Ledger-Inquirer, felt there was a need to find answers. They planned a series of articles that looked at the future of the city and the issues it needed to address. The paper used traditional methods to get the story out. It surveyed local residents about their ties to the community and their vision for the future. A team of reporters conducted in-depth interviews with residents in their homes while other correspondents talked to experts and key figures within the city. The research from this initiative formed the basis of an eight-part series called "Columbus: Beyond 2000," which was published in the spring of 1988. In the stories, people said that they liked the community and wanted to stay. However, the pieces warned of difficulties such as transportation bottlenecks, low wages, lack of nightlife, bad schools, and a perception that the local elite had created a fiefdom from which they were operating.

The lack of response to the series puzzled Swift and some of his colleagues because people seemed so worried about the community during the interviews with the reporters. As a result, the paper decided to initiate a soul-searching exercise that would force people to find solutions to the problems about which they had expressed concerns.

The Ledger-Enquirer organized a public meeting at which 300 people attended and talked for six hours. Many of the participants said they had never taken part in public life before. Then Swift organized a barbecue at his home for 75 interested citizens. Out of that gathering emerged a new organization called United Beyond 2000. A task force was also formed.

According to the senior reporter on the project, Billy Winn, the community-based task force threatened to disband if Swift did not get involved. This left him with a moral dilemma. The choice, said Winn, seemed to be “lead or abandon Beyond 2000. We decided to lead.”<sup>16</sup>

As a result, Swift became a leading member of the group’s 13-member steering committee. He and the other participants saw their role as catalysts for discussions about important issues facing residents such as race relations, the lack of recreation, child care, and special problems teenagers were experiencing. Swift also teamed up with a black state court judge John Allen to hold backyard barbecues at their homes. There was no agenda other than bringing people from different races together in the hope they would discover mutual interest and respect. This “friendship network” grew to about 250 members and included everyone from white bank managers to black barbershop owners. The paper continued to sponsor other public events, including a town meeting for teenagers. Swift would later say that this initiative was akin to leaping “across the chasm that normally separates journalism from the community.”<sup>17</sup>

The Ledger-Inquirer reported on the city’s failure to set a clear agenda and explained how other cities of similar size were trying to think about the long term. And the paper continued to conduct enterprise reporting in an effort to keep the Beyond 200

discussion going. **United Beyond 2000** was significant for two reasons. First, advocates of public journalism such as Jay Rosen and Cole Campbell, editor of the St. Louis Post Dispatch, point to it as the first experiment in the art of journalist as facilitator of social action, even though Jack Swift did not have a name or concept for what he was doing. Second, this example influenced Rosen, who would eventually team up with Davis Merritt to become one of the leading proponents of a movement called public journalism.

### **Jay Rosen and Davis (“Buzz”) Merritt**

Jack Swift’s experiment at the Ledger-Inquirer prompted Jay Rosen to think about practical ways of breathing new life into Dewey’s notion of a public and the conditions that would allow it to develop, thrive and force governments to take notice. A year after the paper published its **Beyond 2000** series, the assistant professor of journalism at New York University was delivering speeches to editors who were concerned about their inability to reach readers who seemed more disconnected than ever before. Rosen had heard about the **Beyond 2000** project and was intrigued about what motivated Jack Swift and some of his editors to take that leap “across the chasm that normally separates journalism from the community.”

Rosen concluded that Swift had taken up the cause for re-invigorating a community or public sphere because the sphere had been weakened by leaders whom citizens had seemed to dismiss as ineffective.

The leap he talked about was toward a different ethic that could only be described using different words: democracy, community, citizenship, deliberation, public life. As I conversed with Swift and studied his actions, I found myself taking on a new role: friendly interpreter of a promising venture. From 1990 to 1992 I began to speak and write about the Ledger-Enquirer, addressing myself to journalists and their imaginations. The aim

was not to duplicate the Columbus case; it was to get journalists curious about an alternative goal: seeing the public into fuller existence.<sup>18</sup>

During the time Rosen was delivering speeches about the Ledger-Enquirer experiment, he established a working relationship with Davis Merritt, a veteran of the business who had been plying his trade for over thirty years, a third of that time at the Wichita Eagle in Kansas. Merritt had never heard of Beyond 2000, yet in 1990 the editor decided that the Eagle would try to help citizens deliberate about important issues, in this case, the gubernatorial race. Feeling he needed to re-think what he was doing and why, Merritt took a year's leave of absence to write a book about that "promising venture," which would later become officially known as public journalism.

There are many people such as Cole Campbell who featured prominently in public journalism's creation and development, but Merritt and Rosen remain the key figures because they took the idea, which had been debated in the scholastic world, and combined it with the experience of daily journalism. The two men became the co-founders of public journalism.

## **It Began with Election Coverage**

The same year that the Ledger-Inquirer was experimenting with a new form of citizen engagement, other journalists began searching for other ways to cover elections. In the 1988 presidential election the two candidates seemed to be more interested in posing for photo-opportunities than discussing substantive issues with a public that needed to understand them. Instead of explaining his views on defence, Democrat, Michael Dukakis doffed an oversized Army helmet and rode in a tank. It was a photo-op that disgusted many journalists. Yet by showing up, covering the event, and sneering from the sidelines, argued Rosen, the press corps had sanctioned Dukakis' antics as a legitimate form of communication with the electorate. Journalists such as Davis Merritt vowed to cover elections differently by eschewing photo-ops and forcing candidates to address issues that concerned citizens.

As Merritt thought about different ways of doing his job, scholars were also pondering the state of public discourse. In 1989, a translated version of Jurgen Habermas' The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere echoed some of Dewey's views about deliberation. Influenced by the work of the German philosopher, American pollster Daniel Yankelovich wrote Coming to Public Judgment two years later. Judgment, he argued, was the state of mind that people reached once they had an opportunity to consider a problem, come to terms with their own prejudices and biases, listen to what other people with differing values have to say then arrive at a compromise. Like Dewey and Habermas, Yankelovich reasoned that an open discussion assisted by a free press

would allow citizens to have a greater hand in deciding the direction their future should take.

The main precondition of self-governance is the simple, fundamental ability to communicate with each other across the barriers of individual differences and interests, nationalities, cultures, and frameworks for the purpose of setting common goals and strategies for achieving them. It is this ability that Habermas equates...with the essence of human rationality. Although it is difficult to practice this form of rationality, it is far from impossible.<sup>19</sup>

During that same year, some media executives were also talking about the need for reform. James K. Batten, the late president of Knight-Ridder, was growing increasingly alarmed because the newspapers in his chain were losing readers. During a speech in 1989, he quoted statistics that demonstrated that in 1988, 51 per cent of citizens said they read a paper every day. That figure represented a 22-per-cent drop over the previous 19 years.<sup>20</sup>

In 1990, Batten produced the results of Knight-Ridder's research illustrating that people who feel more connected to their communities are more likely to buy newspapers. However, there appeared to be more to Batten's concerns than the bottom line. During his speeches, Batten suggested that it was wrong for newspapers to assume that citizens were connected to their communities and willing to participate in public affairs. He, too, was challenging the Enlightenment assumption that the public was a reality that was out there ready to receive and discuss information.

The 1990 gubernatorial campaign provided one of Batten's papers, the Wichita Eagle, with the first opportunity to test-drive the new approach to covering public affairs that Batten, Rosen and Merritt had been preaching. For Merritt, the Eagle's 1990 Voter Project, which he initiated, would accomplish two important goals: re-establish the connection with the citizens of Wichita; and force the politicians into a dialogue with the



people they are supposed to be serving. After polling residents on the issues they considered important, the Eagle concentrated on ten areas: education, economic development, the environment, agriculture, social services, abortion, crime, health care, taxes and state spending. Those issues became the focus of the campaign, not photo opportunities and other staged events that had dominated election coverage. Using a number of methods, the paper insisted that the candidates address concerns revealed in the polls, and if they failed to answer specific questions, the Eagle would run white space where the answer should have gone. Candidates quickly got the message: they had to follow the citizens' agenda. As an opening salvo to his paper's election coverage on September 9, 1990, Merritt wrote in his column:

In the interest in disclosure as the 1990 Kansas gubernatorial campaign begins, I announce that the Wichita Eagle has a strong bias. The bias is that we believe the voters are entitled to have the candidates talk about the issues in depth. <sup>21</sup>

The Voter Project was judged to be a success, in part because it was judged to have increased voter turnout. Merritt claimed that the paper's post-election research had proved that people "are in fact interested in real issues." <sup>22</sup> This is why the Eagle used the same techniques to cover the 1992 presidential elections.

The Voter Project was a starting point in that it tried to stimulate a more constructive dialogue in a public arena that included citizens and the political candidates. However, later initiatives fit more closely with the definition of public journalism as a facilitator of social change by creating opportunities for a more vigorous participation by citizens and media outlets.

## **Public Journalism is Born**

With the likes of Batten, Merritt, Habermas, Yankelovich, and others arriving at similar conclusions about the state of the public sphere, Rosen decided that it was time to move. He sought to create an environment that would allow experiments such as *Beyond 2000* and the Wichita Eagle's 1990 Voter Project to flourish and develop new dimensions. Financial and logistical support would come from four main civic-oriented research organizations: The Poynter Institute for Media Studies; The Knight Foundation; the Pew Charitable Trusts; and the Kettering Foundation.

The Kettering Foundation, a small think tank based in Dayton, Ohio, specialized in assembling public forums and round-table discussions. In fact, the foundation helped Jack Swift of the Ledger-Enquirer plan his public meetings. By providing trained discussion guides with titles such as “Citizens and Politics” and trained moderators, the foundation’s work had sustained thousands of gatherings, formally known as the National Issues Forums.

The Poynter Institute for Media Studies was also disturbed by the 1988 election coverage and decided to look for different ways to cover presidential elections by taking the “campaigns out of the hands of the spin doctors and (giving) them back to the voters.”<sup>23</sup> The institute teamed up with the Charlotte Observer – also in the Knight-Ridder chain -- to design an approach similar to the one Davis Merritt had envisioned in 1990. However, there was an important stipulation that would become a permanent feature of many future initiatives and criteria for outside support: the Observer had to team up with a television station. The institute’s rationale went this way:

The Poynter Institute was founded in 1975 as a center for print journalists, but in recent years had added a broadcast curriculum. For the experiment to ignore

television – what some have called ‘the social brain of democracy’ – would make it incomplete from the beginning. We hoped that a newspaper-television collaboration would surpass the isolated efforts of the partners.<sup>24</sup>

In 1992, the Knight Foundation, a legally independent entity of the Knight Ridder chain, gave Rosen money to establish the Project on Public Life and the Press. What Rosen set out to do was to bring together the ideas from the disparate media outlets, scholars and think tanks. In essence he sought to marry the idea of public journalism with the practice. In 1993, adherents to what had now become a loose coalition of advocates came up with the name public journalism. The following year, Rosen teamed up with Merritt, to produce Public Journalism: Theory and Practice, a pamphlet they jokingly referred to as their “manifesto.” The introduction, which they wrote together, began with this paragraph:

The two papers that follow sketch the outline of an idea that is still taking shape among journalists and a few others in the United States. We call the notion public journalism, and we invite those who are committed to it, or merely curious about it, to join in a conversation that would help improve and extend the idea, or suggest some of its limitations. It is toward those ends that we write.<sup>25</sup>

At this point, public journalism had another supporter. Pew Charitable Trusts had been paying attention to the emerging debate. It had listened to the concerns of Knight-Ridder’s James K. Batten. Pew announced a 4.5-million dollar initiative that became the Pew Center for Civic Journalism based in Washington.

Thus by the time Rosen delivered that speech in 1994 to the American Press Institute, the public journalism movement was officially borne. It had financial backing, a name, a general idea of what it wanted to accomplish, willing participants – and lots of critics.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Michael Schudson, "Watergate and the Press," in The Power of News (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 158.
- <sup>2</sup> James Aucoin, I.R.E: Investigative Editors, the Arizona Project, and the Evolution of American Investigative Journalism (Evergreen: Raging Cajun Books, 1997), 15
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 71
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 99
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Schudson, Discovering The News: A Social History of American Newspapers (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 180
- <sup>6</sup> William Woo, "Public Journalism: A Critique," in Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Robert N. Roberts, eds. Public Journalism and Political Knowledge (in press), 26.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 26.
- <sup>8</sup> James Carey as quoted in The Idea of Public Journalism (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 38.
- <sup>9</sup> Jay Rosen, "The Action of the Idea," in The Idea of Public Journalism (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), 65.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 66.
- <sup>11</sup> Jay Rosen, "Imagining Public Journalism," in Edmund B. Lambeth; Philip Meyer, and Esther Thorson, eds. Assessing Public Journalism, ( Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 50.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 51.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid
- <sup>14</sup> Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1998), 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Jay Rosen, May 15/2000.
- <sup>16</sup> Alicia Shepard, "The Death of a Pioneer," The American Journalism Review, ( September 24, 1994), 35.

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<sup>17</sup> Jay Rosen, What Are Journalists For? (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Yankelovich, Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World (Syracuse: New York, Syracuse University Press, 1991), 223.

<sup>20</sup> Jay Rosen, "The Action of the Idea," in The Idea of Public Journalism, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Carole Reese Dykers, Assessing Public Journalism (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 64.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>23</sup> Edward D. Miller, The Charlotte Project: Helping Citizens take back democracy (St. Petersburg: The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, 1994), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>25</sup> Jay Rosen and Buzz Merritt, Public Journalism: Theory and Practice (New York: The Kettering Foundation, 1994), 3.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Public journalism in practice: Three case studies

A lot of the early discussion about public journalism focused on election coverage. While the 1988 contest provided the movement with its impetus, it can be argued that elections are not the time when public journalism is at its most innovative and distinct from traditional journalism. During elections, there is no need for journalists to create a public, as Dewey felt news media could, because one already exists. And it is impossible for journalists to facilitate social change because citizens are simply asked to cast a ballot, not alter policies or force administrations to change laws. The challenge for journalists is not to create a revolutionary brand of coverage, but to improve upon the quality of the deliberation by, among other things, giving stronger voice to citizens' concerns. In short, what public journalists have accomplished with their election coverage is a more rigorous and systematic attention to issues at the expense of conflict, personalities and photo-ops. Such improved coverage is a worthy goal because trade journals such as the Columbia Journalism Review are replete with articles lamenting the state of election coverage and promises from prominent journalists vowing to do a better job focusing on substantive issues.<sup>1</sup> It is also worth noting that public journalists were not the first ones to search for ways to improve election coverage. The Washington Post, to take one of many examples, was making the effort to include citizens' concerns in its election coverage years before public journalism became established as a movement.

Where the movement demonstrates a more novel approach is when it moves beyond elections and delves into issues at the community and neighborhood level that involve many stakeholders and defy easy solutions. In numerous examples, newspapers and broadcast outlets have tackled everything from proposals to build highways through environmentally sensitive areas to helping residents and local politicians find solutions for economic growth once a large employer has left town. Public journalists encountered problems covering these stories, but the anecdotal evidence and some empirical research demonstrate that the media outlets in question were able to help citizens find solutions or put the community on the path towards discovering answers.<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that the emphasis for the rest of this paper will be on community-oriented initiatives. Because their success is easier to measure it could be argued that they have better track record. As such, these local initiatives are easier to assess. For the purposes of focusing the discussion, an analysis and critique of the practice and theory of public journalism will be based on three case studies at two newspapers.

The Akron Beacon Journal won a Pulitzer Prize for its attempt to help bridge the gap between blacks and whites in Akron, Ohio. Although the newspaper did not call its initiative public journalism, it has been recognized as such in the movement's literature since 1994. Though it did not have a name for its initiative, the Akron Beacon Journal had a clear purpose for what it wanted to achieve. Through "A Question of Color" and later "Coming Together," it created a public sphere, initiated the deliberation, challenged citizens to become more vigorous participants in a search for ways to bring the two races together. In short, the paper saw itself as a facilitator of social action.

For its part, the Charlotte Observer is one of the earliest and most high-profile examples of publications that have embraced public journalism in name and spirit. After

focusing much of its initial energy on election coverage in the early nineties, it turned its attention to an area in which it arguably had more success: community relations. That effort began in earnest in 1993 with an attempt to ward off a racial tensions that threatened to erupt over the closure of a park situated in the middle of an affluent white neighborhood. Riding on the momentum of that initiative, the paper launched into larger endeavor that sought to help residents in ten run-down, crime-ridden neighborhoods improve the quality of life for themselves and their children. “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” was a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize for public service journalism.

Taken together, these three case studies demonstrate what public journalists mean when they talk about facilitating social action.

### **The Akron Beacon Journal and “A Question of Color”**

In May 1992, white police officers charged in the videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney King were acquitted. For the next three days riots broke out in South/Central Los Angeles and a number of cities in what was considered to be the worst civil strife of the century.<sup>3</sup> Once the police, civil authorities and community leaders were able to curb the violence, media outlets were left to report on a phenomenon that had obviously precipitated the carnage: racism, not just black against white, but black against Korean-American. In her assessment, Carol Bradley Shirley, at the time the assistant editor of the Los Angeles Times Westside section, complained that the Rodney King affair and its riotous aftermath took many of her colleagues by surprise because they had lost touch with the community, its problems with race – and the Los Angeles Police Department. “Today we wear three-piece suits and carry briefcases and drive in from the



suburbs. We are attorneys with computers. Much of our reporting is done from our desks and our sources all belong to the club of power.”<sup>4</sup>

Bradley Shirley also blamed her own paper and some of its advertisers for ignoring South Los Angeles because its residents were “bad demographics,” that is, they were not consumers with enough disposable income.

Don’t get me wrong. I don’t believe that there is some plot against the people of South Los Angeles in which the press is involved. What I do believe is that the press is so much a part of the establishment, so much a part of the inside, that it can no longer recognize what is before it.<sup>5</sup>

Akron, Ohio, was one of the many communities to reverberate with the emotional aftershock of the Rodney King affair because citizens in that blue-collar city had also been struggling with racial problems of their own. The King debacle provided the Beacon Journal with the perfect contextual backdrop to examine the festering problems its own citizens were experiencing. Using focus groups, the paper was able to determine that many black and white residents had different perspectives on the racial problem. During one session both groups were separated and asked to listen to the “I Have a Dream” speech that Martin Luther King Jr. delivered in Washington in 1963. After listening to King’s utopian description of a land in which all racial groups were treated as equals and lived in harmony, the whites in the focus group were of the view that the Reverend’s dream had been fulfilled. In their eyes institutional racism had, for the most part, been eliminated and everyone, regardless of skin color, had a chance to succeed. Not surprisingly, blacks held the opposite view, using personal anecdotes to explain that while some progress had been made since King’s famous speech, there was a long way to go.

Black residents told reporters about banks that refused to lend them money, employers who would not hire them and real estate agents who steered them away from white neighborhoods when buying a house. The racial problem the paper uncovered was a complex one because some blacks blamed themselves for not working hard enough to get ahead in life, while others cautioned against using the “race card” to explain all the ills that had beset the community.

The views expressed by citizens were fleshed out in a year-long, multi-part series called “A Question of Color” that began in January 1993. Many of the stories explained the divisions that separated blacks and whites in the five-county area the Beacon Journal served. Culling facts and statistics from polls and focus groups, the paper tried to accomplish two goals: paint a picture of a community divided along racial lines; and demonstrate to white residents that there was race problem in Akron.

Halfway through the series, some of the editors began to wonder about the effect the stories were having, if any. The paper felt that it was not just enough to write stories about the racial divide, it had to create a dialogue between blacks and whites so they could begin to understand one another. In his discussion of the Beacon Journal's case, Art Charity quotes editor Dale Allen who wondered: “If we’re just reporting on stories that just disappear into the ether as so many investigative pieces do, what will that accomplish”<sup>6</sup> The stories in “Question of Color” identified the eradication of people’s isolation from one another as the first step to improving race relations. In other words, not enough whites and blacks had personal relationships. It was at this point when the paper began acting as a facilitator of social change by demanding that citizens become

more active in the search for solutions to the race problem. The Beacon Journal started running coupons that asked citizens, "What Can We Do?"

After reading the front-page coupons, 22-thousand people responded. In a special section, the Beacon Journal printed all the names of the people who had filled out the coupons. Realizing that there were also efforts underway to tackle racism, the paper invited civic groups, religious organizations and schools to undertake projects that would help create a more harmonious environment. The Beacon Journal then hired two facilitators, a white retired minister and a black retired principal, who tried to make sure that the paper served as a connective tissue that put people together and encourage them to talk. Says Dale Allen:

One of the reasons we hired the facilitators was to maintain the separation between the newsroom efforts and the community efforts. The newsroom staff was still free to report on the success and failures of this program as they transpire, just like any other story.<sup>7</sup>

The paper regarded its initial role as that of a catalyst, helping the residents who were featured in the stories to talk to each other about their differences. Fifty staffers from the paper's different departments volunteered to help to get the discussions going by acting as moderators. Eighty-five organizations signed on right away; the number increased to 140 by the end of the year. The groups talked about the obstacles to improved race relations and offered 100 possible ways to bridge the divide between blacks and whites. The Beacon Journal published the ideas, then asked citizens to make a New Year's resolution to improve race relations for 1994.

Again, the response was overwhelming and resulted in a new organization called Coming Together. In an effort to promote the initiative, the paper ordered 10,000 T-shirts, lapel pins and caps bearing the logo Coming Together. The T-shirts were handed

out to participants in community projects and meetings at which businesses collaborated on issues such as diversity in the workplace. There were also meetings between student groups interested in promoting racial harmony. In February of that year, the Beacon Journal sponsored a Kent State sociologists' seminar where 200 people deliberated over how to get past racial barriers. That effort helped draw between 10,000 and 15,000 people into a loose network. Three months later, Coming Together had established an office at the newspaper. Writes Jay Rosen: "The Beacon Journal moved from providing information about the racial divide to making connections across it – a full year after the fires in Los Angeles went out." <sup>8</sup>

In 1994, the Beacon Journal won the Pulitzer Prize for public service. The citation explained that the paper had won the award for "its broad examination of local racial attitudes and its subsequent effort to promote improved communication in the community." <sup>9</sup> The following year, Coming Together was incorporated as a nonprofit group under federal tax law. And in May 1996 the organization moved into its own office several miles away from the paper.

### **Freedom Park and the Search for Solutions at the Charlotte Observer**

In Charlotte, North Carolina, there was a dispute over the closing of Freedom Park. The Mecklenburg County parks director closed the park to Sunday traffic in mid-1993 because the affluent white residents who lived nearby complained about black teenagers cruising through the area with their car radios blaring. When racial tensions threatened to erupt in the park, the The Observer "made a conscious decision to apply

the new civic approach to its reporting. Rather than simply report on the tension, it moved to develop solutions-oriented, op-ed pieces from all parties involved: neighbors, city officials, and the cruisers themselves.<sup>10</sup>

The paper suggested that it was trying to “create a forum for rational talk by providing a space in the newspaper where people could begin to discuss solutions, rather than focus only on the problem’s emotional aspects.”<sup>11</sup> To achieve that goal, the paper printed long verbatim statements from 13 protagonists who agreed to be interviewed, then insisted that representatives for the youths, citizens and community leaders talk about the so-called “root values”<sup>12</sup> that were at stake in the conflict. Editor Richard Oppel wrote in his introductory note: “We chose not to focus our coverage on conflict, but on possible solutions. We sought to draw out the best ideas. What are the problems? What should be done?”<sup>13</sup>

According to Art Charity’s account of the incident in Doing Public Journalism, nearly all of the people reached many of the same conclusions: Parks should not just be closed; recreational cruising should be moved to non-residential areas; drivers should turn down their radios; and a fee for parking might also solve the problem by discouraging people from just hanging around. Charity concludes: “A long-festering issue that seemed to revolve around race relations became more concrete and manageable.”<sup>14</sup>

The Freedom Park initiative was considered to be a success and an important shift in the evolution of public journalism. Up until that point, newspapers and broadcast outlets had focused much of their efforts on elections, in large part because the granting bodies such as the Poynter Institute and the Pew Centre for Civic Journalism made

election coverage a priority and encouraged media outlets to submit proposals.

Journalism professor and former broadcaster Lewis Friedland argues that the Freedom Park coverage was a “watershed” and helped lay the ground work for an even bigger project called “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Charlotte Observer and “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods”**

By mid-1994, the crime rate in Charlotte rose to 18<sup>th</sup> nationwide. Meanwhile, North Carolina City was still reeling from a double murder of two city policemen the previous year. Polls were consistently putting race at the top of the nation’s concerns and, as executive editor Jennie Buckner wrote at the time, coverage tended to “frighten and depress readers, pulling them away from neighborhood life and leaving them pessimistic about their community’s future.” The paper wondered what would happen if it could mobilize the entire community on behalf of the most troubled neighborhoods? Using grant money from the Pew Center, the Observer hired Charlene Price-Patterson as the “community coordinator.” As a former public affairs staffer who had worked for two local television programs during a 13-year stint, Price-Patterson was a well-known face in the community. To gain even more reach, the Observer teamed up with WSOC-TV and two local radio stations that served the black community and charities to launch “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods.” The one-and-a-half-year project focused attention on 10 neighborhoods for six weeks at a time.

The article that began the series on June 5 focused on the city’s crime problem using material from what Charity calls an “unusually intensive poll of high-crime-area

residents themselves.”<sup>16</sup> Seversville was the first community to come under scrutiny. It is a predominantly black neighborhood in which people were frustrated with the city’s inability to address some of their problems such as crime. One in every nine residents had been the victim of violent crime. Reporters spent six weeks on the streets, talking to residents about crime, what causes it, the consequences and ways to make the community safer. As a way to further delve into that neighborhood’s concerns, the paper held two meetings with the neighborhood leaders, who detailed problems that included crack, cocaine and the lack of work. Parents said they were overwhelmed by all the obstacles they faced. Community coordinator Price-Patterson organized the meetings and acted as a moderator. The concerns, which gave journalists a better handle on how the community viewed its problems, shaped the coverage that was to follow. On June 26, the Observer began an investigative series on the links between crack houses and absentee landlords and two days later convened a community meeting in the Seversville church. After the meeting, the United Way held a resource fair at which scores of residents signed up for programs such as neighborhood crime watches and Big Brother programs that had been previously understaffed.

On July 17, the Observer and its media partners such as WSOC-TV, focused on Seversville for an entire day. The paper used seven pages to examine life in the neighborhood. The front of the Observer’s Perspective section reported on the difficulties that can arise for children because of the lack of playgrounds, parks and a community center. In one segment during WSOC-TV’s coverage, viewers were taken on a tour through decrepit homes owned by absentee landlords, then in a startling contrast, showed the manicured home of one of the landlords.

The Observer published a “needs list” that identified items residents required to improve their quality of life<sup>17</sup> By September more than 200 organizations, individuals and agencies including private law firms and the United Way had met every need on the Observer’s list. At no charge, several law firms filed public nuisance suits to close neighborhood crack houses. The United Way of Central Carolinas, Inc. helped channel donations and volunteers. Citizens phoned the Observer’s voice mail line to offer tips to Seversville leaders on ways they could begin solving their problems. The mayor and police also stepped up their activities leading to a shutdown of some of the neighborhood’s crack houses. Then the paper turned its attention to other neighborhoods.

The Freedom Park initiative, “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods,” “A Question of Color” and the “Coming Together” have been hailed by some proponents as some of the best examples of public journalism. The examples also embolden funding organizations such as the Pew Center for Civic Journalism to predict that the movement is here to stay.<sup>18</sup>

### **A Preliminary Assessment: Public Journalism as a Continuum of Practices**

“A Question of Color,” the Freedom Park Standoff and “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” all demonstrated a similar pattern that saw their coverage shift from the traditional to the innovative. The papers used traditional methods such as polling and focus groups to identify problems, explanatory articles to give context, and investigative techniques to develop a statistical profile of neighborhoods in question. By using these methods the papers had hoped to make an impact, which is the desire of traditional journalists. If a story or exposé prompts people to push for changes or officials to change policies, so much the better.



However, traditional journalists argue that the decision to facilitate change rests with citizens, officials and politicians -- not journalists. This was the attitude Theodore Glasser discovered in his conversations with Pulitzer Prize winners. The journalists described themselves as mere observers who simply report the facts. Glasser writes:

Investigative reporters frequently cite this basic logic – journalists report empirically verifiable violations of established standards, while the public evaluates and perhaps responds to those violations – as the way that they maintain a separation between fact and the value of their work.<sup>19</sup>

Such an attitude is also typified by Canadian journalists such as Globe and Mail columnist Jeffrey Simpson. During a panel discussion on the connection between citizenship and the news media, he spelled out his position.

What I'm trying to do is...as competent a job as I can to present information in a comprehensible package to readers do to with it what he or she wants. I have no control over what you do as a consumer with what I write. I hope it will make you better informed. I hope that it will allow you to make more intelligent decisions if the information is relevant to a decision that you have to make. I hope that it's provided in a way that's comprehensible to you...I wish I could say that the purpose of what I do or what journalists do is to make you...say 'this must stop. And I'm going to get involved...' I wish I could say that. But I don't see much evidence.<sup>20</sup>

This view was not shared by the editors at the Beacon Journal and the Charlotte Observer. For instance, when citizens failed to respond to the stories published in the "A Question of Color" series, the Beacon Journal ran a follow-up series called "Coming Together" that stressed ways that people could help create more harmonious race relations. Then the paper helped form an organization that adopted the same name as the series. Coming Together is now a non-profit group that works permanently to bridge the gap between blacks and whites. According to Jay Rosen the two American papers ventured into innovative territory when, seeing that there was no response to the stories they were publishing, asked themselves, "now what do we do?" Implicit in that question is the assumption that the news

media are part of the communities they cover, not neutral observers that stand on the sidelines. But even here, the characterization of the media outlet as a member of the community may not go very far in distinguishing public journalism from traditional journalism. Many small newspapers that serve small markets do consider themselves members of their communities with a stake in local deliberations. This is what journalism professor, John Miller discovered during his stint at Equity, the newspaper in Shawville, Quebec.

Community papers tend to act more like helpful neighbors than stern critics, and this binds them to their communities in ways that daily newspapers can only envy. If you asked the editor of a metropolitan paper what his mission is, he might say it's to be an opinion leader, or to set the news agenda, or to be a watchdog on behalf of the public. The job of the Equity, (editor) Richard (Wills) once said in an editorial, is to act as a 'town-hall meeting in progress.' By that he means it should engage in a dialogue with its readers about the things that they care about.<sup>21</sup>

Rhetoric that stresses the importance of engaging in dialogue is compatible with some ideals expressed by some public journalists. Perhaps this is because the lack of a clear definition for the movement, has prompted some observers such as doctoral student Reneta Coleman to describe it as a continuum of practices.

One extreme on the continuum raises the most criticism with its apotheosis of attachment rather than the traditional journalists' mantra of detachment. At the other extreme, the practice of public journalism bears a striking resemblance to good traditional reporting techniques of systematic listening, reporting on issues people care about, and reflecting diversity in sourcing and viewpoints.<sup>22</sup>

So public journalists situated on the lower end of Coleman's continuum could be said to have much in common with reporters and editors at Equity. The same can be said for election coverage, as news outlets seek to improve the quality of dialogue by doing a better job of reflecting the viewpoint of citizens. By acting to facilitate change, the Observer and the

Beacon Journal are positioned on the upper, extreme end of Coleman's continuum, which as she suggests, also makes them targets for a lot of criticism.

### **Assessing “A Question of Color” and “Coming Together”**

Public journalism has been open to many charges, but some of the most pointed criticism comes from journalists and academics who say initiatives such as “A Question of Color” and “Coming Together” represent the kind of advocacy journalism that newspapers abandoned en masse at the turn of the last century. Articles written in publications such as the New York Times, Washington Post, and the Philadelphia Inquirer have condemned public journalism for stepping over the traditional line that has prevented the Fourth Estate from becoming an actor in events it is supposed to be chronicling. Pushing traditional boundaries, warn the critics, weakens the credibility of a press that is supposed to be a neutral presence to which people with different views can turn.

In Doing Public Journalism Art Charity attempts to deflect those criticisms by referring to what he calls a golden ethical rule: “Journalism should advocate democracy without advocating particular solutions.”<sup>23</sup> When public journalists follow this golden rule, he reasons, they become not advocates, but “fair-minded participants.” Critics such as Theodore Glasser, who have spent a lot of time thinking and writing about the movement, are baffled by the term fair-minded participant. He interprets it to mean that the media outlets should become a referee of sorts, juggling competing demands on its way to helping people build consensus and find solutions.

Well that denies the very moral role the press plays, the role the press plays in deciding what's right and wrong and what's good and bad because those moral

decisions are built into news judgments. When journalists decide what to investigate, what to expose as wrong, which they do all the time and we usually applaud them for doing that, they are making, fundamentally, a moral judgment.<sup>24</sup>

Because public journalism lacks a clear definition that spells out the kind of involvement that is permissible, fair-minded participants can run the risk becoming too close to the initiative or so driven to help people achieve results that news judgment takes a back seat. The Akron Beacon Journal encountered both difficulties. As we have seen in the Akron case, the “Coming Together” project, which was a separate entity, initially operated out of the same building that housed the Beacon Journal. The fact that the project eventually found an office in a separate location is a possible reflection of the inappropriateness of the close proximity in the first place.

There is no doubt that the paper understood the risk it was taking upon initiating the project. This is why Beacon Journal publisher John Dotson wrote an article in the newspaper to acknowledge some of the pitfalls of being associated with “Coming Together” and the need to erect safeguards.

Nothing is ever accomplished without risk. In fact, one of the risks is that the newspaper itself is stepping outside of its more traditional role as reporter of the news and into a role of helping the community repair severed relationships.<sup>25</sup>

Then there are Glasser’s concerns about the suspension of moral or news judgment. When the Beacon Journal first began reporting, it was clear that instances of prejudice were occurring routinely. Blacks complained about banks that would not lend them money and about real estate agents who steered them away from white neighborhoods. Yet apart from chronicling those difficulties, the paper made little effort to investigate the banks and real estate agents. In failing to do so, the Beacon Journal may have allowed the quest for harmony to mask a more deep-seated and harmful reality of

institutional racism that impinged on people's right to earn a decent living and choose to live anywhere they want. Perhaps it could even be argued that a hard-hitting exposé could have done more to jolt the community into action than the more amorphous goal of improving race relations. Even supporters of public journalism such as Edmund Lambeth acknowledge that leaders of the movement open themselves up to criticisms of suspending news judgment.

Proponents of public journalism frequently emphasize that they do not wish or plan to jettison investigative reporting and they certainly do not intend to discard compelling narrative. Yet, in their speeches and seminars, the leaders of the movement fail to emphasize how central to public journalism investigative work can be and, in some places actually is.<sup>26</sup>

However, the fact remains that the Beacon Journal failed to investigate the banks and their lending policies. "I don't want to tell the banks how they run their business nor do I want them to tell me how to run the newspaper, says Janet Leach, the paper's editor. "But I think raising the question and following up is ultimately extremely important."<sup>27</sup> Being accused of ignoring serious problems during the quest for solutions is an accusation that sits uncomfortably with some public journalists. Accounts of initiatives that push the boundaries of traditional journalism are filled with assurances from editors and producers that they will keep their news judgment intact. John Dotson tried to reassure his readers by writing: "We are pledging not to neglect our obligations to report what is going on in our communities."<sup>28</sup>

Dotson also appeared to be responding to the general criticism that public journalists' face: that becoming involved in the community's problem they risk pandering to the concerns of citizens rather than examining them critically. These critics also argue

that it is dangerous for journalists to report on events that they help to create. In Should Journalists Do Community Service?, Jonathan Cohn writes:

There's fine line between addressing community concerns and pandering to dominant local opinion, and an even finer one between encouraging the democratic process and becoming a stakeholder in particular outcomes. Public journalism's high-profile gurus have more cautious views of these issues than their critics usually credit, but in practice at least some public journalism initiatives threaten to subvert the very causes they claim to serve.<sup>29</sup>

Cohn's concern about subverting causes is reflected in "A Question of Color."

Four years after the newspaper ran the series, it revisited some of the people it had featured to determine if the increased dialogue about race had changed their attitudes, and possibly their lives. Some blacks still complained about the lack of opportunities available to them in areas such as housing and education, while others voiced the opposite sentiment. A key part of effective deliberation is convincing people to speak honestly about their feelings. American pollster, Daniel Yankelovich, argues that consensus cannot be reached until people are forced to come to terms with their core values. In other words, they must determine how they *really* feel about an issue. Only then, he argues, are people ready to make the kind of tradeoffs necessary to find common ground. For instance, a white person may feel strongly about the need to achieve racial harmony, but be firmly against measures such as an affirmative action plan by the community's largest employer. Following Yankelovich's argument, it may be difficult for that person to come to a real judgment about racism until he reconciles his feelings on affirmative action. He might have to concede that supporting affirmative action is the compromise he must make in order to achieve harmony. Such tradeoffs can only occur in an environment where the dialogue is constant and honest.

For the Beacon Journal, this meant convincing people to have a frank discussion about their views in “A Question of Color.” In one story that appeared in the original series, a white fire fighter reluctantly spoke about his feelings towards his black co-workers and acquaintances. Dick Reymann wrestled with the idea of allowing his real name to be published because he was afraid of angry reprisals against him for speaking honestly. In the article he insisted that the department’s quota system was unfair. In 1976, he went to federal court to argue against the forced integration of the fire department which had been all white. “I argued before and I’ll argue today, he was quoted as saying:

It’s not fair to have a system where your promotion or your hiring is determined by the color of your skin. To me that’s racism. I don’t dislike black people, and I don’t blame them for what they’ve done as far as getting quotas are concerned. But they do think and act differently.<sup>30</sup>

He went on to argue that blacks had a greater propensity to gamble, and based on his professional experience, they called in sick more frequently than his white colleagues. He even challenged the reporter to verify his claim about absenteeism. In fact, the statistics from the fire department did show that the absenteeism rate among blacks on the force was almost two times greater than that of whites.

After the original story hit the newspapers there was trouble. Rather than being drawn into a broader discussion about ways of achieving more racial tolerance, Reymann faced the kind of reprisals he had feared when he made the initial decision to speak out. Not surprisingly, when a reporter from the Beacon Journal interviewed him four years later to see if his views had changed, Reymann was bitter. “I got involved (with “A Question of Color”) because I thought I could do some good. I was highlighted as a negative person and it caused me untold grief, with my relationships at work, with my relationship with blacks. I do not want to get involved with the Beacon Journal.”<sup>31</sup>

That sentiment led a black reverend to observe that one of the changes he has noticed since the paper ran the series was that racism had gone underground, meaning that people were afraid to speak honestly and openly about their opinions for fear of being labeled racist. So they harbored their views in private, only expressing them to like-minded neighbors or work colleagues. “The only way a problem can be attacked is for it to be brought to the forefront and for a dialogue to be opened. We might not agree on everything, but maybe we can get along.”<sup>32</sup>

Although the article cited examples of positive changes such as a black lawyer and his white colleague forcing themselves to meet once a month to understand each others’ differences, the piece concluded that blacks and whites were no closer to understanding each other. As was evident in the example of Dick Reymann, racism in some instances may have gone underground. The paper’s editor and publisher talked about the necessity of taking risks in order to initiate dialogue. However, by becoming involved to the extent it did, the paper also may have worsened a racial climate it sought to improve.

Thus despite earning a Pulitzer Prize and initiating the Coming Together project, it remains unclear how effectively the Beacon Journal was able to work with citizens and institutions to foster a more racially tolerant community. Improving relations may have been a lofty goal that no one paper could ever hope to achieve. Nevertheless, the Beacon Journal took it upon itself to try. Rosen and other advocates argue that the initiative worked because it got people talking, something they had not been doing before the paper got involved. And though institutional racism continues to be a problem, more blacks did



tell reporters four years after the initial series ran that it was easier to find work.

However, that may have been because the economy was in better shape.

For its part, the “Coming Together” project continues to focus its energies on improving the dialogue between races. In 1996, U.S. president, Bill Clinton, was so intrigued by the paper’s initiative that he held a town hall meeting in Akron to hear what residents had to say about race relations. Coming Together’s executive director, Fannie Brown, uses the Clinton visit as partial proof that her program is promoting the kind of dialogue that can change attitudes on race. However, when it comes to the way institutions such as banks treat blacks, the success of “Coming Together” becomes harder to measure. Unable to point to any empirical evidence, Brown refers to anecdotal accounts of some blacks finding it easier to get loans. In an effort to determine what effect her project is having, Brown is preparing a questionnaire to send out later this year.

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Proponents of public journalism such as Art Charity argue that initiatives including “A Question of Color” and “Coming Together” are successes because they been able to facilitate a discussion among people who normally would not associate with each other.

What papers like the...Beacon Journal...have done so remarkably well isn’t to lead citizens all the way to a solution, but to be forceful and canny enough to make the momentum they’ve created self-sustaining. They’ve been planning to hand off the leadership role from the very beginning. They’ve let readers know that in no uncertain terms. And they have made it an integral part of the project to encourage the formation of private groups and citizen-government coalitions, to keep the ball rolling when the paper turns to something else or steps back to being a watchdog.<sup>34</sup>

In attempting to measure the success of the Beacon Journal’s effort, critics and supporters have pointed to many factors to justify their points of view. In the end, though,

editor Janet Leach dubbed the project a success because it initiated a new dialogue that has achieved a more harmonious environment. For instance, young people from both racial groups make regular visits to schools to preach the importance of racial tolerance. Coming Together continues to promote similar initiatives and does so with money it raises through donations from the community and the charity organization that was established by the newspaper's founders. Leach claims her paper treats Coming Together just like any group, despite the fact that it has indirect representation on the organization's board of directors. So as far as the paper is concerned, the initiative to improve and increase the dialogue was a success. It is reasonable to argue that if the paper had stuck with traditional methods of just reporting the problem, Coming Together would not have been established. Is being involved in the creation of an organization sliding too far down the slippery slope that the publisher had feared? Perhaps for some critics it was. Nevertheless, Beacon Journal's efforts are continuously cited by public journalism supporters as one of the premier examples of how a media outlet, by taking extraordinary steps, can help facilitate change. And what is clear is the paper went beyond the traditional boundaries in trying to accomplish its goal. In the end, the Beacon Journal was able to point to some evidence of success.

### **Assessing the Freedom Park coverage and "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods"**

In his chapter in Assessing Public Journalism, assistant managing editor for news, Rick Thames, made an observation that was similar to the one expressed by the publisher of the Beacon Journal: That "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods" was a risky venture because it could have crossed the line into advocacy journalism and become too closely

associated with an initiative that it was supposed to be covering. The same could be said for the “Freedom Park” initiative because the paper deliberately chose not to focus on the negative aspects of the relationship between the white residents who lived near the park and the black teenagers who cruised the area at night in their cars. In a sense the Observer formed a partnership with the community, inviting residents, police and municipal officials to share their solutions. The same sort of partnership occurred in “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods,” where the paper teamed up with the United Way for Central Carolinas, reportedly a sore point with some of the reporters. In each of the ten neighborhoods, so-called core advisory panels were established with the assistance of the community coordinator the paper hired. The panels, comprised of long-time residents and community leaders, local business leaders and others with a stake in the neighborhoods’ success, organized town hall meetings. Members of the panels also worked with the United Way to publicize resource fairs which helped citizens join organizations such as crime watches and legal services.<sup>35</sup> Such close relationships during both projects raises concerns about the ability of the Observer to step back and cover the citizens and institutions critically.

Critics have denounced efforts such as “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” because they feel papers pander to the community’s needs rather than tell citizens what they needed to hear. The case of one particular neighborhood serves as an illustration. The leader of Grier Heights refused to co-operate with the Observer or its community coordinator, Price-Patterson, because he claimed that his neighborhood did not need to be “taken back.”<sup>36</sup> According statistics that paper had gathered, Grier Heights ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in crime among 73 central-city neighborhoods. Its crime rate of 100 per 1,000 population

was more than quadruple the city's average. Price-Patterson acquiesced to the neighborhood's demands, saying it was a shame that the Grier Heights chose not to become involved in an initiative that could benefit its residents. Of the paper's decision not to include the neighborhood in the project, Liz Chandler, a lead reporter on the project, said:

It's one of our highest crime places and there were some real high-profile killings out there this year and for us to have covered 10 neighborhoods and not hit this one is, to me, is ridiculous...my argument was I don't think we know for sure what the whole neighborhood wants...If I was covering the government I would never let an official say, 'Well, I don't want you to write the story,' and for me not to write it.<sup>37</sup>

Grier Heights was subject to a major drug sweep several months after it refused to take part in the Observer's project. In that one instance the paper failed to meet its own objective, which was to allow citizens opportunities for honest deliberations of their problems. And in a more traditional sense, the paper neglected to tell a story about a community and some of the uncomfortable truths its residents needed to face. This is not to suggest that Grier Heights inclusion in the series would have prevented the drug sweep. However, citizens may have been in a better position to deal with the consequences of the police action had they participated in "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods." In its attempt to work with the community to facilitate social change, the Observer allowed a neighborhood to dictate the rules of the game, thus justifying concerns about the risks of allowing the community to control the agenda. Nevertheless, the paper insists that its project achieved the overall goal of involving citizens in finding solutions to their problems.

"Taking Back Our Neighborhood" and the "Freedom Park" coverage were grassroots efforts in which citizens, not politicians or their bureaucrats, were the central

actors. Because there is no definition that could stipulate the role citizens should play, there is a temptation for media outlets bent on reflecting people's concerns to exclude the political structure. Ironically, such a separation between the citizenry and government is not what John Dewey had in mind. Jay Rosen points out that the American philosopher, whose views on citizen deliberation are an inspiration to many public journalists and their supporters, felt that deliberation was a way of empowering citizens and bringing them closer to governments. Yet during the town hall meetings that provided material for "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods" citizens were encouraged to confront public officials in attendance. "Public officials, not surprisingly, were defensive and felt that the project was out to get them. Nonetheless, the Observer soldiered on for six weeks after the town meeting."<sup>38</sup>

Such initiatives that focus on the citizens' obligation to search for solutions risk alienating them from government. As Theodore Glasser points out, the public journalism is ambiguous about its own philosophy on citizen engagement.

Yes, reporters have been sensitized to pay attention to readers as participants and not as spectators. That's wonderful. But will it amount to something more? Will it call into question the basic relationship between the press and the state, the press and the community? Will it get the press to ask itself fundamental questions about the role of press in society, the role of language in the telling of news stories. All the things that would dislodge the unquestioned assumptions of American journalism.<sup>39</sup>

Jay Rosen responds that it was important for civic officials to be part of the dialogue, as they were in "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods." However such inclusion did not prevent officials from feeling they were under attack. And with the lack of a clear definition and a philosophical position, initiatives run the temptation to become too neo-conservative for their own good.

Despite these concerns, “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” earned the Observer a finalist spot in its bid for a Pulitzer Prize in 1994. “A Question of Color,” the “Freedom Park Standoff,” and “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” were also considered success stories. Though these three examples represent a small number of the many projects that have been launched across the United States, they best illustrate the movement at the extreme end of the continuum of practices identified at the beginning of this chapter.

The Charlotte Observer and the Akron Beacon Journal made assumptions about their communities that traditional journalists do not. By creating opportunities for citizens to become more engaged in the problems that face them, the papers championed John Dewey’s notion of citizenry, then enhanced that notion by making sure deliberation led to action. This is why the editors from both papers felt that if, at the very least, they could convince people to talk to one another, then some of the more modest goals of public journalism would have been achieved. In other words, the publications tried to create a deliberative space, or a public sphere, that allowed people to discuss issues honestly with an eye towards solutions. However, the question remains how much responsibility can and should newspapers such as the Akron Beacon Journal and the Charlotte Observer assume in their campaigns to restore the health of their public spheres?

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For recent examples see “Is there a Better Way,” the lead article in the special election edition of the Columbia Journalism Review, November/December, 1999; For a Canadian example, read “Election 97,” the lead article in the election edition of Media, vol. 4, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> For an idea of some of the anecdotal evidence, read back issues of the Civic Catalyst, a quarterly newsletter published by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, and the following books: Doing Public Journalism; Assessing Public Journalism, What are Journalists For, and Public Journalism and Political Knowledge; for empirical evidence see Public Journalism and Political Knowledge and Causes and Consequences of Civic Engagement, a 1999 study by Gregory Markus at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Research.

<sup>3</sup> Carol Bradley Shirley, “Where Have You Been?” The Columbia Journalism Review, July/August, 1992, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Art Charity, Doing Public Journalism (New York, The Guilford Press, 1995), 140.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>8</sup> Jay Rosen, What are Journalists For (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999), 98.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis A. Friedland, “Public Journalism and Community Change,” in Public Journalism and Political Knowledge, Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Robert N. Roberts, eds (New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, August/ 2000), 129.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Charity, Doing Public Journalism (New York: The Kettering Foundation, 1995), 150.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 113.

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- <sup>15</sup> Lewis A. Friedland, "Public Journalism and Community Change," in Public Journalism and Political Knowledge, Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Robert N. Roberts, eds, 129.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 134.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Interview with Wally Dean, associate director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, January 14, 2000.
- <sup>19</sup> Theodore L. Glasser and James S. Ettema, Custodians of Conscience: Investigative Journalism and Public Virtue (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 9.
- <sup>20</sup> Transcript from a panel discussion on citizen engagement and the media at Carleton University sponsored by the Ottawa Rotary Club, 1998.
- <sup>21</sup> John Miller, Yesterday's News: Why Canada's Daily Newspapers are Failing Us (Halifax: Fernwood, 1998), 212.
- <sup>22</sup> Renita Coleman, "The Intellectual Antecedents of Public Journalism," Journal of Communication Inquiry (21,1, 1997), 60-76; a similar point is also made by Robert Steele in "The Ethics of Civic Journalism: Independence as the Guide," (Poynter Institute for Media Studies, 1995) 6. [http://poynter.org/research/me/me\\_civic.htm](http://poynter.org/research/me/me_civic.htm)
- <sup>23</sup> Art Charity, Doing Public Journalism (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 146.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview with Theodore Glasser, June 3, 1998.
- <sup>25</sup> Jay Rosen, What are Journalists For, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 199), 95.
- <sup>26</sup> Edmund B. Lambeth, "Public Journalism as Cultural Change," in Assessing Public Journalism, Edmund B. Lambeth, Philip Meyer and Esther Thorson, eds. (Columbia: Missouri, University of Missouri Press, 1998), 238-239.
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with Janet Leach, January 17/2000.
- <sup>28</sup> Jay Rosen, What are Journalists For (New Haven: Yale University Press, 199), 95-96.
- <sup>29</sup> Jonathon Cohn, "Should Journalists Do Community Service?" (American Prospect, summer 95), 3.
- <sup>30</sup> Bob Dyer, "ATTITUDES 2 – WHITES: They See Racism As A Vital Issue, But Also A Riddle That Leaves Them Groping For Solutions," Akron Beacon Journal (February 28, 1993)



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<sup>31</sup> Glenn Gamboa and Bob Paynter, "Some things changed for better; others aren't," Akron Beacon Journal, 1993.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Fanny Brown, January 17, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> Art Charity, Doing Public Journalism (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 139-140.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis A. Friedland, "Public Journalism and Community Change," in Public Journalism and Political Knowledge, Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Robert N. Roberts, eds, 130.

<sup>36</sup> Edmund B. Lambeth, "Public Journalism as Cultural Change," in Assessing Public Journalism, Edmund B. Lambeth, Philip Meyer and Esther Thorson, eds., 247.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., page 247.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis A. Friedland, "Public Journalism and Community Change," in Public Journalism and Political Knowledge, Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Robert N. Roberts, eds (New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, August/ 2000), 131.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Theodore Glasser, June 3, 1998.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Beyond the Traditional Understanding of the Public Sphere**

Public journalists would respond to the question posed at the end of chapter two by saying that journalists should assume responsibility for restoring the health of public life in the same way that they adopt the traditional tasks of guarding against government corruption and waste. Jay Rosen draws a parallel to investigative journalism when fielding a question he has heard many times: Who says it is the media's role to revive democratic ideals?

The government has a role in investigating corruption too, right? Well, why is that the press's role? In the United States, the General Accounting Office is supposed to investigate misuse of government funds. Why is that the press' role? Because that function, investigation, is already defined as conventional, nobody asks those questions about it.<sup>1</sup>

Rosen says he is simply using the same logic to define a new role journalists must play -- facilitating social change once journalists have intervened to create and sustain the public sphere. In this vein, his conceptualization of the Fourth Estate's role is much more extensive than the role conceived by traditionalists. As we discussed in chapter one, the latter tends to assume that a public sphere already exists and it is primarily the media outlets' role to provide information to a ready and able citizenry. Invoking the writings of American pragmatist John Dewey, Jay Rosen challenges the assumption of an ever-present public sphere by pointing out that in many instances, it does not exist. Documented factors such as low voter turnout, alienation from media outlets, governments and other institutions, and an unwillingness to become involved in community life have conspired against the Enlightenment ideal of a citizenry ready to use

information to exercise its civic duties. While Dewey argued that a public sphere could exist under the right conditions, he did not specify what those conditions might be. And according to media historian, Michael Schudson, Dewey said nothing “that might encourage the view that journalists should be central agents of social transformation or community construction.”<sup>2</sup>

Even Rosen, who wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on Dewey, was unclear about how his ideas would translate to the daily world of journalism. “Dewey requires interpretation because he didn’t go very much beyond suggestive remarks. So it’s hard to say what he meant.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Rosen found Dewey’s views about the need to restore community life “suggestive” enough to foster a rationale that drives public journalism.

Dewey to me is the one who laid out the problem, which is helping to create a public that may or may not emerge. He has a contingent view of the public: it’s there in theory all the time. To be there in practice requires us to create it. In theory if you had an active and engaged community that was successfully producing the conditions for a democratic debate, then the press could in fact serve as an adjunct to that debate as an information source. What drove public journalism was the perception that that wasn’t occurring, and so it’s a pragmatic judgment made about particular circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

Davis Merritt builds on this notion by suggesting that one of the key preoccupations of journalists should be ensuring that citizens forge links and deliberate in a way that helps them find solutions to long-standing or pressing problems affecting their lives. This is why in an article he wrote in the American Journalism Review, Merritt suggested that public journalism is more about forging connections among citizens than it is about establishing closer links with media outlets. “Public journalism is as much or more about public life than it is about journalism,” he wrote, “a fact universally overlooked in the wild thrust and parry over technique and sacred, uncrossable lines.”<sup>5</sup>

Merritt draws his inspiration from American Pollster Daniel Yankelovich, who explained in Coming to Public Judgment that citizens must be taken through a three-step process before they are ready to understand the implications of the choices they are about to make. First, individuals must be alerted that a problem exists; second, they have to be allowed to work through their feelings about the issue in question; finally, they must reach a judgment, which Yankelovich defines, as a “state of highly developed public opinion that exists once people have engaged in an issue, considered it from all sides, understood the choices it leads to, and accepted the full consequences of the choices they make.”<sup>6</sup>

As was the case with Dewey, Yankelovich did not prescribe a precise role for journalists beyond generalities about the need for media outlets to provide a forum that keeps the deliberations going. Still, Yankelovich’s description of the act of coming to public judgment is one that made sense to Merritt who was looking for different ways to run his newspaper in 1990. “The notion of how publics are formed and how publics decide about issues really came across to me through Yankelovich and his ideas about how people decide and how public judgments are formed.”<sup>7</sup>

Like Rosen, Merritt has expanded the traditional notion of the public sphere as a space where people not only discuss, but use the results of their deliberations, in this case judgment, to constitute an action plan. For instance, in the Freedom Park example discussed in the last chapter, the Charlotte Observer was able to mediate a discussion that led to solutions that dissuaded civic authorities from closing the park on Sundays. In expanding the notion of deliberation as a step toward problem solving, Rosen and Merritt have made certain assumptions about the way a citizenry is capable of functioning. And

those assumptions constitute the idea that has driven public journalism initiatives in Charlotte, Akron and numerous other American communities. In an effort to critique the movement in greater depth, some scholars have dissected the assumptions championed by Merritt and Rosen. Both men admit that there is room to debate the merits of the philosophy they have managed to cobble together from the works of intellectuals outside journalism. Says Rosen:

This (public journalism) has been a pragmatic effort, working with real journalists, it's not an attempt to clarify all questions at the level of theory. We have taken what's needed from communication theory and the history of public opinion to motivate people. And that's a different project than getting the scholarship right.<sup>8</sup>

For his part, Merritt said that if scholars and journalists were serious about offering useful critiques, they would be better off trying to understand the idea that propels the movement, not simply the techniques that media outlets employ.

To be informed about the controversy is not the same as engaging an idea. It's time that engagement took place, for there is much within the philosophy of public journalism that warrants close, critical and creative examination by the best minds in our business. I am confident that the core ideas, once considered, will withstand such scrutiny, but as no such examination and engagement have yet occurred, no one really knows if that is so."<sup>9</sup>

Michael Schudson, who actually supports the movement, is one person who has tried to grapple with the idea. And he has concluded that the movement, which has sharply criticized conventional journalism for alienating citizens, requires a deeper understanding of how people actually make decisions. "Public journalism's acute analysis of the faults of the conventional news reporting is not matched by a comparably sophisticated analysis of the character of contemporary community and public life."<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter we will briefly explain, and then assess four arguments that attempt to challenge the characterization of public life advanced by Merritt and Rosen: i) that

conflict, not consensus, has been the driving force for change; ii) the views of everyone taking part in the deliberation cannot be given equal weight; iii) that human nature is such that people find it difficult to set aside their differences long enough to come to some form of judgment; iv) and that by assuming the responsibility for the quality and the outcome of the deliberation, media outlets run the risk of forging a false consensus.

### **Conflict Not Consensus**

“The democratic point of view, says Merritt, “does not guarantee that all the points of view are going to be satisfied. It ought to be guarantee that they are considered. But finally, what has to happen in the democratic process (is for people to ask) ‘what can we all live with.’”<sup>11</sup>

John Pauly, a communication scholar and chairman of the Department of Communication at the University of St. Louis, suggests that a careful reading of history would suggest that advocates such as Merritt are posing a question that demonstrates a certain naïveté about the dynamics throughout history that have provoked significant changes. In “Journalism and the Sociology of Public Life,” he argues that much of the progressive social reform that benefitted minorities such as blacks and women occurred because of a struggle “often against the weight of common sense and custom by groups that were condemned as controversial and uncivil in their time.”<sup>12</sup> By relying on consensus building as a way to solve problems, suggests Pauly, public journalists would be turning a blind eye to these important dynamics within the community. He argues that public journalists make the assumption that there has always been a historical reservoir of goodwill that if re-awakened could become a key to an active and effective public sphere.

**“Because it places such a high premium on consensus and civility, public journalism has thus far made no space in its theory of society for social movements or the enduring group conflicts that gave rise to them.”<sup>13</sup>**

### **Giving People Equal Weight During Deliberations**

**For her part, feminist scholar Nancy Fraser addresses the general assumption Merritt and other advocates make that consensus is possible in a public sphere because citizens can deliberate as equals. Merritt does not deny that citizens come to deliberations with personal agendas they may want to advance. But he argues that consensus – a word he concedes is the same as Yankelovich’s term, judgment -- is possible because people can be convinced that it is in their best interest to set aside those personal desires and deliberate as citizens concerned about the health of the entire community. In the “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” project, more affluent residents from outside the ten crime-ridden neighborhoods, who at first glance would seem to have had no stake in the deliberations, were also drawn into the discussion. Once they realized the gravity of the situation, they actively worked with the affected neighborhoods to look for ways to make them safer. The point has been made that residents from the more affluent precincts of the city were convinced to buy into the deliberative process because they realized that the safety of the entire community would benefit if crime rates were reduced in the neighborhoods featured in the series.<sup>14</sup>**

**In tackling this consensus-driven model that was in evidence during the “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” initiative, Fraser argues there is a danger in using the model as a template. History, she writes in “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” demonstrates that men**

frequently used the guise of consensus to ignore the campaigns that women wage for equal rights. If the history of the women's movement is any indicator, Fraser doubts whether people are really capable of casting aside their differences in order to achieve a broader public good.

The revisionist historiography suggests that they were not. Rather, the discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality. These functioned informally to marginalize women and members of the plebeian classes and to prevent them from participating as peers.<sup>15</sup>

Here Fraser refers to "informal impediments to participation" that come into play once all the participants have been guaranteed a space in the public sphere. She cites feminist research that demonstrates that in deliberative bodies such as faculty meetings, men tend to interrupt women more than their male colleagues; speak more than women; take more turns and longer turns. This dynamic led other feminist scholars such as Jane Mansbridge to conclude that deliberation can mask subtle forms of control.

Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard. Feminists who focus on the inequality of power between men and women point to the ways women are silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate, and heard to say "yes" when they mean "no." These same insights help us to grasp other forms of domination, such as those based on wealth, that can also infect the deliberative process.<sup>16</sup>

Such an observation can also be expanded into a discussion about other forms of domination that stem from people's tendency to form factions that coalesce around popular points of view.



## **Human Nature and the Dangers of Factionalism**

It is no accident that issues such as crime and race relations tend to dominate public journalism initiatives because these issues cut a broad swath across the community, drawing in citizens from different backgrounds. Rosen, for one, has made the point that public journalism tends to work the best when communities are faced with long-standing problems that require a consensus-building, action-oriented approach. The Akron Beacon Journal discovered that the Rodney King affair was emblematic of a divide that had riven Akron for many years. The Charlotte Observer discovered that residents in ten run-down neighborhoods had agonized about crime for years, but saw no way to make their communities safer despite the foot patrols by police.

For John Durham Peters, however, the coming together of citizens with disparate backgrounds is an exercise fraught with peril. He considers human nature to be an informal impediment to full participation in the public sphere. Durham Peters quotes James Madison – an elitist proponent of representative democracy whose ideals public journalists frequently cite -- who warned people about the danger that human nature poses to democracy, which is itself a fragile concept. Madison, the fourth president of the United States and principal architect of the American constitution, reasoned that factionalism constituted a mobilization of a majority or minority opinion around a common interest that went counter to the common good. Factionalism, he argued, was the “mortal disease” of democracy and the mode through which factionalism was allowed to express itself, that is in the direct assembly of the people, provided a combustible chamber that offered no checks on the “flow of popular passion.” Madison concludes that the latent causes of factionalism are sown in the nature of man.”<sup>17</sup>

By faction, Madison was referring to majorities or minorities that team up against the rest. Durham Peters explains that since Madison's time many scholars have equated factions with political interest groups, lobbyists and multicultural groups. "Such contemporary examples suggest that they use political tactics based on exclusive and experiential claims rather than inclusive and rational claims, hence the conflict with the talky model called for by the public journalists."<sup>18</sup>

Viewed in a more contemporary context, factionalism and the suppression of minority points of view can impede people's ability to reach a consensus on important issues or make it impossible for them to identify emerging trends that may have dire consequences for the community. Critics frequently use the AIDS crisis to illustrate their argument.

By insisting AIDS is a private concern that has no place in the discussion about public matters, the dominant voices or the powerful factions in the public sphere can keep important and emerging concerns from being explored and debated. Barbie Zelizer suggests that such a dynamic has dangerous consequences.

According to the rhetoric of public journalism, why should the public be necessarily interested in issues like...AIDS care...if they involved only a fraction of the public? In dissipating the very essence of what has been potentially important to large numbers of people, then, public journalism may in effect make a bad situation worse.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Tainted Blood Tragedy: A Cautionary Tale**

The tainted blood scandal illustrates the concerns that the critics have expressed in this chapter. When AIDS first surfaced in the early eighties, it was considered an ailment afflicting members of society's sub-cultures: gays, and to a lesser degree hemophiliacs and intravenous drug users. In Canada, ignorance on the part of the media resulted in

newspapers and broadcasters failing to report on the tainted blood tragedy until it had killed many hemophiliacs who become sick after undergoing blood transfusions. They died from blood that was tainted due to the alleged negligence of the authorities -- the Red Cross, and the federal, provincial and territorial governments -- who, at the time, were responsible for Canada's blood supply. "I did my first tainted blood story when I was a summer student at the Globe & Mail in 1987," recounted André Picard, in a presentation on the tainted blood coverage at a Canadian Association of Journalist's convention in 1994. "It was about hemophiliacs and how some of them had AIDS...And I know that our paper didn't come back to this story in a big way until 1992."<sup>20</sup> He told his audience that the media had a duty to inform the public about the epidemic when it first surfaced in 1982. However, because it was considered to be a disease that affected people who were seen to be on the fringes, and because it had been the subject of such little discussion, authorities went unchallenged when they claimed that the virus could not be transmitted from one person to the next through blood. That claim became of the prevailing wisdom of the majority. The media's failure in the 1980s to report on the tainted blood tragedy in particular and the AIDS crisis in general meant that it also failed to tell a bigger truth about the health system that was in charge of Canada's blood supply.

Could the media have done a better job of covering the tainted blood issue? My answer is absolutely. We are in fact guilty of the same crime...as the main players in the blood system. And crime is a failure to inform the public....Our most compelling excuse is that no one was talking about it. More specifically...the victims of tainted blood were simply dying in silence.<sup>21</sup>

Although Picard's criticism applied to the news media's traditional coverage of events, it illustrates the persistent kinds of omissions John Pauly, Nancy Fraser, and John Durham Peters and Barbie Zelizer feel the reliance on public judgment is inclined to

make. In order to make their voices heard AIDS activists had to rely on intense lobbying and noisy demonstrations to gain the attention of journalists and politicians. Thus, as Pauly pointed out in his criticism at the beginning of this chapter, conflict – not consensus -- played a role in putting the AIDS crisis on the map. The crisis also demonstrates what can occur when minority voices are ignored by the majority in a public sphere that considers other matters to be more important.

### **The Danger of False Consensus**

Up until this point, we have been using Daniel Yankelovich's term "judgment" to identify an important stage in a community's deliberation. However, as was pointed out earlier in this chapter, Merritt is comfortable interchanging the term judgment with consensus. He is well aware of the general criticism that in their zeal to get everyone to agree, public journalists run the risk of forging a false consensus. In his article entitled "Are You Now, or Will You Ever Be, A Civic Journalist," Mike Hoyt, senior editor of the Columbia Journalism Review, wrote about an anonymous example which some critics use to illustrate their point. The paper, which was not named because Hoyt obtained the information from an anonymous source inside the newsroom, was trying to mediate a dispute between the Korean Presbyterian church and the police department. Two police officers strode into the church, declared that the building lacked a certificate for occupancy, and then ordered the congregants to leave.<sup>22</sup>

Two months after the incident, the local newspaper invited the Korean community leaders to meet with some local politicians to discuss the issue and perhaps heal the wounds that the incident had created. In addition to providing the space and facilitating

the meeting, the newspaper covered the gathering as a regular news story. According to the account of the reporter who was given the assignment, the attempt at reconciliation went poorly. Most of the meeting was dominated with the kind of verbal sparring and name-calling that public journalism finds antithetical to reasoned deliberation. Ignoring the apology by the politicians, the minister insisted on presenting a list of demands that included a forced apology by town officials to the congregation “and more importantly, to God.”<sup>23</sup>

Once the story made its way up to the senior editors, or the Ministry of Truth, as they were derisively called by some reporters who resented the paper’s efforts at public journalism, the story was subjected to a radical makeover. The version that appeared in the paper contained a brighter point of view in which the participants were able to build a new foundation for finding common ground. A Korean lawyer was quoted as saying: “We’ve got to live together, so let’s laugh together and let’s work together.” The religion reporter and the editor who facilitated the meeting shared the byline.

Which version of the meeting – food fight or celebration of diversity – is closer to the truth is difficult to discern, but the incident points to a fine line that the civic journalists sometimes walk. It is in the public interest of a newspaper to portray its public journalism efforts as helpful, perhaps even when they are not. With a few twists of the semantic dials, public journalism can become public posturing.<sup>24</sup>

## **Assessing the Critics**

The criticisms discussed in this chapter are useful because they try to examine the ideas rather than the techniques various public journalism initiatives have employed. Even advocates such as Rosen and Merritt admit that early efforts at public journalism were poorly executed, but that did not stop members of the elite press from issuing their assessments. “The fact that many of the preliminary forays into journalism were large

projects based on techniques such as polling and focus groups “invited journalists to regard it as a set of practices rather than a philosophy,” says Merritt.<sup>25</sup>

He likens that tactic to defining investigative journalism as “going to the courthouse to look up records.”<sup>26</sup> To their credit John Pauly, John Durham Peters and Barbie Zelizer -- who, unlike Nancy Fraser and Jane Mansbridge, were specifically looking at public journalism and not just the broader issue of the public sphere -- tried to grapple with the ideal rather than the movement’s technique. Still, their analysis does not hold up to scrutiny. The charge that public journalists have misread the public sphere by failing to acknowledge the role that conflict has played in fostering social change is not a fair accusation to make. It is true that the Beacon Journal and the Observer were criticized for failing to be more investigative, in the former’s case by asking tough questions to discriminatory banks. However, that is a minor quibble, given the overall impact the initiative had in fostering a new dialogue between blacks and whites. To broaden the criticism by accusing the movement of historical myopia is a charge Merritt denies. In “Missing the Point,” he is merely suggesting that in working for consensus, public journalists are developing new reflexes that can help readers see positive steps they can take to resolve problems. “No, refining this reflex doesn’t mean ignoring conflict, for conflict is the lifeblood of democracy.”<sup>27</sup>

John Pauly’s criticism also assumes that public journalists are of the view that their methods of telling stories are the only ones that should prevail. This assumption is false. Being an adherent of the pragmatist ideology, Rosen stresses the need for media outlets to use public journalism techniques *only* when it makes sense to do so. Stories such as natural disasters and isolated shootings must still be covered using conventional

methods. However, when issues within a community continue to dwell menacingly below the surface, as was the case in Charlotte and Akron, then it may be time to try to employ a form of journalism that can help citizens bring the issue to the surface, examine it, work through the difficulties and reach a judgment or consensus.

The general criticism that certain groups can use the consensus-driven formula as a cover to push their own agendas and ignore the concerns of minorities is equally problematic. There is a recognition that in pursuit of consensus, some views do get left by the wayside. In Doing Public Journalism, Art Charity suggests many practical ways media outlets could give voice to minority points of view that bubble to the surface during public journalism initiatives. Here again, the assumption seems to be that public journalists are more prone to suspending their news judgment. Certainly if there are concerns expressed by minorities groups, replies Merritt, they should receive an airing. Once again, there is a comparison to be made with investigative journalism – which Merritt, Rosen and many others regard as compatible with public journalism. Detailed investigations tend to be intense exercises that focus the mind. There is no reason to believe that journalists in pursuit of corrupt officials, for instance, suspend their news judgment to the degree that they cannot recognize other developments that may lead to unexpected stories.

The AIDS example was an interesting one to illustrate the kinds of stories that public journalists might miss – at least initially. While that may be a danger, journalists miss stories all the time. It must be remembered that the Watergate story, which in some quarters has achieved mythical status, was first downplayed by the pundits and

mainstream press in Washington when it first broke. Bill Doskoch makes this point in his introduction to The Missing News.

What is often forgotten is that the (Washington) Post was almost alone on the story until after Richard Nixon was re-elected president in 1972. Many senior pundits thought Watergate was a non-story. At one point, Katherine Graham, the Post's legendary publisher, asked her equally legendary editor Benjamin Bradlee, 'If this is such a hell of a story, where is everybody else?'<sup>28</sup>

Doskoch points out that Watergate caught the attention of Carl Jensen, a professor of communications at Sonoma State University in California, who discovered that many alternative publications were breaking stories on Watergate that the mainstream press was ignoring.

From that, he developed the idea that someone should survey the alternative and mainstream press to see whether other socially important stories were failing to get the attention they deserved. The result was the creation of Project Censored, a research group dedicated to studying under-reported stories in the U.S. news media. In 1976, Project Censored produced its first top10 list of under-reported stories, and it has been producing these annual lists ever since.<sup>29</sup>

The last criticism this chapter dealt with was the forging of false consensus. The example, though clearly demonstrative of such a claim, is merely an example of poor journalism that destructively misrepresents the facts. The same criticism about heavy-handed editors pursuing their own agendas also applies to conventional journalists. Following up a tip that it received from the Vancouver Province's editor-in-chief, Michael Cooke, had expunged the comments of a left-wing critic from a story about the Reform Party, The Georgia Straight, ran a condemnatory story that pointed out that many reporters and editors on staff disagreed vehemently with the editorial decision.<sup>30</sup> As well, in an article that appeared in the Globe and Mail, striking members of the Calgary Herald, another Southam paper, accused their managers of similar tactics.



Many of the striking staff accuse senior Herald management of running the newsroom with a heavy hand, often assigning stories based not on news value, but on whether the subject of the story was, for example, a friend of the publisher.<sup>31</sup>

Then, further down in the article:

Management says it is trying to better reflect the community it represents, where the majority of people are decidedly right-wing and vote for the Progressive Conservatives or the Reform Party.<sup>32</sup>

The Herald and Vancouver Province incidents cannot be used to discredit all conventional journalism, just as the incident with the Korean church should not be used to illustrate fears about widespread efforts to forge consensus when there is none. One of the reasons for the kinds of criticisms outlined in this chapter could be the reluctance of the movement to provide a definition, which on the surface seems odd, given that Rosen, for one, considers himself a pragmatist. One would assume that a pragmatist could try to craft a definition and identify an evolving set of tried-and-true techniques that work. But here again, the lack of definition can be applied to many aspects of journalism. Investigative journalists struggled trying to define their craft when the Investigative Editors and Reporters organization was established in 1975. Despite the lack of a clear definition, investigative journalism is still around. Such a comparison is useful because it indicates that for public journalism, the lack of a clear definition has not precluded media outlets from experimenting, no matter how awkward the initiatives turned out to be. Lewis Friedland, the journalism professor at the University of Wisconsin, who is trying to develop a central inventory of public journalism initiatives, observes:

That is the logic of the experiment. That's what Jay and those are talking about. You do this, but it doesn't really matter how crude it is. You start some place. And just by starting some place, it raises a different set of questions and you're

almost propelled by the logic of having tried it once to say ‘now what?’ And that raises another whole bunch of other interesting questions.<sup>33</sup>

Though the movement may have begun as an experiment, it has now become standard practice at many media outlets. Although definitive numbers are difficult to attain, the Pew Center estimates that between 150 and 200 outlets, most of them being newspapers, are engaged in public journalism.<sup>34</sup> For these newspapers standard practice means using public journalism techniques in their everyday journalism. According to Rosen and Merritt, applying the techniques is just a matter of asking different questions when approaching stories. In Charlotte and Akron, the editors asked themselves what steps had to be taken to empower citizens to fight crime and rekindle a dialogue across racial lines? That starting point is different from just reporting facts about rising crime rates or poor race relations. By asking different questions, explains Rosen, journalists are forced to write different stories which, under the right conditions, can lead to the kind of judgment that Yankelovich champions in Coming to Public Judgment.

The fact that the movement is still alive, after such a tumultuous start, may justify the characterization of being the “best organized social movement inside journalism in the history of the American press.”<sup>35</sup> It is for this reason that Canadian media outlets should take a look at a movement that has already shown some signs of life in this country.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Jay Rosen on May 15/2000.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Schudson, "What Public Journalism Knows about Journalism but Doesn't Know about Public," in Theodore Glasser ed., The Idea of Public Journalism (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), 124.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Jay Rosen, May 15/2000.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Davis Merritt, "Missing The Point," The American Journalism Review (July/August, 1996), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Yankelovich, Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Davis Merritt, May 19/2000.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Jay Rosen, May 15/2000.

<sup>9</sup> David Merritt, "Missing the Point," American Journalism, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Schudson, "What Public Journalism Knows about Journalism but Doesn't Know about Public," in Theodore Glasser ed., The Idea of Public Journalism, 126.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Davis Merritt, May 19/2000.

<sup>12</sup> John Pauly, "Journalism and the Sociology of Public Life," ed. Theodore Glasser, The Idea of Public Journalism (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 145.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Lewis Freidland, May 19/2000, an associate professor in the School of Journalism & Mass Communications at the University of Wisconsin, who conducted field work in Charlotte four years after the "Taking Back Our Neighborhood" initiative. He is presently compiling a central data base of public journalism initiatives conducted with money from the Pew Center for Civic Journalism.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," Habermas and the Public Sphere (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992), 119.

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- <sup>16</sup> Jane Mansbridge, *Feminism and Democracy*, The American Prospect, 1(Spring 1990), 127.
- <sup>17</sup> John Durham Peters, "Public Journalism and Democratic Theory: Four Challenges," in Theodore Glasser ed., The Idea of Public Journalism, 101.
- <sup>18</sup> E-mail correspondence with John Durham Peters, May 25/2000.
- <sup>19</sup> Barbie Zelizer, "Making the Neighborhood Work: The Improbabilities of Public Journalism," in Theodore Glasser ed., The Idea of Public Journalism, 166.
- <sup>20</sup> The Tainted Blood Coverage was the title of a panel discussion at the 1994 conference of the Canadian Association of Journalists in Ottawa.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Mike Hoyt, "Are You Now, or Will You Ever Be, A Civic Journalist," Columbia Journalism Review (September/October, 1995), 27.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> David Merritt, "Missing the Point," American Journalism Review (July/August, 1996), 29.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 31.
- <sup>28</sup> Bill Doskoch, preface to Robert A. Hackett, Richard Gruneau, Donald Gutstein, Timothy Gibson and Newswatch Canada, The Missing News: Filters and Blind Spots in Canada's Press, (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Jan. 2000), 7.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Charlie Smith's column reprinted in Media, 7 (no.1, Spring 2000), 15.
- <sup>31</sup> Susanne Craig, "The real reason Herald staff are hitting the bricks," Globe and Mail (November 16, 1999), A14.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with Lewis Freidland, May 19/2000.

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Wally Dean, associate director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, January 14/2000.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Schudson, "What Public Journalism Knows about Journalism but Doesn't Know about Public" in Theodore Glasser, ed., The Idea of Public Journalism, 118.

# **CHAPTER FOUR**

## **The Canadian Experience**

Since there has been no effort to collect data, the extent to which public journalism has taken off in Canada is unknown. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are pockets of activity that can be loosely associated with the movement. In Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity, Bob Hackett concludes that:

Public journalism is far more of a U.S. than Canadian phenomenon, triggered in particular by the manifest irrelevance of political journalism and election campaigns to millions of citizens. The perceived crisis of public life is less severe north of the border. Nevertheless, Canadian media too have been uneasy about their standing with audiences. <sup>1</sup>

He reasons that Canadian media, just like their brethren south of the border, are also concerned about reconnecting with their audiences. And while Hackett argues that Canadians journalists seem to reject the most “radical participatory experiments” <sup>2</sup> that have been carried out in the United States, he observes that some media outlets have been experimenting with ways to re-connect with their audiences, in part because of the wake-up call that citizens delivered to elite institutions, including the media, after the failed 1992 Charlottetown constitutional accord. Citizens rebelled by voting against a series of amendments that, among other things, would have recognized Quebec as a distinct society. In an attempt to harness and give expression to some of that public angst that had clearly demonstrated itself during the constitutional debate, the CBC’s national television service aired a series of town hall meetings that allowed citizens to discuss their dissatisfaction with politicians.

However, the gatherings failed to stimulate the constructive deliberation that Yankelovich, Habermas and Dewey have championed. More staged events than sincere attempts at dialogue, these town hall meetings that appeared on the National Magazine were experiments that George Bain criticized severely for being nothing more than venues that allowed the media and citizens to gang up on politicians.

Mainly, the participants – the prosecutors – asserted rather than asked; they knew rather than wanted to know. Some of what was said had a distinctly nasty tone, full of prejudice. None overflowed with a spirit of understanding and accommodation conducive to (Pamela) Wallin's 'working out some answers,' or with anyone...learning 'how politicians can restore the public's faith in government.'<sup>3</sup>

Town hall meetings aside, there have been initiatives in Canada that date back to 1939 that bore similarities to public journalism. For two-and-a-half decades beginning in 1939, CBC Radio aired programs designed to facilitate deliberation first among farmers, then among citizens in urban centres. Some of the proponents behind the "Farmers Forum" and the "Citizens Forum" were social activists who felt that the corporation should be a vehicle for social change. In 1967, another Canadian institution also became a venue of choice for filmmakers who came to regard film, and later video, as similar venues for social change. The National Film Board launched project called "Challenge for Change," which gave the poor in many communities across the country opportunities to solve their own problems and make their voices heard to politicians at all levels of government.

In 1995, some journalists and academics in this country were first formally introduced to the public journalism when Lisa Austin, then Jay Rosen's assistant at an organization called Project on Public Life and the Press, delivered a speech at the CBC forum on ethics in the media. Austin told the Ottawa gathering about experiments in the

United States and the importance public journalists placed on taking extraordinary steps to understand how they could serve their communities more effectively. Using the language of Daniel Yankelovich about the importance of allowing people to form judgments, Austin told the gathering that...

...by listening to the interaction of citizens with citizens, this reporting technique tracks the process from initial awareness of an issue through the stage when people reach a public judgment they're willing to live with. It shows how people's ideas can affect the system – through an election or as a general consensus develops on a given issue.<sup>4</sup>

Austin's ideas may have been new for many people in the audience unaware of earlier experiments at the CBC or the NFB, but some media outlets had already begun experimenting with initiatives that resembled less radical public journalism projects that have more to do with connecting with citizens than facilitating social action.

In his book Yesterday's News, John Miller cites the example of the Winnipeg Free Press. During the municipal elections in 1994, the paper decided to commission a poll to identify the issues citizens felt politicians should be addressing. Then the paper made sure the candidates dealt with the issues. Next, the Free Press launched a public education campaign designed to improve voter turnout which, over the past decade, had averaged 33 per cent. Editor Phil McLeod likened this initiative to letting minority shareholders decide the fate of a big corporation. "The campaign showed impressive results: 42 per cent of London voters cast ballots in the election, and the paper kept the public involved through phone lines and community meetings."<sup>5</sup>

The Toronto Star also experimented with what it considered to be a more innovative form of coverage. During the 1995 provincial election, there was a lot of talk about merging the six municipalities in the Greater Toronto Area into one big city.



Proponents of the idea argued that in these days when corporations were seeking to find economies of scale, it made little sense to have six, separate administrations, when one large entity would be more efficient. The Toronto Star's publisher, John Hondrich, decided to use his paper to launch a post-election debate about the pros and cons of a merged city. Although the paper campaigned in favor of combining the cities, it took extraordinary steps to make sure that citizens on both sides of the issue could debate the merits of such an important endeavor. "We saw ourselves as catalysts. But that's as far as we wanted to go. Let's get the discussion. Let's focus it as an issue. Let's bring it forward.... We presented it in a way that made it very relevant. And it hadn't been as relevant before." <sup>6</sup>

The Star used polls to find out how people felt about the different proposals on the table, then some of those same citizens were consulted during one-on-one interviews with journalists. Frank Graves, whose firm conducted the polls for the paper, viewed the initiative as similar to the public journalism initiatives that he had studied in the United States because it gave citizens a sustained opportunity to voice their concerns that otherwise would not have been the case.

They wanted to end up with a citizen-based prescription for the future of the metro area that would then be delivered before the first metro election. And this would become a basis for a debate during the lead-up to the actual campaign. So it intended to use a combination of some traditional polling tools, plus some more one-on-one journalistic kinds of interviews with poll participants, and then say "here's the best that we can come up with." And they actually did come up with a set of guidelines or recommendations based on this exercise, which certainly became part of the debate during the (municipal) election. <sup>7</sup>

Laudable though the Star's coverage may have been, it is not the initiative that observers such as Bob Hackett and John Miller point to when discussing public journalism in a Canadian context. The coverage was dissimilar to initiatives in the United

States because the Star stuck to its agenda of insisting that the province enforce amalgamation, even though citizens may have been opposed, as was the case during the plebiscite that the city of Toronto conducted in 1996.

For a more specific discussion about public journalism in Canada, we will examine two initiatives; one that occurred in Alberta in 1995 after major announcements of cuts to health care, education and social services; and an experiment mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: the National Film Board's "Challenge for Change."

### **"Challenge For Change" and the National Film Board**

During the 1960s demands such as "power to the people" and "participatory democracy" were finding a voice in the young idealists pushing for change. The governments of Lester B. Pearson and Pierre Elliot Trudeau, with their emphasis on giving youth a chance in a just society, tried to encourage young people to become socially involved. The political climate in Canada and the United States was characterized in part by the battle that social activists were waging for a more tolerant and caring society. Into this climate waded the Privy Council Office, which asked the National Film Board to develop a series of programs designed to raise peoples' awareness about poverty and the problems associated with it. However, once the project got underway the goal of raising awareness turned out to be more ambitious. At the same time filmmakers at the NFB like Dorothy Todd Hénaut were themselves thinking about a host of social problems and ways in which they could raise awareness and help people find solutions to some of their problems.

**I tried to get everyone to tell the true story as they lived it, with their errors as well as their successes, and most people did. We tried to get people to question**

their own ethics, to realize that there is power in the media, and that to be conscious of that power, and to share it, is far more pleasurable than hogging it or manipulating it.<sup>8</sup>

The converging interests of Hénaut, the NFB and the federal government resulted in an initiative that began in 1967 entitled “Challenge for Change.” It was jointly administered by the NFB and the government to “encourage dialogue and promote social change.”<sup>9</sup>

Broadly speaking, this desire to use the medium as an instrument for an activist relationship to Canadian society grew out of the recognition that the NFB needed to be involved in more than the production of films. It needed to connect with and better understand the audiences it was addressing.<sup>10</sup>

Spurred on by the motto to give a voice to the voiceless, Dorothy Hénaut and the other filmmakers regarded themselves as intermediaries who contributed technical expertise and equipment to citizens prepared to help themselves through the use of 16mm film and eventually, video. “There were two prongs to “Challenge for Change:” one was making films about social issues by professional filmmakers and the other was helping citizens and citizens’ groups speak for themselves...to reach out to their fellow citizens.”<sup>11</sup>

In certain instances, the films brought the plight of the poor to the attention of politicians who otherwise would not be paying attention. The films were also vehicles that allowed people to help themselves in other ways. Some groups used their newfound grasp of the technology to raise money to build amenities in their communities. Still others used the technology as a catalyst that forced people who normally would not deliberate to share ideas in give-and-take sessions. During the course of working with the videos, spokespeople naturally emerged who were able to articulate ideas and stimulate discussion about interests that the participants learned they had in common. “For me, it

was extremely important not to foster dependence on the NFB but instead to weave interdependencies on a local scale.”<sup>12</sup>

These interdependencies were achieved by working with community organizers who frequently were associated with universities. Among other things, the organizers helped shape the discussion and keep it on track, and train the citizens to use the equipment so they could film their own deliberations. The organizers and filmmakers believed that the ability for citizens to communicate was a two-step process: information and response. Such an argument fits in with Philip Meyer’s assessment of public journalism when he asserts that:

The people who practice public journalism do so in order to have an effect on their community. So the ultimate measure is not what they put into the customer’s hands but what ends up in their heads. And even then, it is only important if it affects behavior.<sup>13</sup>

Some projects failed, either because they were poorly conceived, or citizens showed little interest in participating. Other projects succeeded and were used to illustrate the worth of “Challenge for Change.” Such was the case in Alberta’s Drumheller Valley. In the summer of 1969, the NFB hired a community development worker from the University of Calgary to work in this poor mining area for a two-year period. The following winter, “Challenge for Change” spread to Rosedale, a nearby village that had no local government, water, sewers or gas. After a handful of people got together to form a citizens’ committee, they began cooperating with the community development worker who gave them access to video equipment. With cameras in hand, the residents went to stores, pubs and other locales, asking people what they thought about their situation in the village: “Did they like having their outhouses right next to their well? Did they like hauling water? Did they think it was fair that, in a gas-rich region, they had no gas?”<sup>14</sup>

Posing these questions in front of the camera forced people to think hard about possible answers. The citizens' committee edited the tapes and presented the one-hour show, entitled Rosedale: A White Man's Reservation, to 250 residents. After the viewing the program, people organized themselves into sub-committees that pushed for the amenities they were lacking. The results of their initiative were captured in a follow-up video entitled "VTR Rosedale," which showed villagers digging holes to install gas lines, cleaning up the town, trying to attract new businesses in order to prevent the young people from leaving. The village even received a fire truck which was eventually put to use by the volunteer fire department.

The moral of that story is anytime you can help people get together and understand their common interests, they'll take it from there. They had enormous change in the attitudes of the people who were very depressed because it was a very poor area.<sup>15</sup>

Dorothy Todd Hénaut's faith in people's ability to effectively deliberate is echoed in the writings of Dewey, Habermas and Yankelovich. Although every project sponsored by "Challenge for Change" could not boast of the success of the Rosedale initiative, the universal intent behind the program was an attempt to facilitate social change using the medium of film. And as such, the initiative bears a resemblance to public journalism initiatives at the Charlotte Observer, the Akron Beacon Journal. Another initiative that has also been mentioned in the same context as public journalism is a more recent example that also has roots in Alberta. "Eyes on Alberta" was a project that unfolded in that province in 1995 after the Ralph Klein government began making unprecedented cuts to health care, social services and education.

## **“Eyes on Alberta”: Giving Citizens a New Voice**

The “Eyes on Alberta” initiative was not the brainchild of the newspapers and broadcasters who ended up publishing and broadcasting the series of stories. The idea emerged from Tony Meyers and a colleague at the University of Alberta. At the time Meyers was the university’s director of public affairs.

We thought that because the change was so astronomical, because the change was so significant, because the changes happened so rapidly that Albertans needed an opportunity to reflect on those changes and to see what difference they had made, were making and would make to our society.<sup>16</sup>

Meyers’ purpose for finding media partners for a detailed examination and discussion about the changes in Alberta were twofold. He wanted to showcase the expertise of the academics at the University of Alberta who had given some thought to the changes Klein was proposing. And second, Meyers wanted to stimulate a debate about profound changes that would touch the lives of many people.

Meyers first approached CBC Edmonton, then the Edmonton Journal. Soon enough it became evident that in order for the discussion to reach the broadest range of people possible, the initiative had to be province-wide. That meant contacting the CBC in Calgary, the province’s other Southam paper, the Calgary Herald, and the University of Calgary. Convincing the media outlets to take on such a project turned out to be an “easy sell” for Meyers.

During one of the first meetings to discuss the joint initiative, the participants disagreed over who should pay for the polling that was designed to tap into the specific anxieties of citizens. Meyers says that the media outlets expected his university, which has the capacity to conduct polls, to pay the expensive bill. Unable to agree, the

newspapers and the CBC commissioned polling company Angus Reid to conduct the poll. The concerns people expressed to pollsters kicked off three months of research that culminated in a week-long series of stories that ran under the title “Eyes on Alberta.”

The poll produced a jumble of contradictory results that reflected the confusion that the cuts had produced. For instance, about two-thirds of the respondents said they supported the push to reduce the size and budget of many government departments. There was moderate support for user fees for some health care services such as eye exams and lab tests; moderate opposition to hospital closures and health care cutbacks; even stronger opposition to reductions in health care benefits for seniors; two-thirds of the respondents said that the “Klein Revolution” had a positive impact on the economy as a whole; a slightly smaller percentage of respondents said the cuts had a negative effect on the quality of health care; slightly less than half said the cuts had a negative effect on education..<sup>17</sup>

When cuts to education, health care and social services were factored into the equation of slaying deficits and balancing the books, the support for the overall budget was more modest, with about a third of the respondents strongly approving and another third only showing modest support; a strong majority, about eighty per cent, opted for a more moderate approach, but a slightly smaller majority judged that the government was on the right track.<sup>18</sup>

Gloria Lowen, at the time a senior producer who headed up the initiative for the corporation, remembers how tricky it was teaming up with other media outlets.

The print journalists were traditionally our competition on the street. And here we were basically getting into bed with the competition. That presented some interesting challenges, especially from the reporters’ point of view. They had

become friends, they shared resources, they talked to each other throughout the thing.<sup>19</sup>

Nine reporters divided into three teams which interviewed and profiled a number of people. Reporters set out to tell individual stories that included the exploration of ways in which Albertans found security during an uncertain time; the struggle that a Calgary family worried about the future had to endure; the concerns of a mother who lost her job as a dietitian and was forced to depend on her parents to help pay for the children's schooling; and civil servants who managed to avoid being laid off, but were struggling with poor morale and increased workloads. Herald reporter, Carol Howes and CBC reporter Rick Boguski spoke with a resident described as the most resilient Albertan who was "capturing the eyes of the world." Journal reporter Paul Marck and "teammates Rick Boguski and the Herald's Lisa Dempster, talked to enterprising people.

The reporters also wrote about the province's changing values and growing dependence on gambling. In explaining the "Eyes on Alberta" initiative to readers, the Edmonton Journal noted that up until now news coverage has focused on financial details, cuts, layoffs, curtailed services. "But the group that came together to produce Eyes on Alberta decided that this project would take the attitudinal temperature of the province – how we are coping and how our attitudes are changing?"<sup>20</sup>

As we have seen in previous chapters, the desire to take the community's attitudinal temperature is what many public journalism initiatives have in common. Whether it be the Akron Beacon Journal, the Charlotte Observer, or as we have seen in this chapter, the National Film Board, there is a common commitment to shift from the more traditional role of information disseminator to facilitator of deliberations about race, crime, literacy and poverty. "The Eyes on Alberta" project allowed an enhanced



opportunity for discussions as citizens saw their concerns recounted in print and on the airwaves. Albertans also had the opportunity to participate in one of two town hall meetings at the end of the week of programming. The “Eyes on Alberta” project did not go as far as the Charlotte Observer or the Beacon Journal in its efforts to act as a catalyst for change or precipitate deliberation over a greater length of time. However, the Canadian initiative did represent a more ambitious attempt at deliberation than the CBC’s post-Charlottetown Accord town hall meetings. As well “Eyes on Alberta” contained many of the elements that are common to public journalism initiatives that seek the more modest goals of a more vigorous reliance for news copy on what ordinary citizens have to say. Gloria Lowen put it this way: “What we wanted to do was reflect Alberta to Albertans. So we didn’t want a lot of official political babble getting in the way. We didn’t need a politician to come on (the air) and say, ‘Oh, we’re doing this or we’re doing that.’”<sup>21</sup>

“Eyes on Alberta” was almost neo-populist in its insistence that politicians be excluded from the discussion. And as we have seen in previous chapter, such tendencies to exclude politicians and their officials risks distancing the citizenry from the very power structure it wishes to embrace. Still, “Eyes on Alberta” managed to create the kind of public sphere that had not existed during the 1994 provincial election when cuts to vital services received scant attention. Journal columnist Marc Lisac recalled that Albertans were in for a shock.

For the first time since becoming premier (Ralph Klein) let the people see his tough guy side. “The time for debate is over,” he said. It was time for the government to act. But where had the debate taken place? Not in the election campaign, except in the most general of ways. All the campaign had settled was that people wanted to balance the budget and create jobs without adding more taxes.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps sensing a need to stimulate the kind of discussion that Klein had avoided, the Edmonton Journal explained to its readers why the “Eyes on Alberta” campaign was necessary.

**Everybody else is looking at Alberta and now it’s time for some self-examination. This series looks at how we are re-defining ourselves, our province and our future in the face of massive political and economic change. We asked you about your changing attitudes and we’ll tell you how some fellow Albertans are dealing with the new Alberta.** <sup>23</sup>

The changes in Alberta also included a government retreat from activities that had been regulated in the past. “Eyes on Alberta” featured articles which went beyond the standard pro-and-con treatment to explore the changing values and ethics of this new de-regulated environment. A piece entitled “Gambling with morals and values,” profiled Linda Sommer who worried about the deeper implications of the government’s move to give Albertans more choices in areas the province used to regulate such as gambling and alcohol. She pondered the cost this phenomenon would exact on community and personal values. “We haven’t lost our morals and values yet, but the temptations are greater now that (liquor and gambling) are more widely available,” said Sommer, a mother of four and a practicing Christian.

In the same story, a man argued that Klein is on the right track for privatizing liquor stores because “supply will meet demand.” In the following paragraph, the reporter concluded that Klein and his government have extricated themselves from the game of regulating morality. “Gone are the days when government dictated where and when we could purchase alcohol or gamble.”

Further into the story, a reverend lamented about the “moral vacuum” the changes have created. Then there’s an assessment from a Calgary political science professor who

concluded that this deregulation trend symbolized a move to greater hedonism in our society in the past thirty years and greater individual pleasure seeking. Flannagan predicted that there would eventually be a backlash of traditional values and a moral re-regulation. Olds-Didsbury MLA, Roy Brassard, an MLA in the province's Bible Belt, observed that by de-regulating gambling and the retail of liquor, his premier has finally forced communities to take a position on their values. Yet a paradox was raised: a few years earlier, Brassard piloted a private members' bill to outlaw nude dancing while he was a member of the travelling committee studying gambling in the province. Brassard had trouble reconciling his personal beliefs with his government's laissez-faire attitude towards greater freedoms in the areas of gambling and alcohol. <sup>24</sup>

"Eyes on Alberta" was split into themes that crossed over the traditional beats of education, labour and health. Instead, the themes of tolerance, security, community, resilience, enterprise and vices and values were developed as starting points for discussions and stories. For public journalists the goal of moving away from the traditional beat system that focuses on institutional coverage is to force the reporters to think about issues in broader terms that centre on the concerns of citizens, not the inner workings of institutions. For instance, this thematic approach to coverage is evident at the *State* in Columbia, South Carolina, which has re-organized its beat system. Quality of life explores issues such as crime, housing, food/nutrition, health and the environment; city life and governance delve into issues affecting citizens from "town council to Capitol Hill; and passages/learning, look at "cradle-to-grave" issues including parenting, child care, education and aging. <sup>25</sup>

“Eyes on Alberta” contained other elements of public journalism as well. In her explanation of the steps that are involved in a typical public journalism project, Charlotte Grimes, a former reporter with the St. Louis Post Dispatch and a friendly critic of public journalism, identifies six “steps,” that include sponsoring town-hall style meetings, public forums; shaping coverage around a citizens’ agenda of concerns derived from polls, surveys and focus groups; featuring real people in stories rather than experts; and forming alliances of print, television and radio to “promote each organization’s contribution and to saturate the market or region with coverage.”<sup>26</sup>

“Eyes on Alberta” ended with town hall meetings at CBC studios in Edmonton and Calgary that gave Albertans a chance to discuss steps the province should take to deal with its problems and challenges identified in the stories.

Despite the similarities to public journalism initiatives in the United States, the main players behind the Eyes on Alberta initiative denied that they were imitating efforts south of the border. Murdoc Davis, at the time the publisher of the Edmonton Journal, spelled out his view on the subject. The following excerpt is a discussion that took place on CBC Radio’s media program *Now the Details* involving Davis, Gloria Lowen and the host, Mary Lous Finlay:

**Davis:** I don’t think I’d have the concept of so-called public journalism in mind. I would tend to agree that it’s just good journalism. And, yes, doing things in a few different ways.

**Finlay:** What did you do that was different?

**Davis:** Well, we formed some partnerships with what might normally be described as competing media for starters. We had CBC involved with us, as well as the Calgary Herald. And we did some things to engage the public through public forums and that kind of thing. But I’m still not clear (about) the U.S. definition of public journalism. I’m not sure that (“Eyes on Alberta”) would have fallen into (the definition) regardless.

**Lowen:** We wanted to identify a big story in our province, and provide some new insight into what had gone on in the two years that the Klein government had been cutting various budgets. I agree completely with Murdoch Davis, we never cast this in any way as a public journalism project. And I don't think that it was. I just think that it was, as he has said, just good journalism. In no way really did the community... drive (the) project or provide...a focus. In terms of editorial focus, we did that in a traditional way, around a table with senior editorial people, talking about how we should do this project and what we should focus on.<sup>27</sup>

Denials aside, there is clear evidence that the “Eyes on Alberta” initiative bore many similarities to public journalism projects that we have already discussed in previous chapters. Lowen and Davis may not have given Albertans the same opportunities as the citizens in the run-down neighborhoods in the Carolinas or the residents in Akron Ohio to solve their problems. However, CBC, the Edmonton Journal and the other partners did give residents a deliberative space to launch a discussion that continues to this day over the Klein government's plans to make changes to health care. And continued deliberation, no matter how long it may take, is one of the key aims of public journalism.

## **Does the Movement Have a Chance in Canada?**

Given the fact that the traces of public journalism can be found in Canadian experiments, it may be time for media outlets in this country to study the evolution of the movement's theoretical and practical elements for insights. In chapter one, we saw how the drive to find new ways of telling stories stemmed from concerns in the United States about declining circulation. The late president of Knight Ridder News, James K. Batton produced what he considered to be evidence that proves people who feel a greater affinity with their communities are more likely to buy papers. However, the commercial imperative may be insufficient to entice Canadian newspapers, since the evidence that public journalism increases circulation is weak. At the very best, asserts the Pew Center

for Civic Journalism, public journalism has simply allowed many newspapers and broadcast outlets to maintain their listeners, viewers and readers.<sup>28</sup> At a time when more and more people seem to be turning to other venues such as the Internet for news, it may be difficult for any market-driven initiative, including public journalism, to ensure a return to the profitable days that many media outlets once enjoyed.

However, there are two additional motivational elements that have helped define public journalism: social and political. Even after he acknowledged concerns about declining circulation, Batten talked to his editors about improving the health of their communities. Put another way, the CEO felt it important for the Fourth Estate to reinvigorate the public sphere in the ways that we have examined in the previous chapters. Philip Meyer credits these motivational elements for attracting the financial support from philanthropic organizations such as the Pew Center for Civic Journalism.

The participation of so many charitable foundations in this scene is evidence that there is more to the motivation than media profits. The common theme is to use the power of the media to fix something wrong in society, and to pay special attention to those wrongs that can be directly attributable to the media. The proponents of public journalism who are motivated by economic concerns and those whose concern is more social and political no doubt overlap. But the prudent researcher will choose one perspective or the other as a basic framework and then look at the influence of the other within that frame.<sup>29</sup>

Thus far no Canadian charitable organizations have expressed any willingness to bankroll innovative journalistic endeavors. Still, as we have seen in this chapter, some media outlets have spent their own money on experiments, citing some of the same reasons that motivated the Beacon Journal and the Charlotte Observer to push the boundaries of their coverage. As the public journalism movement continues to mature, its survival may not rest on institutions willing to provide funding, but on emerging evidence that the movement has an impact on citizen engagement.

Some researchers in the United States are attempting to collect this evidence. In 1997 Gregory Markus began surveying hundreds of individuals in 14 U.S. cities with media outlets dedicated to public journalism. Through telephone surveys Markus found that residents were more likely to become involved in finding solutions to problems when they were given opportunities to do so.<sup>30</sup> This result seems to confirm some of the attitudes that Frank Graves of Ekos Research came across when he discovered that many Canadians say they are willing to exercise their civic duty under the right conditions. For his part, Markus hypothesized that if public journalism strengthens the citizens' connection to public life, then cities where the movement is present should have a greater level of political involvement compared to communities where residents were only exposed to traditional journalism. To test the hypothesis, the researcher measured the effect that newspaper reading had on two variables: the frequency with which citizens discussed local politics with others; and the number of civic acts in which they had engaged in the previous four years. Civic acts included activities such as participation in neighborhood associations; political parties, service clubs and community action organizations.

We found statistically significant effects of newspaper reading on the two participation variables in every city. More importantly, the results suggest that civic journalism matters... This analysis is preliminary, and there is much additional research that remains for us to complete. That said, we take these preliminary results to suggest that civic journalism can increase civic engagement of readers.<sup>31</sup>

These aren't clinical trials," said Markus in an email response to questions about his study. "There isn't "proof" in that sense. But we found, for example, that the activity differences between readers and non-readers are much greater in civic journalism cities

than in other cities -- presumably because of the positive impact of what is in the papers."<sup>32</sup>

Markus' preliminary results are echoed in field research carried out by American journalism professor Lewis Friedland. He has studied initiatives in cities such as Charlotte, Wichita and Norfolk.

At this state of research, we can say that public journalism seems to have succeeded in its goals of stimulating greater deliberation, increasing community problem-solving capacities, and stimulating new community relationships across boundaries.<sup>33</sup>

In Canada, such results will not necessarily resonate with the National Post, which only seems interested in using shock tactics to sell more newspapers,<sup>34</sup> not a long-term strategy for developing and nurturing a public sphere. However, the ability of public journalism to increase civic engagement should appeal to at least one media outlet that many supporters argue should be unconcerned about profits and audience share: the CBC. At a time when the public broadcaster, especially television, is struggling to distinguish itself from the commercial outlets, this may be a time to study ways of formally and systematically adopting some of the public journalism ideals. "Eyes on Alberta" demonstrated that CBC Alberta was willing to try something different. So the CBC could simply build on experiments that have already been tried and tested, not only in Alberta but, as we eluded to at the beginning of this chapter, as far back as the 1940s and 50s with the "Farm Forum" and "Citizens Forum." In other words, one can make the case that the tenets of public journalism played a significant part in the corporation's development. Historical precedent, emerging evidence that public journalism enhances civic engagement, the desire of citizens to deliberate under the right conditions, and a



**need to re-define its role are four important reasons why it makes sense for a public broadcaster to embrace public journalism.**

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity (Toronto: Garamond Press Ltd., 1998), 204.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., 202.
- <sup>3</sup> George Bain, Gotcha! How the media distort the news (Toronto: Key Porter Books Limited, 1994), 15-16.
- <sup>4</sup> Lisa Austin, presentation at the CBC Symposium "Public journalism and citizenship," (Ottawa: 1995).
- <sup>5</sup> John Miller, Yesterday's News: Why Canada's Daily Newspapers are Failing Us, (Halifax: Fernwood, 1998), 218-219.
- <sup>6</sup> Now the Details, CBC Radio ( March 19, 1996).
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with Frank Graves (April 13, 2000).
- <sup>8</sup> Dorothy Todd Hénaut, "Video Stories from the Dawn of Time" Visual Anthropology Review, 7 (no. 2, Fall 1991), 101.
- <sup>9</sup> Dorothy Hénaut, "The Challenge for Change," Video: The Changing World (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991), 49.
- <sup>10</sup> Ron Burnett, "Video/Film: From Communication To Community," Video: The Changing World (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991), 54.
- <sup>11</sup> Interview with Dorothy Todd Hénaut, (April 28, 2000).
- <sup>12</sup> Dorothy Hénaut, "The Challenge for Change," Video: The Changing World (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991), 51.
- <sup>13</sup> Philip Meyer, "If It Works, How Will We Know?" Assessing Public Journalism, Edmund B. Lambeth, Philip Meyer and Esther Thorson, eds. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 261.
- <sup>14</sup> Dorothy Todd Henaut, "Video Stories from the Dawn of Time" Visual Anthropology Review, 7(no 2, Fall 1991), 90.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Dorothy Todd Henaut, (April 28/2000).

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- <sup>16</sup> Interview with Tony Meyers, (April 19, 2000).
- <sup>17</sup> The Poll, The Edmonton Journal, (Sunday March 19/99) C3.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., C3
- <sup>19</sup> David McKie, "Public Journalism" Media, 2 (no.3, 1995), 13.
- <sup>20</sup> Kathy Kerr, "Extreme Measures," The Edmonton Journal (March 12, 1995) D3.
- <sup>21</sup> David McKie, "Public Journalism," Media 2 (no.3, 1995),13.
- <sup>22</sup> Marc Lisac, "The Klein Revolution," quoted in Media, 2 (no.3, 1995), 11.
- <sup>23</sup> Paul Marck, "Passion, pride and vision; VICES & VALUES," The Edmonton Journal, ( March 17, 1995) A6.
- <sup>24</sup> Lisa Dempster, "Gambling with morals and values; VICES & VALUES," The Calgary Herald, ( March 17, 1995), A1.
- <sup>25</sup> Scott Johnson, "Public Journalism and Newsroom Structure," Assessing Public Journalism (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 129.
- <sup>26</sup> Charlotte Grimes, Whither the Civic Journalism Bandwagon? (Cambridge, MA: The Joan Shorenstein Center on Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University, February, 1999), 9.
- <sup>27</sup> Now the Details, March 19/96.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with Wally Dean, associate director of the Pew Centre for Civic Journalism (January 14, 2000).
- <sup>29</sup> Philip Meyer, "If It Works, How Will We Know?" Assessing Public Journalism, Edmund B. Lambeth, Philip Meyer and Esther Thorson, eds., 256.
- <sup>30</sup> Gregory B. Markus, Causes and Consequences of Civic Engagement in America, Working Draft (Ann Arbor: the Institute for Social Research, the University of Michigan, July 1999), 11.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Email correspondence with Gregory Markus (May 13, 2000).
- <sup>33</sup> Lewis A. Friedland, "Public Journalism and Community Change," in Public Journalism and Political Knowledge, Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Robert N. Roberts, eds. (New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, August, 2000), 140.

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<sup>34</sup> During an interview with National Post deputy editor Martin Newland on Oct. 22/1999, he admitted that the paper was out to “shock” people to get their attention.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **The CBC and Public Journalism**

At first blush, it would seem ludicrous to be discussing whether the radio and television services of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation should adopt a brand of journalism that history has demonstrated takes extra resources – although not as many as people think -- and a mindset that departs from tradition. Although the radio service received an extra 10-million dollars for the 2000-20001 fiscal year, the corporation has launched a major initiative to re-examine the way it delivers programs across the board. On December 21, 1999 corporation President and CEO Robert Rabinovitch announced to staff the creation of a so-called Re-engineering Task Force, which was to be the first stage in an effort to “reconfigure the CBC as it enters the 21st century.”<sup>1</sup> Cutting regional television was supposed to be the first step in this re-engineering process, as Rabinovitch was threatening to emasculate the regions by replacing the supper-hour shows with 15-minute “windows” that would be slotted into a national broadcast emanating from Toronto. Public pressure forced the corporation’s board of directors to vote for a plan that would reduce the supper-hour newscasts to half an hour. The plan will put more pressure on the corporation to find money from advertising revenue and other sources. However, the point needs to be made that throughout its history the corporation has struggled with questions of mandate and money. And, as Rabinovitch acknowledged during his

appearance before the Heritage Committee on May 16, 2000, the past decade and a half has been tough for the corporation.

It can be said that we have endured, at CBC, over a period of 16 years, cuts almost every year. If not in dollar terms, in real terms, and it is very difficult to try to continue to be all things to all people. The difference is, and perhaps it is not a nice thing to say, the difference is this time we're cutting off a limb. We are not spreading the pain across the company.<sup>2</sup>

Given the ongoing nature of the problems that have beset the corporation, one could argue that now is just as good a time as any to consider a possible new direction for news and current affairs, especially since Rabinovitch and his predecessors have talked about the need to make CBC distinct from the commercial sector. It is interesting that he draws inspiration from the radio service in general and the English Radio Report of 1970, that many credit with ushering in the so-called radio revolution, in particular. When the authors wrote that report, which studied ways to make radio more relevant to listeners and more distinct from the private radio, money and mandate were big question marks. But instead of suggesting that limbs be amputated, the authors suggested the need for reform. If the CBC's Re-engineering Task Force was truly serious about reform, it would do well to use the English Radio Report as a template.

Up until now the discussion about the corporation's distinctiveness, or lack of it, has been framed within the traditional definition of journalism, that is, as a disseminator of information. And yet, as we have seen throughout the previous chapters, key proponents of public journalism push the boundaries by positing the movement as a facilitator of social change. While the notion of facilitator may seem radical and smack of advocacy journalism that critics deplore, it is reasonable for the CBC to take a serious look at public journalism. Much of the corporation's history has been enriched by

producers who have used their innovation to push the boundaries. At a time when the public broadcaster is at a crossroads, a search for innovation might be just what the corporation needs.

These are some of the reasons why it is worth, even at this time of continued uncertainty about money and mandate, discussing the feasibility of the CBC adopting public journalism as one way of fulfilling its mandate under the Broadcasting Act, and distinguishing itself from the private sector. The discussion in this chapter will unfold in five sections, with each one being led off by a question that the president, a member of his board of directors, manager or senior producer might ask.

### **Why should the CBC adopt ideals that push journalism beyond its traditional boundaries?**

Because public journalists argue that being distinct and providing a valuable public service in an information-rich age means giving citizens more than just better information. And this is an argument that should make sense to the CBC. The corporation's mandate is spelled out in the Broadcasting Act. Paragraph 3(1) instructs the national public broadcaster to provide radio and television services that incorporate a wide range of programming that "informs, enlightens and entertains."<sup>3</sup> For its part paragraph 3 (1) (m) (ii) spells out the need to "reflect Canada and its regions to national and regional audiences, while serving the special needs of those regions."<sup>4</sup>

The CBC has spent a lot of time over the years devising ways to best fulfill that mandate. The corporation has been more successful in crafting a valuable niche for radio. Television has been another story. In the last decade the terminology being used was "repositioning," that is, devising a plan to situate the broadcaster within the so-called

500-channel universe. Here the goal was to develop a service that was distinct. Under the heading “Why is repositioning necessary – why now?” staff were told that the CBC “cannot expect Canadians to give their moral and financial support to a national broadcaster that gives them what they can get from dozens of other sources.”<sup>5</sup>

The Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage made the same point in its 1995 report.

How the CBC can best fulfill its legislated mandate in the future is an important issue and it is clear to all players in the broadcasting industry, including the CBC, that the changing broadcasting environment calls for a rethinking about how the CBC can provide a wide range of programming that informs, enlightens and entertains.”<sup>6</sup>

When Harold Redekopp, vice-president for English Television, appeared before the Heritage Committee on May 16, 2000, he told the MPs that the CBC is undergoing an identity crisis.

When we canvass Canadians we are not seen as sufficiently different from other broadcasters. In fact, we suffer from what we call a blurred image. We are seen as part commercial broadcaster, part public broadcaster. And indeed when you ask Canadians about public television, they’re not even certain what public television is. So we have a huge challenge to explain and to demonstrate in clear and compelling terms what public is and why it’s worthy of public support. It’s not hard to understand that if you don’t understand what public television is, you’re not likely to support it.<sup>7</sup>

For a public broadcaster that seems determined to continue operating within the traditional boundaries of information dissemination, it will be difficult to stand out from the other broadcasters in an increasingly crowded field. Unlike the days when the CBC first came onto the scene in 1936, citizens are now awash in information. The Internet, cable and satellite provide new information sources. Of more concern to mainstream media outlets such as the CBC should be the evidence that citizens are continuing to turn away from the mainstream media.<sup>8</sup> Against this backdrop, it is difficult to determine how



simply providing more information will win back public confidence and aid in distinguishing the public broadcaster from its competitors who are also producing similar programs such as documentaries.

Because citizens have access to more information than ever, perhaps they need something else from their public broadcaster. Perhaps they need a way to not only make sense of that information, but to act on it. It is time for the CBC to redefine its notion of public service broadcasting. Although the evidence is anecdotal and based on preliminary results of studies, it seems to be compelling enough to suggest that public journalism provides citizens with a different kind of service that they value. Chapter four pointed to research that demonstrates that in U.S. markets with media outlets committed to public journalism, people are able to use the information to get plugged into their communities and they generally feel more positive about the institutions that govern their lives.

Akron and Charlotte were two communities in which residents were empowered by the kind of coverage that the Beacon Journal and Charlotte Observer were able to provide.

### **Does the CBC have the will to commit to public journalism?**

If history is any teacher, the answer should be yes. In the past, individuals within the corporation have espoused ideals that are compatible public journalism's desire to facilitate social change. Within news U.S. media outlets practicing public journalism, the commitment comes from the top. In the case of newspapers, it is the publisher or managing editor. In the case of radio and television, senior producers and managers are the ones who call the shots. Such commitment is necessary because public journalism, as

it was practiced in Charlotte and Akron, represents a significant shift in the way the public is engaged. As well, these initiatives did cost extra money. Without management support, there would be no one to authorize spending the money needed to employ techniques such as polls, focus groups, town halls or backfill for reporters who may be liberated from the daily mix for a set period of time. In the study Lewis Friedland has conducted to evaluate the success of public journalism initiatives in cities such as Charlotte and Wichita, he has discovered in each instance that the coverage was driven by the people in charge of the Observer and the Eagle.

It has to come from someone who can authorize this experiment. Someone who other than an individual reporter going out and saying, "I'm going to do public journalism." I wouldn't say that reporters can't change how they cover their beat or the way that they approach citizens when they talk to them, or the kinds of stories they propose. But ultimately those changes are circumscribed by what the editor wants.<sup>9</sup>

If this is the case, is it reasonable to expect managers in the CBC must endorse public journalism as a way to cover certain issues. Certainly, managers and senior producers in Alberta had no problem endorsing the concept. Although they did not call it public journalism, there was clear evidence that "Eyes on Alberta" fit many of the criteria of the more modest public journalism initiatives in the United States. And in conceiving the direction the coverage would take, the managers asked themselves the kind of questions that public journalists pose, a key one being how can we get citizens engaged in this debate in a way they have not been in the past?

But even well before the "Eyes on Alberta," initiative managers within the corporation were also willing to embrace programs that did try to facilitate social change among certain members of society. Shortly after it came into being, CBC Radio launched

two programs designed to empower the people who listened to them: "The Farm Forum" in 1939 and the "Citizen's Forum" in 1943.

**The "Farm Forum" and "Citizen's Forum:"** "The Farm Forum" was co-sponsored by the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE), the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and produced by the CBC. "The Farm Forum," which focussed on economic, social and educational problems of farmers, directed citizens to "Read and Listen, Discuss-Act."<sup>10</sup>

"Emphasis was placed on the last two objectives as weekly 'listening groups' of approximately fifteen participants were encouraged not only to discuss farmers' problems that were described in the radio programs, but also to take remedial action in their community to tackle those problems. Projects, including promotion of the elimination of warble fly' campaigns, rural electrification, community centres, and the development of co-operative medical services and were often assisted by provincial farm organization field men who doubled as forum organizers."<sup>11</sup>

In her Ph.D. dissertation, Eleanor Beattie examined the emphasis the "Farm Forum" placed on the need for enhanced medical care.

An action project in the early years might be gathering a number of small communities in the area together and hiring a nurse. Or setting up a clinic. And then later on, one of the action projects was a discussion about what can you do to bring doctors into your community? Well, you need to make sure that he has a house, and make sure there's a place for his children to go to school. Maybe you need to improve your educational system in your area. These were actual projects.<sup>12</sup>

Once "Farm Forum" had been established, the corporation turned its attention to the creation of a similar program built around the idea of discussion groups. At the May 1942 national farm radio forum conference in Winnipeg, E.A. Corbett, head of the CAAE

and one of the advocates who lobbied for the creation of the CBC, stressed the need for a national conversation about post-war restructuring. In its report of the proceedings of the special program committee held at Macdonald college, Dec. 27-31, 1942, the CAAE highlighted the need to work together to find solutions and the requirement that social goals take precedence over “individual and sectional purposes of profit or advantage.”<sup>13</sup> The principles spelled out in that report became the basis of a manifesto, which the CAAE adopted at its conference in the spring of 1943. One of the six major problems spelled out in the manifesto was the assumption that “Canadians are disillusioned with their democratic institutions. They do not understand that citizenship in a democracy means more than casting a ballot every three or four years, that it means also active participation.”<sup>14</sup> The committee was also concerned about post-war reconstruction and felt that the conditions that led to the war should never be allowed to occur again.

The world must be rebuilt; old errors and injustices swept away, economic and political wrongs righted. And this was not just a foolish dream. It could be accomplished if men and women of good will join together in a concentrated campaign of study, discussion and action.<sup>15</sup>

These concerns were addressed in the “Citizen’s Forum,” which gave Canadians in urban centres the opportunity to discuss the pressing economic and political issues of the day. Corbett announced the program as a three-way project with the CBC organizing the broadcasts, the Institute of International Affairs providing “research facilities,” and the CAAE organizing the discussion groups.<sup>16</sup>

The “Citizen’s Forum” turned out to be controversial because Brooke Claxton, the Parliamentary assistant to prime minister McKenzie King, felt the speakers list for the program included too many government critics, including some of the country’s leading socialists. When Corbett learned that the government was putting pressure on the CBC to

kill the program, he leaked the details to the Winnipeg Free Press. The corporation eventually backed off and Citizen's Forum went ahead.<sup>17</sup>

Outside the CBC, Corbett and the CAAE were the key driving forces behind the Farm and Citizen's forums. In Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada's Broadcasting Policy, Marc Raboy describes the CAAE as a broadly based coalition that included the rural social movement and university associations of urban elite.<sup>18</sup>

Within the CBC, Neil Morrison, the head of the corporation's Department of Talks and Public Affairs, was the passionate advocate who pushed for and defended the programs against critics, including federal politicians and businessmen. A self-described social activist, he felt that the CBC had a vital and pragmatic role to play in the everyday lives of citizens. "Radio from 1936 on was an instrument in facilitating and encouraging people to act for the solution of their problems."<sup>19</sup>

According to Frank Peers, who also headed up Talks and Public Affairs for the CBC, citizens also had a hand in shaping these broadcasts on public affairs.<sup>20</sup> After the programs ended Peers lamented their passing. In a forward to the Passionate Educators he wrote: "Farm Forum and Citizen's Forum represented an effort to give substance to an ideal that we can now describe as participatory democracy, and I can only regret that the next generation did not build upon and improve the foundation."<sup>21</sup>

The goal here only to suggest that individuals such as Corbett and Morrison did espouse many of the same views that could be considered compatible with the goals promoted by the likes of Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt. The discussion groups represented the public spheres that the CBC's partners helped create. Then through the programs, be

they panel discussions or dramatizations, the citizens in the groups were encouraged to deliberate and act.

Programs tend to be reflections of their times. In the early days of radio, there was a feeling that people required a kind of service that allowed them to function as citizens who could make sense of a world that was presenting new challenges. The same kind of calculations were made in the lead-up to the “Eyes on Alberta” project, when CBC Alberta decided to take part in an unprecedented examination of the Klein government’s cuts to health care, education and social programs. Taken together, “Eyes on Alberta,” “The Farm Forum” and the “Citizen’s Forum” demonstrated a willingness on the part of key individuals within the CBC to try something different by, in part, re-interpreting the way the corporation operates. If nothing else, Rabinovitch and his colleagues would do well do draw inspiration from the corporation’s history in developing a service that is truly distinct because it allows people to function as citizens in an information-rich age.

### **What about the cost of public journalism?**

There is no doubt that initiatives that took place in Charlotte and Akron and Alberta cost money, as did many other public journalism experiments when the movement was officially launched. And one of the advantages that the United States has over Canada is the presence of philanthropic organizations willing to fund public journalism because of the movement’s efforts to revive participatory democracy. National Public Radio even received money from the Pew Center for Civic Journalism for its federal election coverage in 1994 and 1996.<sup>22</sup>

While “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” and “A Question of Color” were expensive projects, they served to illustrate the best ways in which public journalism pushes the traditional boundaries by facilitating social action. An initiative that carried a regular price tag was Charlotte Observer’s “Freedom Park” coverage. It was an example of a newspaper taking a problem and approaching it with a solution-oriented mindset. Getting people from different factions to talk to one another does not take an inordinate number of resources, just imagination. The Observer’s editors had the choice to approach the story in the traditional way, that is, by reporting that the municipal authorities had closed the park because black youths were cruising the area and invading the sanctity of the affluent white residents. Instead, the paper saw an opportunity to ask the simple question: What would it take to provide the kind of setting that would allow these people to discuss their differences and reach a judgment that a majority of people could live with? As far as Lewis Friedland is concerned, money is becoming less of an issue as media outlets become more comfortable with public journalism. “Really a lot of it now is a matter of will and not a matter of money. It’s a matter of the willingness to take the learning that’s been generated up to now try to apply it to the daily work of doing journalism.”<sup>23</sup>

Apart from the money there is a more fundamental question at play. If a public broadcaster such as the CBC decides that it wants to deliver a public service differently, it has the scope to allocate resources. Once again, it is significant that Robert Rabinovitch refers to the English Radio report for an inspirational example of innovation at work. The authors of that report acknowledged that money has always been an issue.

We could hardly afford the initial expansion of radio in the early twenties; we could afford less the development of public broadcasting during the Depression, especially with Canadian interest attached to commercial Canadian and American

radio. Yet Sir John Aird's conclusion in 1929 seems to have been vindicated. 'Canadian listeners want Canadian broadcasting.'<sup>24</sup>

Another example of the CBC's willingness to spend money in new areas even when economic times are tough occurred in 1999 when the radio service set aside 250-thousand dollars for investigative journalism. Admittedly, the allocation of new resources was an effort to keep pace with the investigative efforts of the Globe and Mail and National Post. However, there was also a desire on the part of senior managers in Toronto to use the investigative work to push the corporation's work in new directions that would make governments more accountable. There is no reason why such a will can not be demonstrated for public journalism, which like investigative journalism, represents one way among many to operate.

**By acting as facilitators for social change, is there not a risk of alienating the power structure, namely governments and businesses?**

That really depends on how the public journalism initiative is conceived and executed. Remember, in its ideal form, the movement is supposed to help citizens bridge the gap between themselves and the institutions they distrust. "Taking Back Our Neighbors" serves as a good example. Residents in one neighborhood, Seversville, were pleased with the project, especially because the crime rate dropped in the areas that had been the subject of the Charlotte Observer's stories. One resident said that her community association had been dormant for some time and the project "jump started" our organization. Residents also reported that they felt better about institutions such as the police.<sup>25</sup> During the fieldwork he conducted in Charlotte four years after the project, Friedland says he encountered no hostility on the part of civic authorities.



Nor did anyone express worry about the newspaper usurping the agenda of elected officials, overstepping the bounds, distorting its reporting on citizens by covering them more favorably, or any of the other litany of imagined problems that the critics of public journalism have offered up.”<sup>26</sup>

Alienating the authorities is always a risk any brand of journalism runs. The CBC history is filled with examples of programs that offended the sensibilities of federal politicians and their officials. Public journalism, when it properly conceived, draws all the stake holders into the deliberative process, which means that they should have significant input into the judgment or consensus that is eventually reached.

To date, experience has shown that public journalism works best when it is dealing with problems in communities where the protagonists are in fairly close proximity and the issues are ones that affect people’s everyday lives. In addition, initiatives seem to work best when addressing long-standing concerns, in part because people may be willing to find solutions once they are given a chance to deliberate. Whether public journalism blends in with regular coverage or stands apart and is used in large projects is not the point. Rosen and Merritt never did draw up a blueprint that listed every situation where public journalism was necessary. It represents one way among many for media outlets to operate.

### **Most of the successful initiatives seem to be in newspapers. What about broadcasters?**

Newspapers have been highlighted because they illustrate best how public journalism can be the most effective. “I tended to focus on newspaper journalists,” says Jay Rosen, “because I found they’re the most lively, interested and engaged group of participants who could do the most good. And I personally was looking for where the constituency for the idea was.”<sup>27</sup> Newspapers, which also took the lead in many of the

collaborations that occurred with broadcasters, complained that they were stuck with doing the lion's share of the work. This was the case in "Taking Back Our Neighborhood."<sup>28</sup>

In their assessment of public journalism and television, Deborah Potter and David Kurpius reiterate that most stations were first enlisted by newspapers. And this is perhaps why the number of stations striking out on their own remains relatively small. It is not surprising, then, that the authors observe that the number of television stations engaged in public journalism still lags behind newspapers, but continues to grow nonetheless. The only statistic they provide emanates from the workshops held by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism. The authors observe that as of November 1998, more than 80 television stations participated in Pew-sponsored workshops, although only half of the stations could be legitimately described as practitioners of public journalism.<sup>29</sup>

During the early collaborations, newspapers such as the Charlotte Observer and the Wichita Eagle set the agenda. "The role of the television partners consisted almost entirely of carrying stories and promotions based on the newspaper's agenda, or broadcasting public forums on topics pre-selected by the paper, timed to coincide with print coverage."<sup>30</sup>

Potter says the situation was better at public television, in large part because they had a commitment to public service and the flexibility to air longer stories. "Stations committed to public journalism often find they have to break the mold. At KRON-TV in San Francisco, each story in a week-long series on race relations that aired in February 1998 averaged ten minutes in length."<sup>31</sup>

The same kind of commitment to break the mold was also evident at National Public Radio. At the outset, John Dinges, the network's former managing editor, suggests that a movement that strives to, among other things, give a platform to authentic voices is a natural fit for a public broadcaster. NPR has 20-million highly educated and highly motivated people who listen to the network's 600-plus stations. The seemingly above-average commitment to civic duty – "above-average levels of education, church-going, and voting are the audience's most salient characteristics" – would also seem like a natural fit. And yet what Dinges describes in his chapter is a fit that shows promise, but thus far has been characterized by varying levels of discomfort. <sup>32</sup>

Just like we have seen with publications as the Charlotte Observer, NPR's commitment to public journalism began in response to the dismay over the way in which media outlets had covered presidential elections. A nationwide project emerged, based on the idea of bringing citizens more prominently into political reporting and even into the newsroom decision-making process. The NPR Election Project, of which Dinges was director, eventually brought together partnerships between NPR member stations and newspapers in dozens of cities. <sup>33</sup> Key elements of the project included jointly financed polls designed to discover the concerns of citizens; multi-media partnerships; and coverage that allowed citizens to deliberate. Reporters used these encounters as raw material for their stories.

On balance it produced coverage generally recognized as superior and more systematic than in previous years, including in its orientation to citizen voices and issues. Its greatest impact and success was at the local station level, rather than inside the NPR (network). It offered news staffs a way to plan and expand high quality coverage...It was responsible for the convening of hundreds of citizen events, such as forums and small group meetings in all areas of the country. <sup>34</sup>

Radio and television have always been at a disadvantage because they have smaller staffs than newspapers. Still there is evidence that a growing number of broadcast outlets are tuning into the movement. This could be why the Pew Center hired a former broadcaster, Wally Dean, to become its associate director.

Given the ways in which public journalism has evolved over the past several years, there are bound to be many questions about the movement. The five questions that have been tackled in this chapter should provide enough information to at least begin a dialogue about a movement that does seem to be making a difference in the lives of some citizens in the United States. It would be ideal if the corporation were to set up a pot of money, just like radio did for investigative journalism, that the regions could draw upon to carry out certain initiatives that, while not overly expensive, do stretch resources. However, the regions are also autonomous enough to launch projects on their own without depending on money from the network. Places such as Alberta, Ottawa and Windsor have dipped into their own budgets to use techniques such as town hall meetings to allow people with enhanced opportunities to voice their concerns, which can be a first step on the road to building consensus and facilitating change.

Communication scholars have pointed out that issues such as the rise in infotainment and the persistence of market-driven journalism represent threats to the Fourth Estate. The CBC is subject to the same kinds of pressures in its attempt to speak to those parts of its mandate that stress the need to entertain and enlighten. An official commitment to public journalism would add another mission to that mandate: facilitate social action.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> [http://cbc.radio-canada.ca/htmen/4\\_1f.htm](http://cbc.radio-canada.ca/htmen/4_1f.htm), the corporation's Web site.
- <sup>2</sup> Appearance before the Heritage Committee, (May 16, 2000), 19.
- <sup>3</sup> "The report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage," The future of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in the Multi-Channel Universe (Ottawa: June 1995), 11.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 12
- <sup>5</sup> Repositioning: A report to the Staff of the CBC (undated)
- <sup>6</sup> "The report of the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage," The future of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in the Multi-Channel Universe, 75
- <sup>7</sup> Harold Redekopp's appearance before the Heritage Committee, (May 16, 2000), 8.
- <sup>8</sup> Interview with Frank Graves, head of Ekos Research, April 13, 2000.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with Lewis Friedland, May 19, 2000.
- <sup>10</sup> Ron Faris, The Passionate Educators: Voluntary Associations and the Struggle for Adult Education Broadcasting in Canada 1919-1952 (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Limited, 1975), 99.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Eleanor Beattie. On April 1999 she completed a Ph.D. dissertation on the "Farm Forum" entitled Public Education in the Mass Media: National Farm Radio Forum on CBC Radio.
- <sup>13</sup> Ron Faris, The Passionate Educators: Voluntary Associations and the Struggle for Adult Education Broadcasting in Canada 1919-1952, 32.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Isabel Wilson, Citizen's Forum: Canada's National Platform (Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1980), 4.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 5.

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- <sup>17</sup> Frank Peers, The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting – 1920 – 1951 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 338.
- <sup>18</sup> Marc Raboy, Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada’s Broadcasting Policy (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990), 75.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with Neil Morrison, May 26, 2000.
- <sup>20</sup> J.R. Kid, in Isabel Wilson, Citizen’s Forum: Canada’s National Platform (Toronto: the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1980), ii.
- <sup>21</sup> Ron Faris, The Passionate Educators: Voluntary Associations and the Struggle for Adult Education Broadcasting in Canada 1919-1952, x.
- <sup>22</sup> John Dinges, “Public Journalism and National Public Radio” in Anthony J. Esterowicz and Robert N. Roberts eds., Public Journalism and Political Knowledge (in press), 91.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Lewis Friedland, May 19, 2000.
- <sup>24</sup> Peter Meggs and Doug Ward, English Radio Report (Ottawa, May 1970), 1.
- <sup>25</sup> Lewis A. Friedland, “Public Journalism and Community Change,” Public Journalism and Political Knowledge (In press), 132.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 141.
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with Jay Rosen, September 22, 1999.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with Lewis Friedland, May 19, 2000.
- <sup>29</sup> Deborah Potter and David D. Kurpius, “Public Journalism and Television News,” in Anthony J. Esterowicz and Robert N. Roberts eds., Public Journalism and Political Knowledge, 78.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 81.
- <sup>32</sup> John Dinges, “Public Journalism and National Public Radio,” in Anthony J. Esterowicz and Robert N. Roberts eds., Public Journalism and Political Knowledge, 91.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with John Dinges, April 4, 2000.
- <sup>34</sup> John Dinges, “Public Journalism and National Public Radio,” in Anthony J. Esterowicz and Robert N. Roberts eds., Public Journalism and Political Knowledge, 92.

# CONCLUSION

Public journalism has been criticized for many reasons. Journalists with the elite press such as the Washington Post and the New York Times have dismissed the movement for being nothing more than advocacy journalism that takes sides in community debates. Other observers suggest that in showing too much concern for citizens and the way they make decisions, public journalism risks pandering to special interests. There have also been critics in Canada as well. During a panel discussion on the movement that CBC Radio program “Now the Details” aired, journalist Robert Fulford referred to advocates such as Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt as “snake oil salesmen.”<sup>1</sup>

At first glance it may seem odd that a movement that stresses the need to reconnect people with public life and revive participatory democracy should elicit such a harsh reaction. There are perhaps two main reasons for the backlash: the lack of a definition; and the vigor with which Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt attacked traditional journalists and their craft.

## **Hampered by the Lack of a Definition**

Even after the movement became official, Merritt and Rosen refused to fashion a definition that would, among other things, help situate it in comparison with other forms of journalism. Instead, the two advocates referred to public journalism as an experiment, or a range of practices that news-gathering organizations should adapt to their particular circumstances. Reflecting on those days, Merritt says: “The reality was that this was an idea that a couple people had. It was all about asking different kinds of questions and

thinking differently about current affairs...it was an effort to start a dialogue in the profession.”<sup>2</sup>

Although Merritt admits that a definition would have been helpful, he and Rosen are still unwilling to craft one, in part, they argue, because a blueprint would limit the possibilities for a movement that they feel needs to be flexible to respond to particular circumstances. When Merritt first began talking and writing about the public journalism, he used jargon such as “fair-minded participant” and “making community life go better.” These phrases were foreign to journalists who were more comfortable with more traditional concepts such as objectivity, balance and neutrality. Though the validity of these concepts has been challenged over the years, they have become mainstays that, in large part, define how most media outlets operate. The lack of a definition has also allowed critics to equate misguided initiatives with public journalism itself. When editor Jack Swift of the Columbus Ledger-Enquirer yielded to community pressure to become a member of the task force charged with examining the city’s future, the move was condemned by critics for crossing the line. Yet even advocates such as Merritt felt that Swift had no business becoming that involved because he had become an activist. Nevertheless, one of the persistent criticisms the movement faces is that it crosses the line. In a book about the movement due to be published in August, William Woo, former editor of the St. Louis Post Dispatch, writes:

Connections with the community meant actual participation in civic endeavors, occasionally with editors and reporters represented on boards of commissions and citizens groups -- activities that flew in the face of conventional detachment...In such settings, independence and what it brought, were more than inconveniences; they hung over the shoulder of public journalism like Banquo’s ghost, uninvited and unwanted at the new civic feast.<sup>3</sup>



Rosen, who wrote the forward to the book in which Woo's chapter appears, says that the critique is erroneous because the author fails to cite specific examples. "It's like the lowest level of debate technique there is," he says, "the classic straw man thing. You associate the approach with clearly something that is reprehensible and say that stands for the whole and everyone reacts to that."<sup>4</sup> If Rosen was more willing to provide a definition, critics may not have been tempted to build straw men. Rosen and Merritt have taken pains to draw a distinction that still seems to baffle some of their detractors: that public journalism does not advocate one solution over another, it simply pushes for a deliberative process citizens can use to solve their problems.

I've always drawn a distinction between creating the conditions for talk, and even for action, and creating action itself. I think there's an important conceptual and practical divide. Ultimately political action and public action are up to citizens and representatives. And to me it overstates what public journalism can accomplish to say that it is itself engaged in social action, only because it's not up to journalists to determine what social actions are appropriate. In my work I've tried to distinguish between a press that would make it easier for citizens to act and a press that is itself the actor.<sup>5</sup>

While it may be discomfoting for some, the lack of a definition need not be an insurmountable obstacle. It is significant that many media outlets such as the Akron Beacon Journal, and to a lesser degree, CBC Alberta, felt the need to resort to a brand of journalism that would help citizens get to the root of the problems that seemed beyond the reach of easy solutions. However, a definition or more specific set of criteria may have attracted more adherents to the movement, especially the elite and influential media outlets such as the New York Times. For instance, a clearer explanation about the ways in which public journalists use traditional forms such as explanatory journalism, investigative journalism and computer-assisted journalism may have made the movement

less threatening, and less of a target for those who still equate it with a destructive form of advocacy.

Another reason for the vehemence of the attack relates to the way in which Rosen and Merritt characterized traditional journalism in arguing the need for reform.

### **Coming Down Too Hard on Traditional Journalism**

“If I had this to do over again, I probably would not have been as aggressively condemnatory about traditional journalism,” says Merritt.

That caused a tremendous defensiveness and sort of blurred the real message of what we were trying to do, which was legitimately to try to get people in journalism to think about the consequences of what they were doing and the way they were doing it. I guess we took a two-by-four when we should have used a one-by-two.<sup>6</sup>

A characterization that angered many was the assertion that journalists who considered themselves neutral were disinterested in the communities they serve. Carl Sessions Stepp, for one, took exception to this characterization by pointing that neutrality and indifference are not necessarily the same.

There’s nothing inherently untrustworthy in caring passionately as people but trying to act dispassionately as professionals (like, say, judges or teachers). In some ways, public journalism creates a caricature of the traditional press, attacks it as corrupt, promotes itself as a reform “movement” and dismisses critics as reactionaries. There is a whiff of self-righteousness here, and it alienates some potential allies.<sup>7</sup>

Other critics have accused public journalists of ignoring the diversity of practices within traditional journalism. In her analysis, Barbie Zelizer charges public journalists of being guilty of “historical myopism.” That is, the movement has set itself up as antithetical to traditional journalism, which is neutral and objective. Yet she argues that the neutral journalists guided by an ethos of objectivity is only one of many models that

determines editorial content. As a case in point, she uses a study that was conducted in the early seventies which demonstrates that the notion of neutrality did not monopolize journalists' belief system. In fact, the authors argued that more journalists viewed themselves as participants. In yet another study twenty years later, researchers discovered that journalists adhered to a range of belief systems that included interpretive and adversarial.

These studies suggest that journalists are more pluralistic about journalism than the stance of public journalism proponents suggests, and that the invocation of objectivity and neutral journalism resembles a straw man argument. That is, in setting themselves up against the neutrality of traditional journalists, public journalists may be overstating the resonance of the practices of neutral or gate-keeping journalism within the community.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, she continues, public journalists may be overstating the differences between their practices and those of more community-minded reporting, muckrakers at the turn of the century, advocacy journalists of the 1960s and 1970s and even the strident investigative reporters of the post-Watergate era. Zelizer feels that these reporters were more committed to the community than to their own professionally orientated aims.

Here she fails to make an important distinction that goes to the heart of the difference between public journalists and their traditionalist counterparts. The latter did not see it as their duty to help people grapple with and find solutions to their problems. For instance, in his book about Pulitzer Prize winning reporters, Theodore Glasser, discovered that the journalists he interviewed took no responsibility for the stories they produced or the effects that the material would have on citizens. If the stories led to change, which in most cases they did not, so be it. The journalist's role ended there.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas in the instances such as the Ledger-Inquirer or the Akron Beacon Journal, the

public journalism component of the newspapers' initiatives began once they became facilitators, helping people deliberate to overcome obstacles such as race. Traditional forms of journalism may have been incorporated to help those two publications alert their citizens to a problem, but the facilitator role is what engenders the criticism, in large part because it pushes the traditional boundaries.

### **A Movement in Need of More Historical Context**

Concerns that citizens are disengaged from their communities and that governments are unaccountable have persisted through the years. Whether the state of democracy that so worries public journalists is any more dire now than at any other time in history is a point that Rosen and Merritt are unable to pin down with any degree of accuracy. However, there is no denying that there was a confluence of factors that gave rise to the movement in the mid-nineties: a citizenry continuing to ignore the mainstream media; a downward trend in voter turnout; a cynicism towards institutions; and a distrust of politicians. There may have been concerns about these factors in the past, but Rosen points out that this is the first time in the history of journalism that a movement has been created that has given media outlets a chance to experiment. In some cases, the experiments may have been market-driven attempts to increase the bottom line. Still, in other instances, media outlets may have been enticed to try something new for no other reason than funding bodies such as the Pew Center for Civic Journalism provided the financial backing.<sup>10</sup> However, the fact that these philanthropic organizations, which are concerned about the state of democracy, are prepared to back the movement financially,

suggests a deeper concern about the lack of civic virtues and unaccountable governments than the critics may be unwilling to acknowledge.

### **The Lofty Goal of Saving Democracy**

Public journalists have also been open to the charge that they have taken on too lofty a goal that is nothing short of trying to save democracy. John Durham Peters feels the notion of the press as instigator of public dialogue and action is one that distorts the vision of the press and places too much of a burden on its role in society. He argues that the notion of instigator contrasts with the traditional responsibility the press adopted: namely a dispenser of publicity. Publicity called for the wide and equal dissemination of news to counteract the forces of censorship. While publicity may have led to discussion, Durham Peters observed that the act of publishing information was a one-way affair.

The universal character of publicity is not a defect. It is intensely democratic: the equal access to all of political knowledge. This notion – the press as dissemination rather than dialogue – has been a governing narrative of journalism whose trace is inscribed in many mastheads. Names such as the Planet, Star, Sun, Herald, Mercury, Chronicle, Globe, Times, World, and Post all imply universal dissemination. They offer a democracy of knowing, not of access.<sup>11</sup>

Durham Peters argues that dissemination represents a more modest and realistic ideal than expecting media outlets to be instigators and facilitators. Rosen responds by drawing on the example of investigative journalism. Government prosecutors are responsible for rooting out corruption, and yet many investigative journalism initiatives also seek to accomplish the same goal. Michael Schudson makes this point in his account of the role the press played in the most celebrated example of investigative journalism: Watergate.

**Journalists did not uncover Watergate unassisted. The contributions of the FBI investigations, the federal prosecutors, the grand jury, and the congressional committees are systematically ignored or minimized by (Carl) Bernstein and (Bob) Woodward. The journalistic contribution was one among many, and there would have been no presidential resignation had it not been for Judge John Sirica, the Ervin committee, the existence and discovery of the White House tapes, and other factors. Moreover the journalistic contribution was itself dependent on government officials who risked their jobs or their careers by leaking to the press. It was less the press that exposed Watergate than the agencies of government itself.<sup>12</sup>**

**Public journalism, suggests Rosen, is no different. Governments have a role to play in reconnecting to the people they serve, just as citizens are responsible for ensuring that politicians are accountable and community life goes well. Journalists are just one small part of a much larger effort to add lustre to the democratic ideal.**

**In making their case, Rosen, Merritt and others may have fallen victim to overstatement. However, it is just as legitimate for media outlets to look for ways to improve life in a community as it is proper to dig for the truth about government expenditures or the conduct of powerful individuals whose competence and judgment affect the financial and economic wellbeing of many citizens. Certainly, public journalism can not solve all the problems it has identified. But to be fair, Rosen and Merritt never made that claim. But because their criticism of the conventional media was so harsh, and because they failed to define the reform they were championing, the two advocates made themselves targets.**

## **Understanding the Public Sphere**

**If the practice of public journalism has been open to criticism so, too, has the philosophy that gave rise to a movement that pushes the public sphere beyond its traditional boundaries. Scholars have expressed concerns about the ways in which public**

journalists seem to misinterpret a public they hope to serve and empower. In his critique, John Durham Peters argues public journalists spent too much of their time trying to address the “pathology of the public” by examining newsroom practices rather than the “structures of civil society.”<sup>13</sup>

John Pauly follows the same critical path. “Most damaging of all, he asserts, “public journalism works with a thin and unconvincing account of the communities it hopes to serve.”<sup>14</sup> Both scholars argue that in its attempt to use consensus in helping people to solve their problems, public journalists fail to realize that conflict has been a catalyst for major social changes, including increased civil rights for blacks in the 1960s. There is always a danger with the consensus-driven model, just as there are potential pitfalls with investigative journalism, for instance. The criticism of these scholars would be more accurate if public journalists argued that their movement should replace all other forms of journalism. Merritt and Rosen make it quite clear that their approach is one of many. As a matter of fact, Merritt acknowledges that conflict is vital to democracy.

### **A Debate That Should Pique the Attention of the CBC**

As public journalism continues to evolve as a movement, critics will no doubt persist in drawing attention to its strengths and weaknesses. This is a debate that should attract the interest of the CBC as the corporation struggles for a way to re-invent itself as a public service broadcaster that is distinct from the private sector and valuable to citizens who support the corporation through their tax dollars. Canadian journalists and academics were first introduced to the concept of public journalism in 1995, when Lisa Austin, then associated with Jay Rosen’s *The Project on Public Life and the Press*, delivered a speech

at a conference the corporation organized and hosted. In her address, she spoke about the movement's ideals and why public journalism was necessary at this point in time. A month before Austin's speech, CBC Alberta participated in the "Eyes on Alberta." That initiative demonstrated the willingness of journalists within the corporation to push the envelope by exploring new ways to cover a story.

It is also significant that for 25 five years beginning in 1939, the CBC's radio service, then later television, experimented with programs designed to, in the words of some of the programmers and proponents, facilitate social change. So while it is important for the CBC to plug into a debate that could inform the direction its own journalism takes, the corporation also has homegrown examples from which it can learn.

In an age when citizens have access to a greater variety of information sources, it is difficult for the corporation to solely distinguish itself as just another information provider. There is no doubt that listeners – including CBC president Robert Rabinovitch – value the radio service as a rich source of information steeped in context and analysis. Improvements in this area will always be necessary if the corporation is to avoid the criticism that it is stagnating. Presumably, this is why the president has created a task force responsible for reviewing all programs.

However, in its quest for reform, the corporation also needs to examine its impact as a participant in the life of the country's democracy. The corporation has the reach, authority and respect to, at the very least, become the instigator of dialogue. The CBC needs to ask itself what do citizens in regions across the country need to become re-connected with each other and the institutions that, according to polls, are continuing to fall out of public favor? <sup>15</sup> A corporation that could serve as this kind of connective tissue



would engender even more public support than it has up until this point. And more importantly, a new approach would strengthen its mandate as a public service broadcaster. For the reasons outlined in chapter five, public journalism is a viable direction for the corporation to take in circumstances that defy easy or short-term solutions.

### **Where Does the Movement Go From Here?**

Shortly after Davis Merritt's book Public Journalism and Public Life was published in 1995, he said that it would take 10 years for him to judge whether the movement was a success.<sup>16</sup> When he returned to the Wichita Eagle after taking a year off to write the book, Merritt thought he would be able to convince most of his reporters to buy into the concept. As the editor, he had the power and the motivation to implement changes. Now, in the year 2000, a year after he retired from his post, Merritt admits that he was only able to convince about 10 or 15 per cent of his staff that public journalism is worth pursuing. That percentage may be ideal for some editors, but Merritt had higher expectations. According to researcher Lewis Friedman, who spent time studying the Eagle's public journalism efforts, Merritt pushed too hard. "(He) didn't achieve holistic change," concludes Friedland. "He insisted on all or nothing and he ended up with nothing, meaning that in end the Wichita Eagle is a pretty crummy traditional newsroom."<sup>17</sup>

For his part, Merritt concedes that it may take longer than 10 years for the movement to gain a firmer foothold.

Maybe what we really need to do is to begin to take journalists at their very beginning point at universities and even early and try to inculcate this kind of thinking at that level. So maybe the future of this lies in the training stage where,

**as part of learning about the traditional concepts of journalism of accuracy and fairness and ethics and objectivity, you also begin to think about the role of journalism in a democracy.<sup>18</sup>**

**This is why Merritt is now teaching a graduate seminar in public journalism at Kansas University and why he is writing the textbook that will spell out practical ways students can practice this kind of journalism.**

**Merritt says the practice must be tied to the daily routines of journalism rather than large projects that characterized the movement's early years. For Jay Rosen, making public journalism routine means developing new reflexes that will force journalists to ask themselves different questions when conflicts arise.**

**What does it mean to address people as citizens rather than readers and spectators and victims? What does it mean to be in a conversational relationship with the community you are addressing? What does it mean to get people engaged as well as informed? Those are the global questions.<sup>19</sup>**

**And a final determinant for public journalism's long-term success could be the implementation of a new reward structure for journalists. Michael Schudson makes the point that connectedness to the community and its concerns is not in journalists' best interest because they regard public journalism as pushing them into an area – the public sphere – where they have no authority. “Whatever authority journalists may have, it does not lie in the area of community organizing or conflict mediation. It probably does not even lie in community interconnections.”<sup>20</sup> The authority, suggests Schudson, as well as Rosen and Merritt, lies in the contacts that journalists can make with insiders, be they whistle blowers, politicians or officials with private companies. Those contacts lead to scoops, which result in stories that grace the front pages of newspapers or lead newscasts. If reporters produce enough of those breaking stories, they are rewarded with higher pay**

and more prestigious beats. Connectedness in the traditional sense means links to the power structure, not citizens.

Art Nauman, former ombudsman of the Sacramento Bee, observes that although journalists are paid for their communication skills, their present reward structure increases their distance from communities rather than creating bonds.

There's a great disconnect between our reporters and our editors and the community itself. They are fairly well paid, and they're in the upper middle class. They're not really talking to the folks who are buying our papers with any degree of regularity. I find it very difficult to get reporters and editors to think like the folks are really thinking.<sup>21</sup>

Changing the reward structure means giving journalists promotions based on their commitment to public journalism and giving stories that attempt to create dialogue en route to facilitating change prominent play. A key part of this equation is an area that has received scant attention by public journalists and their critics: the reaction of citizens. We have already seen that, in general, the movement has not resulted in greater profits for certain media outlets – at least not yet. However, public journalism seems to be connecting with citizens in a way that is harder to measure. The emerging evidence we saw in chapter four illustrates that in markets with media outlets committed to the practice, citizens demonstrate more confidence in their institutions – including the media outlets – and a greater willingness to become involved in initiatives designed to solve problems in areas such as race relations, crime, and health care.

If managers can point to solid evidence that public journalism does connect with citizens in measurable ways such as increased volunteerism, they may be motivated to create a new reward structure that places a higher premium on community connectedness. And if that occurs, then perhaps more reporters will develop a new set of reflexes in

**addition to the ones they already possess. Certainly, such an outcome could benefit the  
CBC.**

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Now the Details, March 26, 1996.
- <sup>2</sup> Interview with Davis Merritt, May 19, 2000.
- <sup>3</sup> William F. Woo, "Public Journalism: A Critique," in Anthony J. Esterowicz and Robert N. Roberts eds., Public Journalism and Political Knowledge (In press), 27.
- <sup>4</sup> Interview with Jay Rosen, May 15, 2000.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Interview with Davis Merritt, May 19, 2000.
- <sup>7</sup> Carl Sessions Stepp, "Public Journalism: Balancing the Scales," in American Journalism Review (May 1996), 39.
- <sup>8</sup> Barbie Zelizer, "Making the Neighborhood Work: The Improbabilities of Public Journalism," in The Idea of Public Journalism (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 159.
- <sup>9</sup> James S. Ettema and Theodore L. Glasser, Custodians of Conscience: Investigative Journalism and Public Virtue (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 9.
- <sup>10</sup> Interview with John Dinges, former managing editor in charge of public journalism at National Public Radio, April 4, 2000.
- <sup>11</sup> John Durham Peters, "Public Journalism and Democratic Theory: Four Challenges," The Idea of Public Journalism (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 107.
- <sup>12</sup> Michael Schudson, The Power of News (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 144-145.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 112.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 141.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Frank Graves of Ekos Research, April 13, 2000.
- <sup>16</sup> Interview with Davis Merritt, June 26, 1996.
- <sup>17</sup> Interview with Lewis Friedland, May 19, 2000.
- <sup>18</sup> Interview with Davis Merritt, May 19, 2000.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Jay Rosen, May 15, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Micheal Schudson, "What Public Journalism Knows about Journalism but Doesn't Know about "Public." in Theodore Glasser ed., The Idea of Public Journalism (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 12.

<sup>21</sup> Debra D. Durocher, "Journalism and the Public Trust: Strengthening The Bond," in American Journalism Review (June 1998), 4.

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