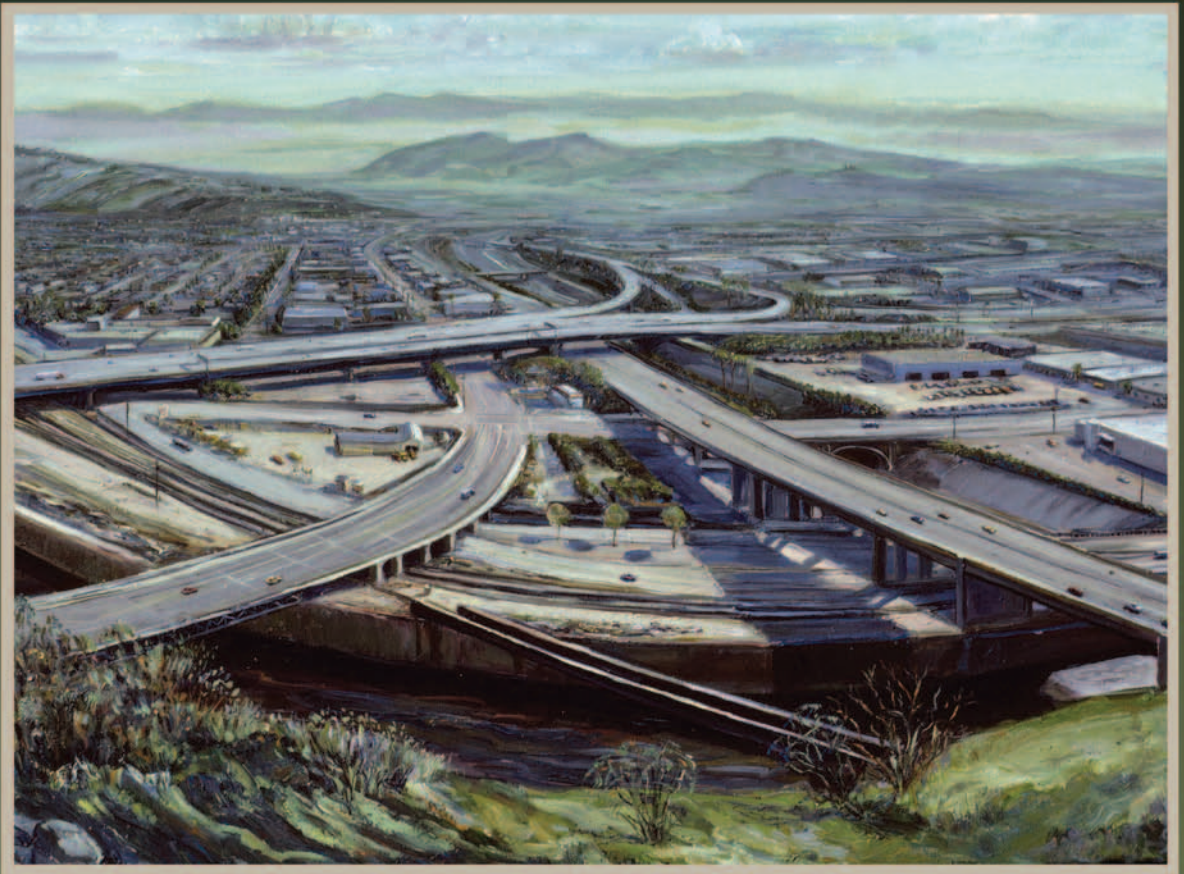


KETTERING REVIEW



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

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Editor's Letter

Sixteen years ago, in its Winter issue of 1992, this *Review* presented a series of essays upon what was quickly tagged, “public journalism.” A small group of committed professionals—led by Davis Merritt Jr., editor of the *Wichita Eagle*, Jay Rosen of the journalism department at New York University, and the late Cole Campbell, then editor of the *Virginian-Pilot* and soon to occupy the editor's desk at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, then the deanship of journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno—had determined that the newspaper, by and large, was not adequately fulfilling its responsibilities to the public in a contemporary democracy. Nineties journalists were, admittedly, not really much like the bumbling characters of 1930s movies, with press card in the cap, cigarette between the lips, and camera always at the ready; but they did tend to be purveyors of a top-down product. “All the news that's fit to print” (to borrow the *New York Times's* phrase) tended to be stories of sport, crime, politics, and society (not necessarily in that order of priority), framed to capture attention readily—and perhaps to lose it just as quickly; or to stir palpable excitement but stimulate relatively modest thought. The reader, one supposes, got what he paid for; and so, of course, did the advertisers, who paid for the newspaper's operating costs.

The public journalism people were apostles of a cause. Their concept was a medium that did not merely report “stories” from what Walter Conkrite used to describe as “the day that was,” each evening on television (whence more and more people in those days were getting their sense of “the news”); rather it would seek to raise questions from what was reported; questions about what should be done, what trade-offs might be advisable or could be guarded against. For them the challenge was not merely to tell what *had* happened but to open the way to what *could* happen—and the role that the public, their readers, might play if they assumed their responsibility as citizens of our democracy.

Civic journalism was modest and relatively short-lived as a movement, per se: a victim perhaps of economic change, the decline in newspaper readership and therefore advertising, and, above all, the development of new electronic communications. Yet, as some of the writers in this *Review* will evidence, the concept itself is still very much alive.

So much has changed in the way we communicate with each other that the early '90s seem more than a couple of decades away. There were cell phones then, of course, but not in everyone's pocket; the blackberry was just a fruit; *text* was merely a noun, not an adjective or verb; and the word *blogging* might have sounded something like a cockney sport! Yet today, these are the means by which

we speak, or seek to speak, with each other; newspapers are folding—or read, electronically, as often or not, on our computer screens; and we expect to talk, listen to, or look at one another virtually on demand. In this issue of the *Review*, six writers explore how these still changing phenomena of communication may facilitate, or challenge, a more effective public engagement in democratic self-government.

None of these writers, we think, would be at odds with the expressed principles of public journalism; and none, we think, has a low estimate of the need for some pervasive and broadly recognized reporting skills like those the news media used to claim. The effective and efficient democratic community depends upon its ability confidently to share and expand a public knowledge. Yet each of them, too, is sensitive to the exclusionary tendencies that are evidenced when means of communication are in our *individual* control. We not only pick friends among kindred spirits but we are even sometimes reluctant either to talk or to listen to strangers. Fewer newspapers and more blogs may or may not mean that we access more opinions. Or wiser ones! And opinions will not lead to actions in the public interest until their implications have been weighed for good and ill, their cost, and inevitable trade-offs, have been estimated collectively.

Our own associate editor, Noëlle McAfee (who is a professor of philosophy, incidentally, not a journalist) lays out the problem for us, with great circumspection, in her opening essay. McAfee argues that, in a democracy, “all who are affected by common matters have a voice in shaping those matters”; but she leaves us with the question, “can people use new media to create spaces that are more inclusive, or are they destined to repeat their polarization in cyberspace?” David Holwerk, who claims 30-odd years as a professional journalist, responds that, in civic life “citizens cannot act to solve mutual problems,” it is likely because no one reports on them. Spoken like an old public journalist, indeed! “Deciding what the story is really about,” he says, “and how to tell it effectively,” is the critical part of the journalist’s work; yet few journalists know it. To “know” what the story is, Michael Hamill Remaley explains, is to understand the public “take” on an issue; and for the benefit of would-be public journalists, he carefully explains 15 aspects of public engagement with what are recognizably “political” issues. These are serious and sophisticated methods of connecting citizens to issues, he writes, “and journalists can play a crucial role.”

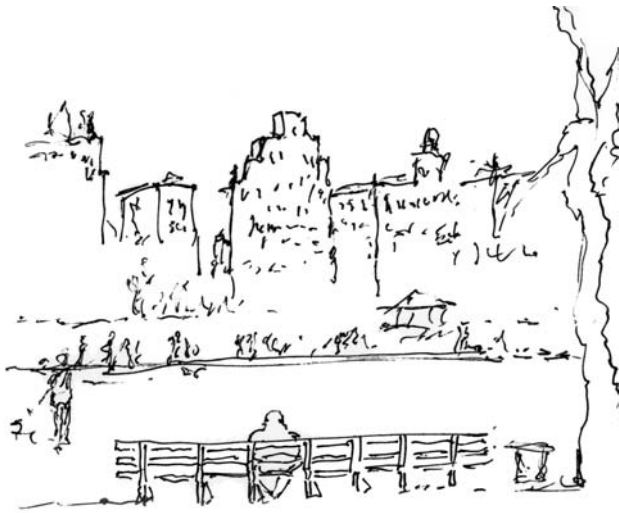
Michael Skoler, of Minnesota Public Radio (and a 25-year journalist), fears that “today’s journalism ... is more about experts than about people. The voices

of direct experience and the questions that matter most to the audience are often sidelined.” Accordingly, for him a new journalism is long overdue; and he finds it in the vast array of experiments in citizen journalism—which are the substance of Pat Aufderheide’s and Jessica Clark’s essay on the future of public media. Directors of the Future of Public Media project, funded by the Ford Foundation at American University, their essay provides, in itself and with considerable enthusiasm, an admirable entrée to the maze of new technologies that enable citizens to serve as their own journalists and professionals: to know citizens as their subjects and their sources instead of merely their audience. What remains challenging, however, is an answer to the question this *Review* set out to address. Let us call it the McAfee dilemma: “how new media will create and proliferate opportunities for cultivating new meanings, new connections, and relationships.” The chapter from Albert Dzur’s book, with which we conclude, brings us back full circle again, to ask, what is, then, the role of the professional among a democratic people?

One popular philosopher, a few decades ago, when television was at its peak, observed that “the medium is the message.” Well, perhaps, yes! Certainly, through the centuries when the wise and learned wrote letters by candlelight, to be delivered, over time, by some kind of mail, such correspondents shared, most generously, their own personalities; radio, later, became the one-way medium for news, and music, and jokes; then television turned everything into “show business.” And now we rush to e-mail or cell, as though only the present commands our attention, in a life lived one message at a time.

The open highways of the American West may seem to make an odd cover for such a collection of thoughts, particularly granted the present dilemma of the U.S. automobile industry and our energy problems! But the much travelled contemporary artist, Neill Slaughter, has always demonstrated an uncanny ability to suggest echoes beyond the different landscapes that he faithfully captures in his work. Something about the space, the promise—the opportunity and the desolating uncertainty—of those man-made landscapes struck us as pertinent to our subject ... “new meanings, new connections, and relationships!”

Robert J. Kingston





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