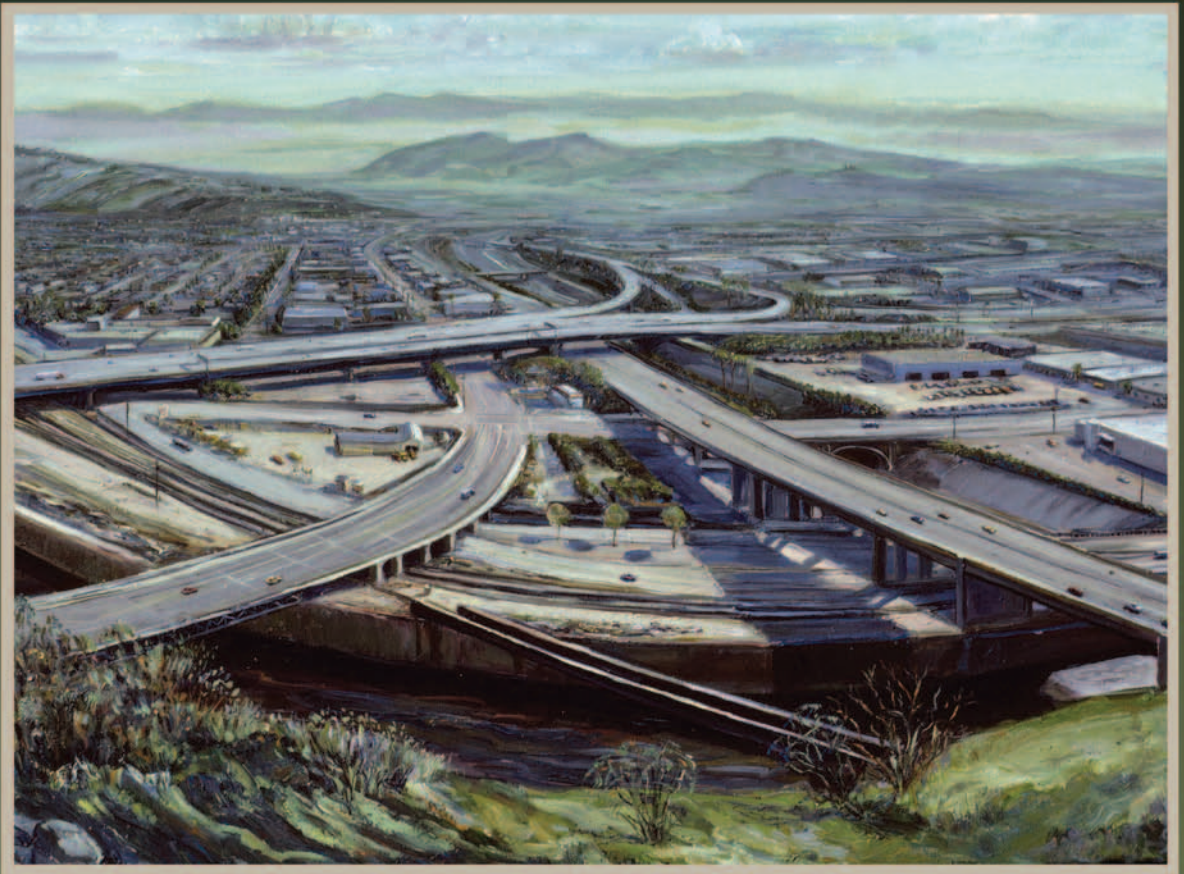


KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Journalism and Civic Life: Whose Story Is It, Anyway?

David Holwerk

*“Something is askew
at the juncture of
journalism and
democracy.”*

The connection between good journalism and a healthy American democracy is so widely accepted that it is rarely given much thought, either by journalists or by politicians. The idea behind that connection is simple and easily expressed: better journalism yields a better democracy. It is as old as Thomas Jefferson’s 1787 adage about whether to choose newspapers without government or government without newspapers; and it is as contemporary as the dissection of political coverage in the letters section of any American daily newspaper or on innumerable blogs and Web sites.

When the connection is examined, the focus is usually on journalism as it is practiced at the highest levels of the nation’s democracy: coverage of and commentary about elections, especially presidential elections, is a perennial topic for press critics, journalism professors, citizen critics, and political partisans. As anyone who has been reading the journalism trade press this year knows, this activity typically involves activities like analyzing hours of broadcasts and pages of newsprint to see whether Barack Obama or John McCain got more positive references; lamenting the press’s failure to cry “foul!” over evidence of overt sexism against Hillary Clinton or Sarah Palin; grading how well the press did in sniffing out McCain’s vice-presidential choice; subjecting the rhetoric of news and opinion to various arcane analytical techniques; hand-wringing about the meaning, nature, and possibility of fairness; and endless bullying by the army of partisan operatives and public relations professionals hired to keep journalists off guard and at a very long arm’s length.

These exercises are frequently entertaining (especially to the participants) and occasionally even revealing. They have led journalists to learn some new tricks over the past couple of decades: ad analyses, truth squads, and a level

You're seeing the result of dysfunctional civic processes.

of self-scrutiny bordering on auto-flagellation are now commonplaces of life in election-year newsrooms. But at the end of the campaign season, it's never clear that either journalism or democracy is better off for the effort.

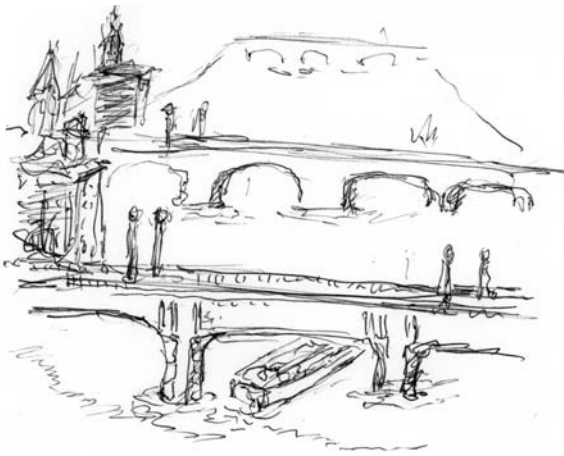
Why is that? After 30-odd years as a newspaper writer and editor, I've concluded that it is the result of journalism focusing on the wrong end of the political process. (I realize that I am about to commit the journalistic sin of stepping off the cliff of commentary into the perilously thin air of political theory, but there's nothing to be done about that.) If you watch politics as a journalist, you quickly learn that all elections, even presidential elections,



are the culmination of an array of economic, social, political, demographic, and cultural activities that I'll call civic processes. You learn this because paying attention to those processes is how you learn what's going on in politics.

Say you're a young reporter in your first job and working for a newspaper in a town you know almost nothing about. Your boss assigns you to cover what is described to you as a heated race for City Council District 4. You find yourself wondering why the race is so heated, anyway. You know next to nothing about District 4, but another reporter tells you that the Gardenview neighborhood is an important part of the district, so you go to a meeting of the Gardenview Neighborhood Association. An association board member tells you that the challenger, who lives in Gardenview, was irked when the incumbent was rude during a meeting with the board. Later, you call the head of the Gardenview Boulevard Business Improvement Association and he tells you that the incumbent has done a good job of getting new streetlights installed. The president of the Gardenview Elementary PTA tells you that the organization's membership is split, with the split reflecting whether a family lives north or south of Gardenview Boulevard. After a while, you realize that in some large measure, the city council election is an expression of what is going on in these civic structures that exist inside and independent of District 4. Naturally, you realize other forces are also at work, of course: raw ambition is one of the most common. A sort of contemporary tribalism is another.

When the campaign in District 4 turns ugly, you realize that the nastiness reflects conflicts between the affluent neighborhoods north of Gardenview Boulevard and the poorer ones to



the south. When racial politics rears its head, you realize that the district's minority residents are mostly in a public housing project that is so tucked out of sight in the southern part of the district that you've never even noticed it. Gradually, it dawns on you that what you're seeing and writing about is the inevitable result of dysfunctional civic processes in District 4. You see that dysfunction everywhere you go and hear it talked about at every meeting you attend. But your paper doesn't cover stuff like the meetings of PTAs, neighborhood associations, and business improvement groups. You cover big stuff—like elections. You're ambitious, and you want to do a good job, so you don't argue the point. Still a question keeps nagging at you. How can you do a good job of covering elections if you don't cover the little stuff?

The same question applies to most criticism of political journalism. The problem isn't that journalists are doing an inadequate job of covering presidential races. I think that by almost any measure, the coverage of national politics is more thorough and penetrating now than it has been at any time since I went to

work as a journalist. Nor is the problem that the coverage of national politics has missed the phenomena that are frequently decried as examples of dysfunction, such as wedge-issue politics and the politics of affinity and identity. These political realities, which are in many cases the result of carefully crafted campaign strategies, have been thoroughly and effectively dissected in the national political press.

Yet it is true that a problem exists. Something is askew at the juncture of journalism and democracy. But that disjuncture doesn't lie in the journalism of presidential elections. It lies at the other end of the scale, in journalism that focuses (or should focus) on civic processes and the countless structures that constitute civic life of a local community: neighborhood associations, business organizations, union halls, church committees, PTAs, and so on. The press's performance at this almost cellular political level deserves the same intense scrutiny that the coverage of a presidential election gets.

If the structures of civic life aren't healthy—that is, if they do not produce a civic life in which citizens can act to solve mutual problems—

Newsrooms are not organized to cover civic structures.

then the electoral politics of a community or a state isn't likely to be healthy either. Those civic structures change over time, and those changes will have effects on larger civic and political structures. But if no one reports on those changes, citizens aren't likely to understand them or be prepared to cope with them effectively.

That is why critics interested in producing excellent journalism and a healthier democracy would better spend their time looking at the lower end of the political and journalistic ladders. If they do, here is what they are likely to find.

There is little or no incentive to cover most of what happens in civic structures. While the experience of covering politics often reveals to journalists the importance of civic structures, the dynamics of the news business lead them to discard that knowledge. Put simply, most newspapers and local TV stations don't see any payoff to paying attention to the Gardenview Neighborhood Association. Even if its internal dynamics are important to the health of city politics, coverage won't attract many readers or viewers unless it involves conflicts that result in the police being called to a meeting. If the activities of the group do get covered, the story is usually written by a junior reporter and relegated to the back of the metro section or a "neighbors" section with limited readership. It doesn't take reporters and editors long to figure out that covering the building blocks of civic life is not a path to success.

Most newsrooms are not organized to cover civic structures. Consider the political activities of the imaginary Gardenview Business Improvement Association. Who will cover that? The business desk, because of the nature of the organization? The city government reporter, because streetlights are a city responsibility? The political reporter, because the story is about politics? Most often, there is no clear answer to the question, so nobody covers the group's activities. Here's a less hypothetical



example. One of the biggest political stories of the past 30 years was the rise of evangelical Christians as a force in national politics. This development was first apparent in many communities in the growth of megachurches whose pastors were highly visible in local civic life. Many newspapers (although by no means all) were slow to note this development.

At least part of the problem lay in the practical question of whose story it was. Should it be assigned to the religion writer, who probably worked in the features department? To the political writer, who almost never worked on Sunday? To the reporter whose turn it was to work the early Sunday shift and who thus had to choose between going to a church service or going through the overnight police reports? To a reporter who was a member of the congregation but was reluctant to talk about it for fear of violating the journalists' prohibition between mixing personal and professional interests? Again, if it's no one's story, it's often not a story at all.

Covering civic structures leads journalists into unfamiliar territory and often poses uncomfortable questions. The difficulties begin with the fact that few journalists know how to frame stories involving civic structures—so first, a bit of explanation for nonjournalists.

No part of the journalistic undertaking is more obscure to readers and viewers than "framing" a story. For that matter, it's obscure to many journalists, too. Basically, framing involves deciding what the story is really about and how to tell it most effectively.

Is it about that fatal traffic accident on Locust Street, or is it about the circumstances that make Locust Street the most dangerous street in your city? Is it about the third school

board member in six months getting arrested for drunken driving, or is it about the board's long-standing culture of post-meeting cocktails? Is it best told as a guide on how to prevent heart attacks, or as a moving narrative about one family's struggle with three generations of coronary artery disease and the decision of a young woman to be genetically tested before having a baby? Answering such questions determines how a story is framed.

Consider this example: A citywide organization of church youth groups is trying to get the city council to do more to combat gangs. How that effort will be covered involves answering some questions about framing the story. At what point is this worth a story? What's the story about? What makes this group more worth a story than other groups? Is the mere effort enough to warrant a story? Should the story hang on whether they succeed in getting a hearing before the council or be focused on the council's lack of interest? Should the reporter spend her time on a project exploring the city's gang problem instead? For most kinds of stories, questions like these have answers that are familiar to journalists. Questions about stories involving the activities of civic structures are less likely to have familiar answers, which means that once again the most likely outcome is no story.

The decision to cover what happens inside civic structures often leads to a variety of unfamiliar practical and ethical difficulties for journalists. Consider the youth group's anti-gang initiative. You and your editor decide the combination of the issue and the youth group is compelling. And you decide to frame the story as the ongoing story of the political education of the group's members: What will they learn? Will they succeed? Does their experience make them more

engaged in the life of the community or leave them cynical and alienated?

This approach entails a commendable dedication of time and resources to following the young people's efforts from an early stage. But as soon as you publish the first installment of this ongoing story, another group (maybe

Framing involves deciding what the story is really about.

the police union) complains. You seem to be advocating for this group's agenda, they say, rather than backing the police's recommendations. A nonprofit youth center wants to know when you are going to do a story highlighting a group affiliated with their center that is working on the same problem. Isn't their work just as important and worthy of attention? The adult advisor of the group you are writing about wants the newspaper's publisher to "partner" with the group by making a financial contribution.

All of this leaves you—and even more so, your editor—flummoxed. You can't write a story about every youth group in the city, and the last thing



you and your editor want to do is to get caught in the middle between competing community organizations. You don't get this kind of problem when you do straightforward stories about cops and city council budget

Opportunities exist in every community and newsroom.

deliberations and gangs and drive-by shootings. Faced with the prospect of choosing between so many competing interests, and with legitimate ethical concerns about taking sides in civic controversy, editors and reporters are likely to throw up their hands and wait for the issue to come up in a council meeting or on the police scanner, where the rules of coverage are clear and familiar.

The recent drumbeat for “local, local, local” news content has not resulted in more or better coverage of what goes on inside the civic structures at the heart of democratic life. Partly this is a result of the circumstances and forces cited above. Partly it is a result of the shrinking resources available to newsrooms



across the print and broadcast industries. Partly it is a reflection of the news business's focus on aggregating audience. (How many people want to read about Gardenview or that church group, anyway?) And partly it is a result of the disconnection of newsroom leaders and news executives from the communities in which they live and publish or broadcast.

Well, okay, a reader might well interject at this point. Let's say you're right that newspapers and TV stations do a lousy job covering neighborhood associations and local business groups and PTAs and so on. So what? Maybe the conventional wisdom is correct and people really don't want to read about that kind of stuff. Anyway, how do you plan to get around all those obstacles you just outlined?

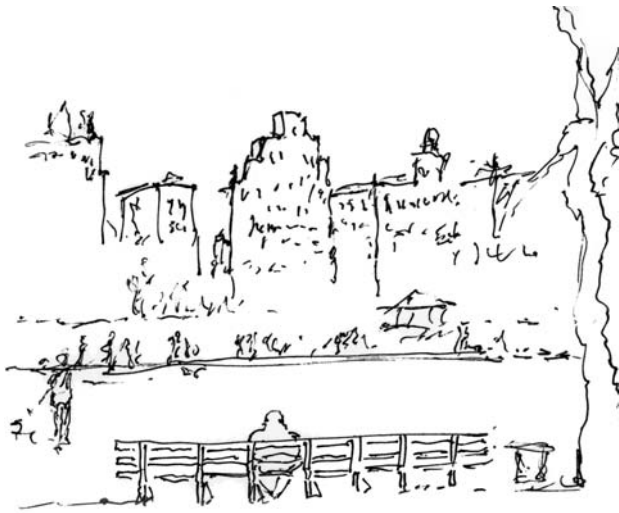
Fair enough!

First, I don't think the goings-on inside civic structures are inherently uninteresting. Lots of it is, to be sure, but most of what happens in the majority of nine-inning baseball games isn't very interesting, either. Yet people read sports sections or watch *Baseball Tonight* because journalists have figured out what is interesting and how to bring it to the attention of readers and viewers. I think it's possible to do the same for significant parts of civic life. The question is how to develop and disseminate the tools that journalists need if they are to do a better job of covering civic life and bringing it alive for readers and viewers to strengthen the civic life of local communities—and, on occasion, even lead to the creation of new, ongoing civic structures. This is journalism that works in what Richard Harwood has called the “Sweet Spot of Public Life.” While it is rarely practiced, and often raises unfamiliar problems and risks, opportunities for it exist in every community and in every newsroom.

As for getting around the obstacles: It's a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. For one thing, the timing is right for trying some new stuff in American news organizations. It's hardly a secret that the American newspaper industry is in trouble: declining circulation; declining revenues; shrinking staffs, news hole, and newsroom budgets. But while everybody sees the problem, nobody seems to have a solution. As a result, there is a greater acceptance of the need for change in newsrooms in the industry's recent history.

I'm not proposing that covering or strengthening civic life is a cure for the news industry's problems. I do think figuring out how to do it better would help make newspapers and local broadcasters a more important and trusted part of the lives of their viewers and readers. And that, it seems to me, is surely a part of any equation for the survival and success of the press in America.

David Holwerk is the editorial page editor of the Sacramento Bee and the president of the National Conference of Editorial Writers.





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