THE KETTERING FOUNDATION’S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

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KF and Journalism: On Again! Off Again! On Again!

David Holwerk

It's easy to understand why the Kettering Foundation has long been interested in the role of journalism in democracy.

In the United States, the First Amendment to the Constitution explicitly protects the practice of journalism. The institutions of journalism—the newspapers, broadcast outlets, magazines, and more lately, websites—ceaselessly declare themselves to be serving the needs of citizens and of democracy. So do most professional journalists who work for these institutions. And behind all this lies a couple of centuries of thought and writing that make the connection between a free press, an informed citizenry, and a properly functioning democracy.

But for anyone looking at the course of Kettering's relationship to journalism and journalists, the story is considerably less clear. It's a tale of enduring interest, however, in ways that journalism does or does not contribute to the work of citizens and communities in self-rule. Things having to do with journalism itself—story form, the state of the news business—are of interest only as they affect the ability of citizens and communities to rule themselves.

The second problem is that there is a tendency to lump anything involving Kettering and journalists under the heading "public journalism." This is both inaccurate and unproductive.

It's inaccurate because public journalism was the name given to a specific movement among American journalists that lasted from roughly 1990 until 1999. Kettering's interest in the connection between journalism and democracy began before that and continues to the present day.

It's unproductive because journalists have one of two reactions when they hear the term public journalism. Either they are puzzled, because they have never heard it before and have no idea what it means. Or they have a strong negative reaction, based on bitter arguments between journalists that took place more than 20 years ago.

With all that said, here's my take on the ups and downs of Kettering's journalism research.

For anyone writing about Kettering's interest in journalism and journalists, a couple of problems present themselves from the get-go. The first is that, properly speaking, Kettering doesn’t have any particular interest in journalism and journalists. The foundation is interested, however, in ways that journalism does or does not contribute to the work of citizens and communities in self-rule. Things having to do with journalism itself—story form, the state of the news business—are of interest only as they affect the ability of citizens and communities to rule themselves.

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With all that said, here’s my take on the ups and downs of Kettering’s journalism research.
I would divide Kettering’s work with journalists into four periods. The first began in late 1985, when the foundation invited journalists to a meeting in Washington to discuss their role in how communities learn and to attempt to identify what community journalism is and whether it actually exists.

The results of that discussion are unclear, but there was no question that journalists were beginning to explore the nature of the connections between their work and community life. One notable example came out of Columbus, Georgia, where the Ledger-Enquirer, under the leadership of editor Jack Swift, launched a news project on the town’s future. When the local government failed to act on goals that the newspaper had elicited from citizens, Swift reached out to Kettering for advice on how to proceed. In response, senior associate Bob Kingston and program officer Carol Farquhar helped set up community forums. Later, Estus Smith, KF’s vice president, spoke at a community barbecue.

In early 1989, Katherine “Kay” Fanning, the first female president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and a great proponent of community journalism, became a Kettering board member. Later that year, New York University professor Jay Rosen wrote an article for the Kettering Review. By 1990, Rosen and Swift were traveling the country talking about the work in Columbus and elsewhere—a series of events that David Mathews called the “Jack and Jay Show.” Somewhere along the way, the term public journalism began to be commonly used (perhaps suggested by Katherine Fanning) to refer to such work.

The public journalism phase of Kettering’s research had more than a few moving parts—significant publications, meetings both in Dayton and elsewhere—but it reached its peak from 1992 to 1993. First came the publication of the Winter 1992 issue of the Kettering Review, which was devoted solely to public journalism. That was followed in June 1993 by the first meetings of the Project on Public Life and the Press. This project—which was run by the American Press Institute, had support from the Knight Foundation, and was guided by Kettering—ran until 1997. It marked the high point of the public journalism movement. (I attended some early meetings, as well as Knight-Ridder newspaper editors meetings, where folks connected to Kettering were in prominent evidence.) And through this period, Kettering continued to be active in a number of journalistic areas, notably including to help the Project on Public Life and the Press move toward an emphasis on making the ideas behind public journalism work.

But even though Kettering was engaged with journalists on many fronts—broadcast projects, coverage of presidential elections, the link between journalism and public deliberation, the role of journalism education in shaping journalists’ ideas, the Katherine Fanning Fellowship, which has brought many journalists from other countries to Kettering—the record (and my own experience as a journalist during that period) makes it clear that interest was waning, both inside the foundation and...
among journalists. And in fact, by 2000, it had almost disappeared.

(This account of the history of Kettering’s interest in journalism and journalists relies heavily on two documents: an unpublished 2000 paper, “Public Journalism History,” written by Daniel McCoy; and an unpublished timeline of the events it recounts, written by my Kettering colleague Libby Kingseed. Both of these documents are in the Kettering archives. I grovel in gratitude to both authors.)

I think two things account for the sudden emergence of the public journalism movement.

First, a new generation of leaders was moving into American newsrooms and journalism classrooms. Most of them had come of age in the 1960s and 1970s and were molded by the experiences of those tumultuous times. For many of them—most prominently Cole Campbell, Jay Rosen, and Buzz Merritt— notions of active citizens and ties to community were familiar ideas.

Second were economic trends. The year 1990 saw the beginning of a recession in the newspaper industry, marked by declining revenues and the first glimmering of the electronic publishing revolution. Newspaper companies responded with hiring freezes, layoffs, and other expense controls. At the same time, market research showed that citizens were losing confidence in news organizations and journalists. In those circumstances, even folks as notoriously averse to introspection as journalists begin to examine their assumptions about why they do what they do.

Mathews Conference Center

The Mathews Conference Center (MCC) is a 10,500 square foot state-of-the-art conference center. MCC provides up to eight meeting rooms that can be configured in different ways, including a large plenary-style room for up to 163 people. Built with attention to detail, the front exterior is finished with area limestone to reflect nearby historical buildings. The interior provides highly functional space designed with the foundation’s research in mind. MCC was completed in the spring of 2007.

January 19, 1989
The DPA officially changes its name to the National Issues Forums Institute.

Katherine Fanning, a journalist and newspaper editor, joins the Kettering board.
And several things account for public journalism’s swift decline. Some were factors that affect any human endeavor but are not of interest here: personalities, competing ambitions, and battles for primacy of place in journalism’s weird class system. (If you’ve worked in the business you know what I’m talking about. If you haven’t, take it from me, you didn’t miss anything.)

But other factors do have something to do with Kettering’s interests. Chief among them, public confidence in journalists and journalism continued to decline. To those paying attention, this suggested that the public journalism efforts weren’t bridging the gap between citizens and journalists. And in an environment where instant feedback is the norm, that message carried a lot of weight.

Meanwhile, newspaper industry revenues rose sharply between 1993 and 2000. So the incentive to rethink the relationship of journalism to citizens and communities receded, and with it the sorts of initiatives that Kettering was interested in studying.

I’ll pick up the narrative of Kettering’s work shortly, but let me pause here to make a point about the connection between the financial success of journalism and the interest in citizens and communities. It’s commonplace to identify this connection as a sort of existential crisis. Journalists saw their livelihoods threatened, this storyline goes, and so they turned to connecting with citizens as a possible lifeboat.

That’s true to some extent, but identifying (okay, I’ll say it: naming) the incentive that way obscures something useful. Such circumstances—which occur periodically across the entire spectrum of institutional life—create moments when professionals are open to examining how their work connects (or doesn’t) to citizens and communities. These are the moments when institutions and the professionals who work in them are most likely to experiment.

But back to the narrative. There is no concise record of the foundation’s journalism work from 2000 on. But I can speak from my own experience beginning in 2008, when I got involved with Kettering again, as part of a workshop involving the National Conference of Editorial Writers. Much of the focus was on new interactive media, and involved discussions of questions, such as whether these media are by nature democratic. (For the record: they are not. Egalitarian, yes. Democratic, no.) These discussions were interesting, if you’re interested in gadgets and their effect on people and society. But what seemed to be missing were the experiments and innovations that, for better or worse, marked the public journalism days.

To my mind, that began to change in a 2010 research exchange with editorial writers. By that time, it was pretty clear that things were going to hell in the news business and that this time there would be no business rebound to bail them out. A number of the folks in that meeting seemed eager to try some different things. They also seemed ready to reexamine questions, such as whether their ideas about what citizens do in democracy were accurate or what it meant to serve the needs of citizens.

Since then, life in Kettering’s Journalism and Democracy internal working group has been increasingly busy and fruitful. Everywhere we look, we find journalists trying to figure out how to connect better with citizens and communities, or how to manage the difficult tensions that arise even in the best of such connections. Among journalism academics both here and abroad, we have found a deep wellspring of interest in questions related to democracy—not just theoretical questions, but practical ones related to the professional training of journalists. In both cases, a sense of existential crisis seems to have opened up the willingness to consider questions that just a few years ago were not on journalists’ agenda.

How long this state of affairs will last, I wouldn’t care to guess. Journalism itself, at least as we know it, could disappear, in which case Kettering would be left with nothing to examine. But as of this writing, the foundation’s on-again, off-again engagement with journalism and journalists is definitely on.

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