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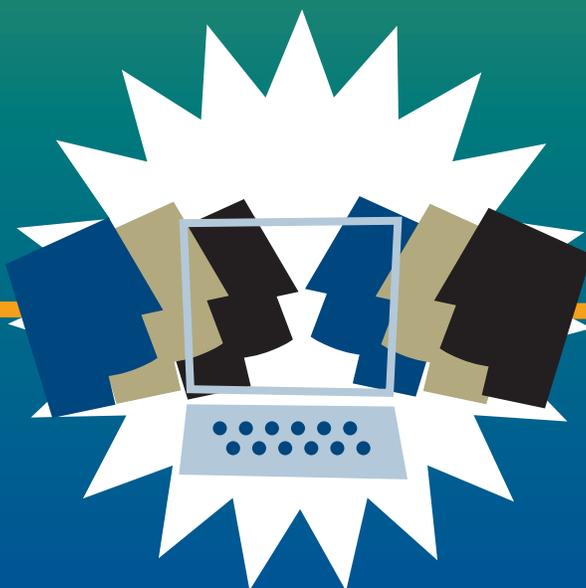


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C O N T E N T S

- 4 **Democracy and Economics**
David Mathews
- 7 **How Citizens Talk about Responding to Economic Change**
Steve Farkas
- 10 **Discovering Capacity**
Harold H. Saunders
- 12 **Chattanooga Chugging**
Ramón E. Daubón
- 14 **Journalism as a Civic Practice**
Doug Oplinger
- 16 **Cooperative Extension and Community Development: How Politics and the Academy Mix**
Alice Diebel
- 19 **University Outreach in Communities: The Limits of Expertise**
Joe Summers
- 22 **Getting Grounded: An Interview with Linda Hoke on Listening to Southern Communities**
Alexandra Robinson
- 25 **Institutes Using NIF Strengthen Civic Life**
Alice Diebel
- 28 **Experiments in Communicating the Results of Public Deliberation**
Phil Stewart
- 31 **Jordan's Public Forums Initiative**
Ibtisam Al-Atiyat
- 34 **Effects of Deliberation on Secondary School Students:
The Experimental Sowing the Seed of Deliberation Project in Nigeria**
Moshood Folorunsho
- 36 **The International Civil Society Consortium for Public Deliberation.Org**
Ileana Marin
- 38 **Books Worth Reading**
- Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness**
By Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, reviewed by Scott London
- Democracy as Problem Solving: Civic Capacity in Communities across the Globe**
By Xavier de Souza Briggs, reviewed by Zach Vanderveen
- The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups,
Firms, Schools, and Societies**
By Scott E. Page, reviewed by Dana Walker



Journalism as a Civic Practice

By Doug Oplinger

The *Akron Beacon Journal*—with its four Pulitzer prizes—has a rich tradition of journalism and community service. “The *Akron Beacon Journal* was where it all began,” said Rem Rieder, editor and publisher of *American Journalism Review*. “This was Jack Knight’s first paper, the initial building block in constructing the magnificent newspaper company that Jack and his brother Jim put together.”

The newspaper was sold in 2006 as the Knight Ridder era ended. That was the beginning of a sea of change in journalism as revenues declined and newsrooms became smaller. Journalists like Rieder wondered: Can newspapers continue to chronicle and be the conscience of the broader community as new owners face a discouraging set of economics? The answer for the *Beacon Journal* is yes.

Without compromising its journalistic

integrity, the newspaper collaborated with its media “competitors” and the city’s “special interests” on a civic journalism project that addressed the financial fears of 2008.

The foundation for the *Beacon Journal*’s work was laid in 2006 when computer-assisted reporter David Knox secured a Kiplinger Fellowship at the Ohio State University to analyze U.S. census records for pay data. The idea of using a fellowship to conduct research for a story was new for the *Beacon Journal*.

The numbers were unsettling. Knox found that the middle class is disappearing, and the current generation of working Americans is the first in modern times that can’t expect their children will do better. Included in that September 2007 reporting was an interactive database on the *Beacon Journal*’s Web site (Ohio.com) where users could see how their standard of living compared with previous generations.

Next came seven focus groups to explore whether people were conscious of this changing dynamic. Alice Rodgers, who worked with the *Beacon Journal* on many projects over the previous 20 years, facilitated those discussions.

We were stunned by the expression of latent fear, as one after another member of our community revealed anxiety that they were one unexpected event away from falling out of the middle class. This

Journalism as a Civic Practice

fear came before the “foreclosure crisis” was a daily staple of the news, before gasoline, groceries, and other line items in a standard household budget had reached record spikes, and before the implosion of the stock market.

Our findings turned into a yearlong project as we broke down what people were telling us and reexamined the data. We focused on:

- an overview to give context
- the job market
- higher education
- health care
- education
- retirement
- the role of government in creating the problem and finding solutions

The first story was that of an anonymous college-educated couple who started married life with good jobs, had a modest home in the suburbs and two cars to match. Why anonymous? After a temporary job loss, loss of health-care coverage, and an ensuing medical problem, they didn’t want their parents to read in the paper that they were in bankruptcy.

The problem was that this family had done everything right. That observation became the hypothesis for every future installment: everything Americans were taught to do to achieve the American Dream was no longer true. The first sentence in that first story set the tone for the year’s narrative: “This could be you.”

The day of the first installment—March 16, 2008—the collapse of Bear Stearns became the first major event in a financial drama that would change the international economy and dramatically elevate the newspaper’s reporting. The series took on a new urgency, as each monthly installment ran against a backdrop of historic economic news.

And while every news organization reacted to this story, the *Akron Beacon Journal* was in a unique position to report from a local perspective with a distinctly proactive approach. We knew from the focus groups that people had little hope that the government could help because they believed that same government was part of the problem. Our reporting showed they were looking inward for solutions. On Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, they were moving toward their primal instinct: self-preservation.

That focused attention on the question nagging the newsroom: what can people do? At that point, we added a new component to our series, originally titled “The American Dream: Hanging by a Thread,” by examining personal responsibility and solutions in a series of stories called, “Reclaim the Dream.” Our food writer, health writer, home writer, consumer columnist, and others presented a weeklong package in June that offered practical advice for household budgets.

Beacon Journal consumer columnist Betty Lin-Fisher recruited five families who volunteered to open up their financial lives to advisors who explained what each of them was doing right and wrong. And she issued a challenge: Join us in pledging to save money and pay down debt.

The project blossomed.

We invited non-newsroom employees, the University of Akron, financial counselors, and public radio and television to join us. *The Beacon Journal* partnered with WKSU-FM by providing stories to the public radio station before they were published. The result was simultaneous radio and newspaper reports on the middle class. Cleveland public radio station WCPN invited our reporters to speak on interview programs. The nonprofit Consumer Credit Counseling of Northeast Ohio provided us with advice and financial counselors. At the invitation of the *Beacon Journal*, community leaders, who competed in the marketplace, collaborated on solutions-oriented essays that were published.

Two public events—a forum and a financial fair—went beyond the reporting to reach into the community. The forum at the University of Akron brought voices from the community together with public policy leaders in a spirited dialogue. The effort involved several community organizations, attracted more than 400 people, was simulcast on public radio, rebroadcast on Western Reserve public television, and streamed on a special Internet site, reclaimthedream.net, established by WKSU-FM.

The mayor of Akron, Summit County executives, and the John S. Knight Convention Center provided the resources to open the convention center for the financial fair. The *Beacon Journal*’s marketing director worked with Consumer Credit Counseling and dozens of groups to assemble a daylong program of edu-

Economic models come and go, but journalism is and always should be a near-religious commitment to inform and inspire a community toward constructive dialogue and action.

cational classes and displays. About 1,000 people attended.

Some journalists will argue that such efforts cross a line from reporting to advocating. But we were comfortable with our decisions each time the topic came up in our newsroom. After thorough analysis, we had identified needs and solutions. Public engagement was a natural outgrowth of sound journalism.

Collaborations such as the *Beacon Journal*’s middle-class project may begin a rewrite of the rules of engagement for civic journalism, a practice rooted in Jack Knight’s papers. This worked in Akron because the journalism not only reported on the problem, but helped drive the discussion. In that way, the *Beacon Journal* remained an independent voice in its community.

So, in the end, does this suggest that financially imperiled news organizations can continue to be chronicler and conscience of our communities?

Most certainly. Not only are we able to continue as before, we must. Economic models come and go, but journalism is and always should be a near-religious commitment to inform and inspire a community toward constructive dialogue and action.

Doug Oplinger is a 38-year veteran of the Akron Beacon Journal and currently serves as its managing editor. He can be reached at doplinger@thebeaconjournal.com.

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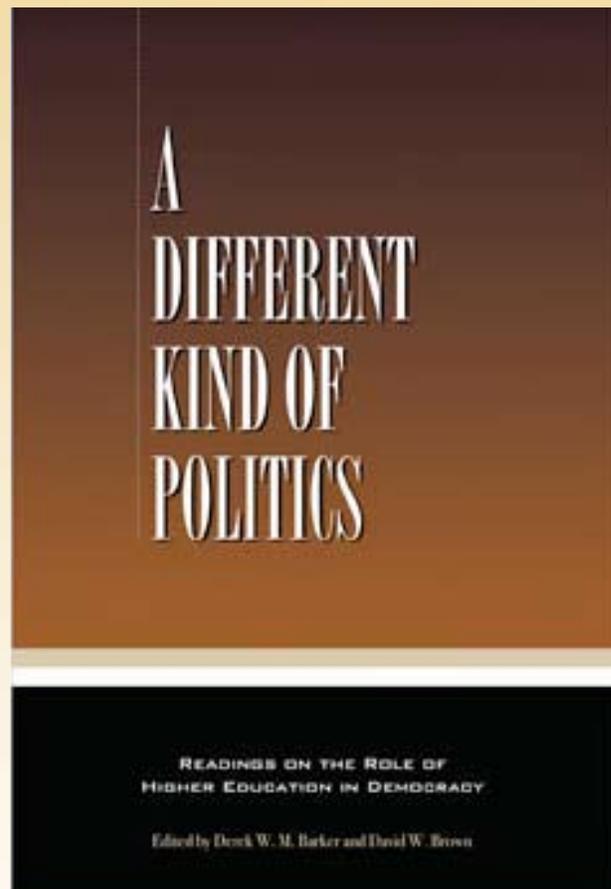
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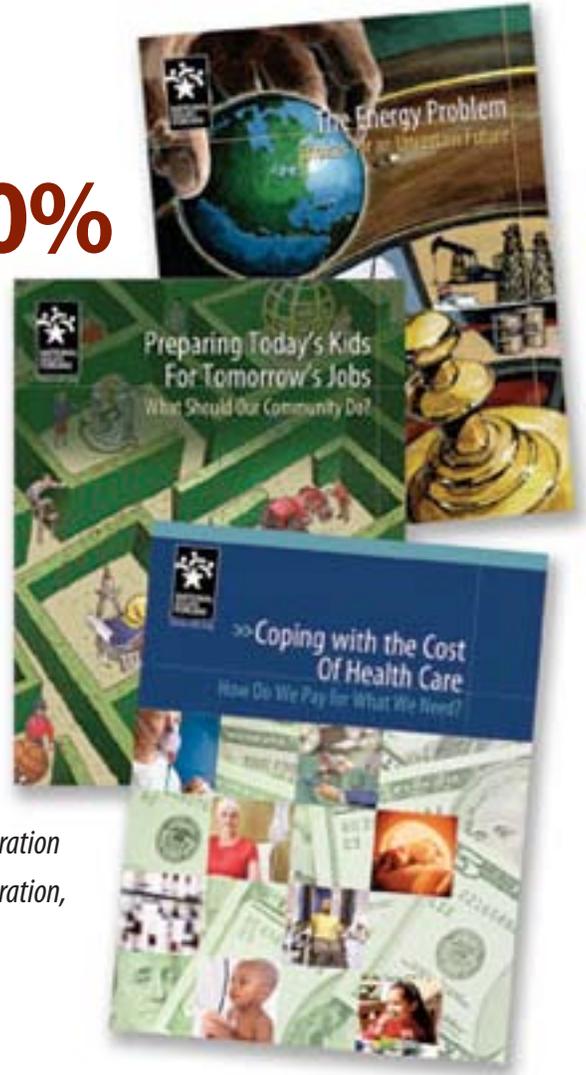
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