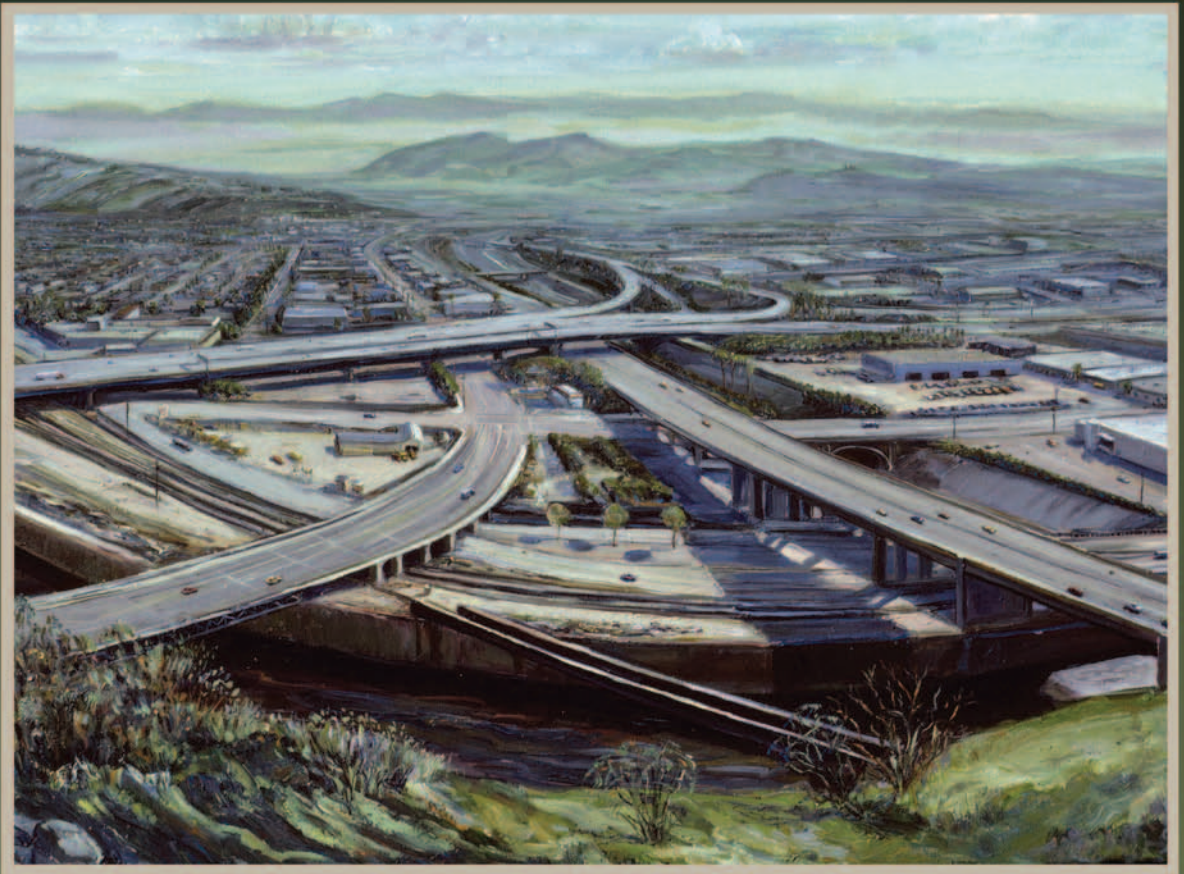


KETTERING REVIEW



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

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From Priesthood to Partnership: Public Insight Journalism

by Michael Skoler

“We need a new journalism, built on a partnership with the public.”

Fifteen years ago, I flew to Nairobi, Kenya, as Africa correspondent for National Public Radio, a nonprofit radio network in the United States. On the way, I stopped in Paris, where a Rome-based correspondent passed on a large bag containing a bulletproof vest and helmet. Within two days, I was in Somalia.

Being a foreign correspondent back then meant seeing for yourself what was happening on the ground—and having a Rolodex of experts to explain what it all meant. When it came to stories about Africa, those expert analysts were nearly always white and non-African, and most were getting their information secondhand, often from foreign correspondents like me. During four years of reporting in Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, South Africa, the former Zaire, and elsewhere, I grew skeptical of those standard sources.

Increasingly, my reporting featured Africans explaining their concerns, their dreams and their world, from direct experience. Yet my stories and those voices were typically lost in the din of expert explanations in other news reports. And the experts were often wrong.

Coverage of the Rwandan genocide was one example. Most people still believe that the genocide was caused by deep ethnic hatred between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority. That was what the experts said. “Will those Hutus and Tutsis ever get along?” my father asked me once when I returned to the United States for a visit. I had been reporting that the Rwandan genocide was *not* about deep ethnic hatred between the Hutus and the Tutsis. In interview after interview in Rwanda, I heard that intermarriage between the two groups was common.

I reported that there was too little land in this most densely populated country in Africa. Rwandans told me how the Hutu government and its militias had incited the genocide through fear and the promise that Hutus would get new land as the countryside was cleansed of Tutsis. My father had listened to my stories. Yet, the voices of those living the news in my reports lost out to the more frequent voices of experts elsewhere, citing tribalism as the root of the genocide.

Today's journalism has lost its connection with people!

I fear that today's journalism, like the journalism I saw emerge from Africa, is more about experts than about people. The voices of direct experience and the questions that matter most to the audience are often sidelined by the authority of experts and the judgment of journalists who see themselves as arbiters of the news. Some news organizations even *brand* experts as their own and feature them again and again in reports and interviews. In the current U.S. election, journalists seem more comfortable asking pundits what Americans think about an issue, rather than asking citizens themselves.

The irony is that in today's increasingly Internet-linked world, it has never been easier for journalists to connect with people around the globe through blogs and social networks, chat rooms and bulletin boards.

I certainly don't mean to paint journalism (which I have been part of for 25 years) as all wrong or all bad. In the United States, journalism has exposed scandals like Watergate, told us why the poor of New Orleans suffered most from Katrina, and explained everything from climate change to credit fraud. There is a great deal of excellent journalism happening, and it does reach people, inform them, and

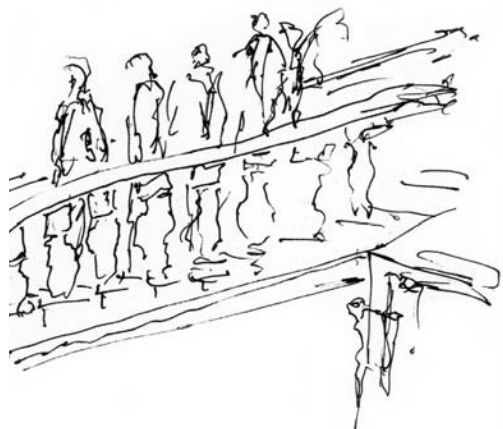
add to their lives. But, on balance, much of the news does not.

I believe journalists have become disconnected from the people we are meant to serve and that this situation is dangerous in a free

Today's journalism is more about experts than about people.

society. The news media, when independent and connected to the public, is the foundation for government by the people. Ideally, journalists are trusted truth-tellers who enable people to come together to learn from each other and solve common problems.

But when journalists become disconnected, the public becomes distrustful and disdainful of newsmakers and newsgatherers alike. The weakening connection between journalists and the public in the United States has led to 20 years of declining public trust in the media. Our poor relationship with the audience wasn't as problematic or obvious when there were no alternatives to mainstream media and no easy ways to get information from different voices





and perspectives. But the rise of the Internet has changed all that.

The Web has broken the monopoly of mainstream news. In the United States, big city newspapers and national

television news programs are struggling

to survive as the audience, and advertisers, go elsewhere. In the emerging information-sharing, open-source culture of the Web, people expect to share what they know and be engaged in a conversation.

They expect to learn from a huge range of sources, many informal and expert by experience, rather than by title. And they expect this from their news. Mainstream journalism, as a priesthood whose role is to determine the news that is fit to print and inform the uninformed masses, seems outdated, arrogant, and disconnected.

What we need is a new journalism—one not handed down from the pulpit, but built on a partnership with the public. It's a journalism that asks, listens, and engages with the public and taps the widest possible source network, while still preserving the hallmarks of quality reporting: verification, independence, and powerful storytelling. It's a journalism that values collaboration and diversity, while still filtering for truth. It's journalism that's relevant because the audience is deeply involved.

Quality journalism, as a trusted truth-teller that helps create shared understanding, is more needed than ever. Our world is growing more complex and more interdependent, while the understanding and tolerance needed to tackle common problems seems to be shrinking. This new journalism is long overdue.

You can already see the first drafts of it. It's there in crises, like the South Asian tsunami of 2004 or the Hurricane Katrina disaster in the United States, when people living the news shared their knowledge and questions on hastily created Web pages. It's there in the BBC's interactivity desk that vets thousands of photos, videos, information, and comments from the public every day and distributes them to its editorial staff.

It's there in sites like Global Voices (www.globalvoicesonline.org) by Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, which find diverse voices and sustain conversations with a worldwide audience. It's there in the collaboratively written encyclopedia, Wikipedia, and South Korea's online OhMyNews service and other experiments in citizen journalism. And it is spreading in America's nonprofit, public radio system.

Ideally, journalists are trusted truth-tellers.

For the last five years, my colleagues and I at American Public Media have worked to create a set of principles, practices, and tools for this new journalism of partnership. American Public Media is the largest owner and operator of public radio stations in the United States and produces national programs that reach over 15 million people

each week. We call our model Public Insight Journalism,[®] and we are using it daily to create stronger local news coverage in our Minnesota Public Radio newsroom and national coverage on our shows like *Marketplace*, *Weekend America*, and *Speaking of Faith*.

Public Insight Journalism is about tapping the knowledge, experience, and insights of

These citizen sources have knowledge.

a vast network of people who have expertise but are rarely recognized as experts by the media. These *citizen sources* have knowledge from their training, their work, their passions, their community life, and their personal and professional contacts. They also know what questions, issues, emerging trends, and stories are most relevant to their lives.

Public Insight Journalism creates a partnership between people willing to share their knowledge with the press and experienced journalists willing to listen. It relies on communications and knowledge management technology to maintain and tap relationships with tens of thousands of people in hundreds of communities. Public Insight Journalism harkens back to an earlier age when reporters spent time at community meetings, cafés and coffee shops, bars and pubs, building hundreds of relationships with people and reporting based on those relationships.

We start by asking people on the radio, over the Web, in person, or by e-mail to share their knowledge on issues or stories our news programs are exploring. We ask people to share their knowledge, not their opinions. And we promise we will not share their personal information or their comments without their permission.

Those who respond become part of our Public Insight Network,[®] which is growing daily and now includes more than 50,000 sources in over two dozen countries. After people register, we ask them for information about their lives, experience, and expertise, so we can ask them questions that are relevant to their knowledge. We learn more about their expertise and experience every time they respond to a request for help with a story.

We gather this information in a database using knowledge-management tools we have built and fine-tuned over time. The system is automated and efficient so that a few journalists, called Public Insight Analysts, can quickly identify those people most likely to have knowledge on a topic, contact them by e-mail or phone, and then rapidly review and synthesize their responses. These journalist-analysts check the information provided by public sources, follow up with them, and pass the vetted information and sources to reporters and editors for use in shaping our coverage.

A typical request for help, or an e-mailed “query,” goes out to 500-1,000 people and responses start arriving immediately. We also invite those in the network to contact us



whenever they want with information, changes they notice in their communities, and story suggestions.

Several times a month, we gather groups of our sources to help us think through an

We ask people to share their knowledge, not their opinions.

issue, such as immigration, health care, crime, or education. Often, we reach out to under-represented groups—ethnic minorities, youth, religious minorities—to inform our coverage and deepen our understanding of the stories that matter most in our communities.

The Public Insight Analysts are the connectors that make Public Insight Journalism a real partnership. They ensure that our relationships

are real rather than virtual. They welcome new people into the network and send thank you's to all those who share their knowledge. They ask follow-up questions and call people. They invite people to meet with reporters. And, most important, they close the loop, letting people know when their ideas, contacts, and knowledge have informed our coverage and providing a link to the stories that result.

We also complement these more personal requests for partnership with broad invitations to share knowledge with many others. We are a pioneer in creating online “serious” games and new social discussion tools that engage many thousands in public knowledge sharing and help us gather insight broadly and understand differing perspectives on major issues.

During the U.S. presidential election, we offered a game called Select a Candidate (www.mpr.org/selectacandidate) where people could see how their stands on issues match or don't match the positions of candidates. The game showed players the candidate that most closely matched their positions and then allowed players to compare their matches and the issues they find most important with those of other players of different ages, U.S. states, economic classes, and political parties.

American Public Media has created budget games that allow Americans to create their own budget plans for the government and compare them with politicians and other players. And we recently created a game called Consumer Consequences (www.consumerconsequences.org) that invites Americans to weigh how their lifestyles impact the Earth's resources. Our games record the choices and comments of every player and our Public Insight Analysts study the results to understand how people think through these issues and to help guide our coverage.



Public Insight Journalism is now a part of our daily news process, informing our reporting and the choice of stories to cover. The result has been a greater diversity of voices in our coverage and an increased ability to spot stories and trends that matter to our audience. In a world where news organizations face shrinking audiences, our news audience continues to grow.

And this new journalism of public partnership helps ensure, first, that news organizations have the most complete information possible from the widest array of sources. And second, it can help ensure that news coverage, rather than being disconnected from the audience, focuses on the stories and issues that matter to them.

Jay Rosen, a professor of journalism at New York University and author of the PressThink blog, calls this a pro-am model, mixing professionals with amateurs. I see it as journalism that's deeply connected to the public it serves.

In July 2006, American Public Media created the Center for Innovation in Journalism to share this model with other newsrooms and to lead our work in creating genuine partnerships with the public. Four other public radio newsrooms are now using the Public Insight Journalism model and we are in talks with other news organizations to share the model.

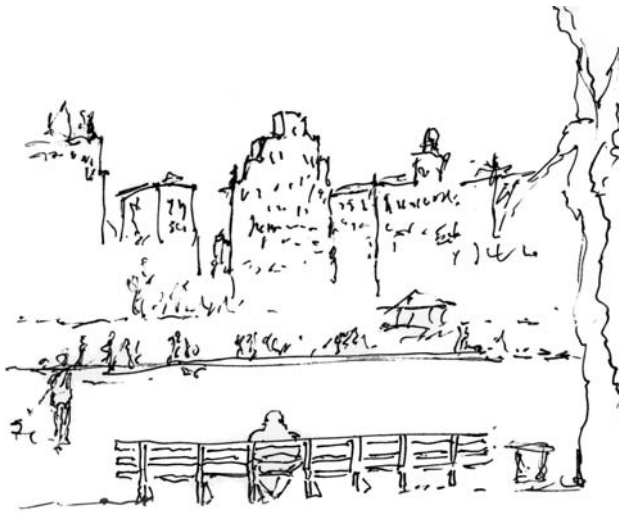
The *old* journalism model was built for a culture with a scarcity of information and connections. Journalists had the means to distribute news widely ... and took on the mantle of deciding what information people

Our sources help us think through an issue.

needed, which sources to use, and how to define the news. That old model of journalism has lost its connection to the public.

As our societies increasingly face complex problems that require global understanding and cooperative solutions, the media has a critical role to play. To save journalism in today's open-source, information-sharing culture and to ensure it remains a force for shared understanding and positive change, we need change. The media alone cannot do it. We need a new journalism of partnership. And it is coming.

Michael Skoler is an award-winning journalist in radio, television, print, and the Web. He is currently on leave from running the Center for Innovation in Journalism at American Public Media. This essay was originally printed in Kosmos Journal (Spring/Summer 2008).





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