PUBLIC JOURNALISM

Theory and Practice

Lessons from Experience

By
Jay Rosen
Davis "Buzz" Merritt
And
Lisa Austin

An Occasional Paper of the Kettering Foundation
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PUBLIC JOURNALISM AS A DEMOCRATIC ART

By Jay Rosen

In this paper, I address myself to the public journalism “movement,” meaning the people who have tried to experiment with an idea: that the press could contribute more to public life by recognizing that American democracy’s troubles are its own, and by rethinking some of its assumptions and routines in light of that fact. In the pages that follow, I refer to a “we,” which most often means we who have joined in the effort to understand what “public journalism” could and should be. But occasionally it refers to “we” Americans, for if there is one notion that is central to public journalism, it’s that journalists are members of the political community, citizens themselves, and not bystanders to our public life. As members, they may have a particular role to play; and to be independent — and thus trustworthy — is certainly part of that role.

But here I write in the conviction that journalism itself, the art of telling our collective story, is never independent of the country and culture in which the story is told. Public journalism, it seems to me, is about recognizing this truth, and trying to tell the truth at the same time.

Public journalism began its life as a kind of convenient premise that some of us simply decided to adopt. The premise was that there existed this other way of doing journalism that differed enough from conventional practice to warrant a new name. By acting as if this premise were true, we started to do the things that would help make it true. Some of us began to try to talk public journalism into existence, while others did things that felt like public journalism. The do-ers gave the talkers new things to talk about, while the talkers gave the do-ers a language to describe their doings. If public journalism

If there is one notion that is central to public journalism, it’s that journalists are citizens themselves, and not bystanders to our public life.
is, in fact, a “movement,” it proceeds in precisely this way: practice inspires theory, so that theory can inform practice.

By proceeding in this fashion we have been borrowing the spirit of perhaps our only homegrown intellectual tradition: the American tradition of pragmatism. To be a pragmatist — in the intellectual rather than the political sense of the term — is to adopt the ideas that help you do your work. William James, the philosopher most associated with pragmatism, would often refer to the “cash value” of an idea. By “cash value” he did not mean what you could buy with it, but what you do with it, the help it gives you in accomplishing your task.

In our own case, the cash value of the founding premise — that there was something called public journalism — was clear. We could consider how public journalism works as a daily routine. We could ask what counts as success in public journalism, as compared to success in traditional journalism. We could try to discern what public journalism looks like on a page, or what it meant for training and development. And we could pose these questions before we fully understood what the term “public journalism” meant, or ought to mean.

All this is by way of saying what I’ve said from the beginning: that public journalism is an experimental movement. It’s a bunch of people who don’t know exactly what they’re doing. And they’re simply saying, “what if . . .” or “suppose we . . .”

A number of people in the medical field undertook a similar project some years ago. Sometime in the late 1970s, they began to ask themselves whether they had defined their mission in the wrong way. What if, they said, a doctor’s job (or a nurse’s job) is not just to cure disease, or treat the sick, or heal the injured, but rather to keep people healthy. Maybe a focus on injury and illness — what we might call a disease model of medicine — was too narrow. Maybe this narrow focus — the tendency to see people as patients, as bundles of problems — caused everyone to worry too little about preventive care.

For those in the medical field who started to think this way, a
new term was needed to counterpose to the dominant framework, the disease model. Of course, simply recognizing the existence of the disease model was a kind of progress in itself, for when things are named they become thinkable, and so do their alternatives. In this case, the alternative that eventually emerged was called “holistic medicine,” among other terms.

Holistic medicine, when it started, wasn’t much of an “it.” It was more of a premise, a possible “it.” The premise went like this: If curing disease, treating illness and injury, was one way of doing medicine, then maybe keeping people healthy, or helping people maintain their own health, was a different way of doing medicine. This different approach begins with the proposition that health rather than disease is a doctor’s primary concern. And it recognizes that while doctors can cure disease, the production of health is a job for patients and for the society as a whole.

Those who began this way didn’t know exactly what they were doing. However — and this is the key point — they grasped that, in order to discover what holistic medicine was, they would have to begin talking and acting as if this thing called holistic medicine already existed. The “as if” approach brought results. Today, holistic medicine means some very important things: careful attention to nutrition and diet, an emphasis on exercise and stress reduction, preventive care during critical periods like pregnancy, and a general quest for healthier ways to live. The idea of an HMO — a health maintenance organization — owes something to the holistic approach.

And it is not only the champions of holistic medicine, the believers, who support this approach. Almost everyone in America who pays attention to public discourse — everyone who reads the “living” section of the newspaper — realizes the importance of healthier living, including doctors who would never call their own approach holistic. In a sense, then, holistic medicine has succeeded by losing its name, by becoming just good medicine, part of sound practice in the field.

Of course, the disease model of medicine has not gone away. It has too much cash value, as William James would have said. Where would heart surgeons be without the disease model? But
Like holistic medicine, public journalism wants to begin in a different place. Rather than starting with the ruptures and breakdowns that make for news, it asks about the conditions that allow for a healthy public life. And it rejects as too limiting a disease model of community life, in which things become interesting only when they begin to break down. But just as an initial focus on health, rather than disease, didn’t mean that doctors would stop treating the sick and injured, neither does an emphasis on the political health of the community mean that journalists should ignore the conflicts and ailments that inevitably occur in public life. But by beginning in a different place, public journalists end up with a wider view of their responsibilities.

As Davis “Buzz” Merritt puts it in the subtitle of his book, *Public Journalism and Public Life*, “telling the news is not enough.” There’s also the job of improving the community’s capacity to act on the news, of caring for the quality of public dialogue, of helping people engage in a search for solutions, of showing how a community might grapple with — and not only read about — its problems. None of this requires a radical departure from traditional First Amendment notions. As one journalist from the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot* said about the idea of listening carefully to citizens, “This is not exactly an epiphany.” True enough. But neither was good nutrition. There was nothing “new” about the notion that diet shapes health. But emphasizing diet was a departure from what medicine had become under the influence of the disease model. At the time, there weren’t even nutrition courses in most medical schools, just as there are no journalism courses now in how public life works.

Let’s be clear about this: Just as the “new” approach to medicine could easily be seen as a return to traditional notions of care — indeed, to ancient wisdom about the body — so can public journalism be seen as a return to traditions in journalism that stress public service and a vital connection to the community. There’s no epiphany here. But there is a departure from
what journalism has become, from the disease model of political life.

Another parallel: Just as doctors and nurses cannot by themselves keep people healthy, so it is with public journalists. They cannot by themselves create a healthy public climate. Many others must do their part. And so, implicit in the idea of public journalism is the need for new kinds of relationships between journalists, citizens, and other potential actors in public life.

What we're really after is something Gene Patterson, former editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, called "whole journalism." That's what Buzz Merritt is getting at when he says "telling the news is not enough." A whole journalism would not stop at exposing ills and ailments; it would also focus on creating a healthy public climate. A whole journalism would not equate politics with government and its misdeeds; it would see public problem solving as the best definition of the political sphere, and it would ask how this sphere could be made to work better.

A whole journalism would not simply inform the public; it would realize that the climate of public discussion is often shaped by the press, by the flux and flow of media attention, and it would take responsibility for this formative power. A whole journalism would not pretend that toughness, fairness, and a powerful crap detector are virtues enough for the mature journalist; it would also cultivate a respect for ordinary life, for the common sense of concerned citizens, and for the public square as the place where we all get to join in the drama of democracy.

We don't have a whole journalism yet. That's our problem. In fact, the dream of a whole journalism is coming apart as the mass audience fragments and the media universe expands. So this quest may never succeed. But if anyone wants to know what public journalism is fundamentally about, it's about trying to make journalism whole again by stressing those things that have been left out, neglected, or not allowed to shine in the busy environment of the American newsroom: things like civic participation, deliberative dialogue, cooperative problem solving, taking responsibility for the place where you live, making democracy work.
If public journalism one day loses its name, becoming “just good journalism,” it will have succeeded. We will gladly accept imitation over flattery. And we don’t care if public journalism is old or new. We don’t care if it’s considered radical or traditional. We don’t even care if it’s called public journalism. We’re after results, not recruits. Which is to say we’re pragmatists, focused on what works but also working within a certain focus: a concern for the future of public life without which, we believe, journalism has no future.

In the four years since this movement first emerged, I have had to reflect on a flaw in my own approach. Public journalism, as I said earlier, is about accepting a wider view of a journalist’s responsibilities. Ask almost anyone who has tried it, and they’ll say that it’s harder than conventional journalism. For example, starting where citizens start, allowing news coverage to reflect their concerns, takes more time and thought than hitching yourself to experts and officials. In any sphere of life when people get more responsibilities, but not more power, they get mad. If power without responsibility is a formula for arrogance, then responsibility without power is a formula for frustration.

So here was the flaw in my own approach. As I see it, my job is to make vocabularies; that’s pretty much all I do. I try to get better at talking about public journalism. But as I talked a lot about wider responsibilities, I did not speak much of additional powers. Perhaps I was creating a formula for frustration, I thought. But what can I, a college professor, do to supply the press with additional power? When in doubt, a sage once said, draw a distinction; a good distinction can get you out of almost any jam. So I distinguished between two ways of supplying power. One is to give people in journalism more power, which I cannot do. The other is to make more visible the power they already have. That, I thought I could do.

What follows is a thought experiment: an attempt to give public journalism some of the power it needs to do what it does. The experiment relies on a professor’s only real power source: the
resource of clarity, of giving names to things so the things can be reckoned with, made more visible. For what is visible can be handled by our collective intelligence, and that is my aim here.

First, I need to say something about the existing vocabulary for describing the power of the press. What is the conventional view of press power? I asked myself that question, and here’s what resulted:

**The conventional view of press power**

The press can:
- Bring key facts to light and raise consciousness
- Focus public attention
- Uncover abuses, act as a watchdog
- Ask the right (i.e. the “tough”) questions
- Recommend courses of action
- Distribute praise and blame
- “Afflict the comfortable; comfort the afflicted”

And here are the terms I want to add:

**A revised vocabulary of press power**

Journalists participate in:
- Defining their dominion
- The art of framing
- The capacity to publicly include
- The positioning effect
- Shaping a master narrative

**Defining dominion.** The founders of holistic medicine understood that doctors had a power they were not quite acknowledging. In fact, all professions have this power, if they enjoy any degree of autonomy. It’s the power to define the problem you will regard as real and claim responsibility for. That’s what the disease model did. It limited the problem the medical profession chose to own. It said: We cure the sick and heal the injured, so come to us when you’re ill or hurt. The alternative model, holistic medicine, defined the problem in a different way. It said: We keep people healthy, so come to us, as we’ll come to you, for help in maintaining your own health.

Any profession that cannot define its own dominion lacks
real autonomy — indeed, lacks power. As a tenured professor, I have a great deal of freedom to define the problem that my own work will address. Thus, my interest in public journalism. But consider a high school teacher in any school system in America. She is constantly having her own dominion defined for her — by school boards, parents, and society's expectations. It is we who say to her: Here's the problem you shall regard as real.

The press is still powerful enough to define its own dominion, especially when it comes to reporting and commenting on public life. Granted, there are real limitations of time and space, limitations of readers and viewers, limitations of economic necessity. No one should minimize these. But they do not eliminate the power of dominion that makes journalism a relatively autonomous profession, as compared, say, to high schoolteachers. That's one thing that freedom of the press means.

If journalists have the power to define their own dominion, how should they define it? Which problems should they regard as real? Public journalism tries to address this question directly, by asking journalists to include in their dominion the problem of making public life go well.

Let's look at the answer some journalists in Norfolk gave when they asked themselves: How should we define our dominion? There, a group of reporters and one editor responsible for public affairs coverage were designated the public life "team" and asked to devise a mission statement. After some bloodletting, this is what they arrived at:

We will revitalize a democracy that has grown sick with disenchantment. We will lead the community to discover itself and act on what it has learned. We will show how the community works or could work, whether that means exposing corruption, telling citizens how to make their voices heard, holding up a fresh perspective, or spotlighting people who do their jobs well. We will portray democracy in the fullest sense of the word, whether in a council chamber or cul-de-sac. We do this knowing that a lively, informed, and most of
all, engaged public is essential to a healthy community and to the health of these newspapers.

Notice, first, the emphasis on health in the last sentence. What this statement does is define the problems the Norfolk team will regard as real — and really theirs: Disenchantment with public life — yes, that’s our problem. Inactive citizens — we agree: that’s our problem. A narrow portrayal of democracy — we’ll address that problem, and so on.

So here’s a power journalists don’t always admit to using: the power to redefine their own dominion. Obviously this power can be abused; that’s how we know it’s real. When the press steps in and decides to run truth boxes that examine campaign ads, it is redefining its dominion, adding a new responsibility: the power to police the advertising discourse. No one considers this an abuse of power because it is done in the name of truth, a widely held value. There’s an important lesson here: Any redefinition of the journalist’s domain must be grounded, not in professional prerogatives, but in public values. That’s why the philosophy of public journalism stresses things like civic participation, public conversation, cooperative problem solving. These are not professional norms or journalistic conventions; they’re part of a vision of democracy that citizens can be invited to share with journalists.

The art of framing. Imagine a story about the crack trade in any big city neighborhood. There are a number of ways of telling this story. The most common way would be to view the crack trade from a police or crime perspective. Here, you would focus on the complaints of neighbors, the attempts by cops to shut down the dealers, the drug murders, the arrests and convictions, and so on. A very different way of telling the story would be to view the crack trade as a neighborhood business. Here, you would describe how the business is run, the way decisions are made, the various interests involved, the relationship between this business and the rest of the neighborhood.

Now, which is the “right” way to understand the crack trade? Clearly, there is no simple answer to this question, although
Framing is one of the most powerful and subtle things journalists do. To understand why, we can look at the values that lie embedded in framing decisions. When the crack trade is treated as a crime story, the values of lawfulness and public safety create the story. Social values are being violated, and that's what makes the crack trade “news.” In viewing the crack trade as a business, we have to recognize that the people who sell crack are upholding certain social values, even as they violate others. For example, they start at the bottom and rise through hard work. They have to be on time; they have to be organized. They work in teams and respect hierarchies. Most of all, they learn about money. So while the crime story emphasizes the violation of certain social values, the business story emphasizes the acceptance of other social values. This is why framing matters. It shapes the way we view things. The dealer who looks like a criminal in one portrait, emerges as an entrepreneur in another. Which is not to say he's not a criminal — only that “criminal” does not describe everything of note here.

Journalism schools don’t teach this, but it’s nonetheless true: Facts can’t tell you how they want to be framed. Journalists decide how facts will be framed, and that means making decisions about which values will structure the story. We do not have a coherent philosophy that instructs the uncountable acts of framing that occur in daily journalism. What we have instead are certain rituals of framing: the way everyone does it. The abortion story that quotes pro-lifers and their opponents is an example of a framing ritual. It stresses the value of conflict. It says, through conflict we can know the truth; or it says, get both sides and decide for yourself because that’s how political debate
works. The very idea of getting “both” sides, of there being two sides to every story (rather than three or four), the overwhelming preference for “two-ness” in journalism is itself a powerful framing ritual.

One of the best ways of understanding journalism is to have it done to you. That certainly goes for acts of framing. In the *American Journalism Review’s* first feature on public journalism, the magazine had to decide how to frame the phenomenon. Here’s the result:

Adherents of the fast-growing movement say news organizations must listen to their audiences and play more active roles in their communities if they are to flourish. But nonbelievers worry it will hurt credibility by turning the media into a player rather than a chronicler.

This is an accurate enough summary. The facts are more or less correct. Note, however, how the story divides the journalism world into believers and nonbelievers, and suggests that what’s at stake is the “flourishing” of news organizations. As Buzz Merritt later pointed out in a letter to the *AJR* editor, we think what’s at stake is the flourishing of democracy and public life. To us, that’s what public journalism is about. By framing the story as one of media survival, the reporter took a derivative concern, an element in public journalism, and made it the primary concern, the definition of public journalism.

Of course, Alicia Shepard, who reported the piece, is under no obligation to see things the way we do. She’s an independent intelligence creating an independent account, exercising her right to frame things the way she sees them. And so public journalism emerges in her treatment as a religious cause, with believers shouting a gospel and nonbelievers warning of doom. It could have been seen as a conversation within journalism, with participants asking certain questions that invite other participants to reply. These two ways of framing the phenomenon — religion on the one hand, conversation on the other — are both supportable by the facts. Choosing between them is an
Many of the typical complaints about bias and negative news can better be understood as criticisms of the framing decisions journalists make. But since framing is not in the public vocabulary of the press, complaints can't be addressed to an act that is rarely acknowledged. So instead people say: You're biased, you're too negative. Perhaps what they mean is: "This was narrowly framed."

Framing is something journalists prefer to watch other people do. That's why the term "spin" was invented. The "spin doctors" are people outside of journalism who openly struggle to frame stories their way. A reporter is not a spinner; a reporter is the one spun by a figure like David Gergen, who is so adept at the gentle art of spinning that Washington journalists talk of receiving "Gergen's lotion" on the phone. Spin is a good example of the power of naming. It names the phenomenon in such a way that it can be expelled from the world of journalism and assigned to other people. Reporters are not spin artists; or if they are, they're violating the code of the profession.

I hesitate to put it so bluntly, but here it is: Acknowledging the ubiquity, the everydayness, of framing in journalism is a gut-level issue of intellectual honesty. Those who are unwilling to admit that they select frames are saying, "I don't want to be a part of that conversation. I don't want to think about that dimension of my job."

Becoming more thoughtful about framing is central to what public journalism is about. Because part of what we're struggling toward is a better philosophy of framing. We're trying to talk openly about the values that lie embedded in framing decisions, so that journalists can think carefully about a power they've always had, but haven't named, and therefore haven't owned.

What our philosophy says, so far, is that framing is not only an art but one of the important democratic arts. Done well, framing in journalism should proceed from and support certain values, and these are public values, democratic values: the values of genuine conversation, broad participation, deliberative
dialogue, public problem solving; the values of inclusion, civic responsibility, cooperative and complementary action; the values of caring for the community, taking charge of the future, overcoming the inertia of drift; finally, the value of hope, understood as a renewable resource. These are things public journalism is “for,” and as a philosophy it doesn’t apologize for that stance.

The art of framing is to find a way of telling our collective story that gives these democratic values their due — without artificially injecting them where they have no truthful place, without ignoring or slighting in any way the facts that contradict these values. We don’t know yet how this art should be practiced. We don’t even know if we’ve got all the values right. We’re making it up as we go along, which is what the spirit of experiment demands. Public journalism means asking: How are we framing this story, and how should we frame it, if we want to fortify public life, civic participation, deliberative dialogue? My claim is that this question — how should we frame things? — is an empowering question. It has pragmatic value; it helps us do our work.

The capacity to publicly include. I’ve borrowed this term from the communication scholar Michael Schudson, who writes of the journalist’s “capacity to publicly include.” What he means is that a significant power the press owns is to decide who (or what) will be visible in the frame. When the story of public life is told, who gets the prominent roles and who is rendered invisible? This is really an aspect of framing, but I have given it a separate heading because the power to include is so basic to what we mean by democracy.

During the Persian Gulf War, I noticed the following pattern in televised discussions of the war. The people from whom the networks sought commentary were virtually all the same people — retired military men and academic specialists who commanded technical expertise. The capacity to publicly include was being used in a particular way. The result — unintentional, perhaps, but effective — was to define the war as the province of experts, and to uphold the importance of a
particular brand of expertise: technical knowledge of military doctrine, strategy, and equipment.

Watching this pattern unfold on my television screen, I asked myself what other way of knowing about war ought to be visible on the public stage. And I tried to conduct a little experiment. I chose one alternative to the technical frame, and I tried to make the case, with every TV journalist who would hear me, for including this alternative in discussions of the war. The lens I chose was a moral lens. I knew there existed a lively discourse among historians, philosophers, theologians, and clergy about the concept of a "just war." There were interesting arguments on several sides about how to determine a just from an unjust action, and these arguments proceeded from different ethical and religious traditions. The concept of a just war had obvious applications to the Persian Gulf, and would make for a compelling dialogue — compelling especially to viewers at home who can relate more easily to a moral discussion than they can to a lecture on military hardware.

I made these points with several television producers, all at the network level. Two of them had called me seeking commentary on patterns in media coverage. I faxed to them a list of experts in the just war concept. I had a research assistant dig up several articles on the subject. Well, my experiment failed. An in-depth discussion of a just war never aired on network television. The existing framing rituals were too strong; the alternative frame too novel. The network continued to blitz us with technical experts because that is the form of expertise they understood and valued. In making this decision, they were using their capacity to publicly include.

Of course, it is their right to make this choice, but they ought to realize what kind of choice it is. By selecting whom you'll include in a discussion, you're making a statement about what kind of discussion people require, and what's worth knowing. Consider the habit of quoting various spin doctors after a presidential debate. There's a decision about whom to publicly include. And here's the statement it makes: The most important thing to know about a political debate is who won and who lost, and the people who'll tell us are professionals paid to say their
side won. Over time, viewers treated to this absurd ritual invented by the news media are forced to conclude that journalists understand little about them and their concerns.

So the capacity to publicly include is a crucial power, and not only because it gives some people visibility over others. It also renders the public world in a particular way. By choosing whom to include, the press tells us whose world public life is, who knows about it, who acts within it, whose voices count, whose lives are relevant, whose concerns are central. To put it another way, journalists make casting decisions. They decide whom to cast in what roles in the drama of public life.

Public journalism, trying to live honestly, says that decisions about whom to include are decisions about values. And we're trying to discover the values that are relevant. So far what we've been able to come up with is this: Using their capacity to publicly include, journalists should try to give citizens a larger place in the public world, in their capacity as citizens. Let me explain what I mean by that.

A citizen is not a victim, a citizen is not a spectator, a citizen is not a quote machine, a ventilator of steam, or a cute adornment to the news. To include citizens in their capacity as citizens is to ask them to deliberate with others, in addition to expressing their own opinions. It is to see things from their perspective, in addition to taking their photos. It is to treat them as actors, participants, as well as consumers or clients. It is to hold them to a certain standard of citizenship — which includes civility, mutual respect, informed participation, a willingness to listen and respond — rather than condescendingly treasuring everything they say because it comes from an ordinary person.

To see people as citizens is to elevate them to a role they may not always do justice to, which is another way of saying that democracy is frequently disappointing. So, for that matter, is journalism. We are all frequently disappointing to each other, but we learn to live together by seeing each other as citizens, which means: "somehow equal despite all differences." Seeing people as citizens is the art of finding that equal station to which all are entitled in a democracy, and reserving a place in the news...
for people when they occupy that station.

What I mean by “finding that equal station to which we’re all entitled” is locating the points where citizens are good judges, where they are competent to advance the discussion. When Vicki Porter, editor of the Olympian in Olympia, Washington, decides that citizens should have a say in the economic future of their city, when she helps organize a series of forums where they can deliberate about such matters, she is saying that citizens are good judges of the basic direction in which the community should go. And she’s employing her power to publicly include them. Public journalism says: When you include people, include them as citizens, which is another way of saying: Give them their due because the story of public life is their story, and journalists can learn to tell it that way.

So public journalists take hold of their power to publicly include and ask themselves: How are we using this power, and how can we use it to give citizens and citizenship itself a stronger place in the public world, when we choose how to frame it?

The positioning effect. Among their various powers, journalists have the ability to arrange our encounter with the public world, to make things come at us in a certain way. This is what I mean by the “positioning effect.” Let me use another example from the Persian Gulf War to illustrate.

Think back to the gun-turret tapes we saw during the Gulf War — sometimes called video game footage. The effect of these images was to position us inside the cockpit of American jets as they completed their bombing runs. Now, compare that position to the very different one we occupied with Peter Arnett and Bernard Shaw of CNN as they watched American bombs rain down on them in Baghdad. Clearly, the news can position us in different ways, feeling different things, depending on the location from which it arrives. With the pilots, we’re in on the launch of American weapons, and we feel the same surge of power they get when their missiles hit the target. With Arnett and Shaw, we’re on the receiving end of the bombing, and feel some of the terror and confusion of those who are targeted. The
difference between hitting the target and being the target is, I think you'll agree, a significant one, and this is what I mean in saying that journalists arrange our encounter with the public world.

News stories position us in a wide variety of ways — as spectators or as participants, as insiders or as outsiders, as voters, as consumers, as fans, as victims, as celebrants, as sentimentalists. Take the sort of story we commonly call a “tear jerker.” It puts us in the position of the jerkee, the one from whom tears are pulled.

Although the positioning effect is routine in journalism, it escapes the sort of discussions that typically go on in newsrooms. When have you ever heard one editor say to another, “Wait a minute, how are we positioning readers here, as what sort of people, doing what sort of things?” The ritual of balance tries to avoid the positioning effect. The perfectly balanced story says: Take your own position, we won’t determine one for you. Of course, it’s not that simple. What the “balanced” story often does is position people as helpless spectators to a bitter and unresolvable dispute, leaving no middle ground, no room for ambivalence, no place where many of us might want to stand.

So positioning is unavoidable, and again, I believe it’s a matter of intellectual honesty to admit this fact and grapple with the consequences. I am not saying, by the way — and I want to be clear about this — that the news is inevitably biased by the opinions or feelings of journalists. I am not saying that since bias is inevitable, we might as well be up front about it. I am definitely not saying that traditional concerns about fairness, balance, and neutrality can be downplayed. On the contrary, I think those issues are central to public journalism.

Public journalism actually strives for a deeper level of fairness by taking note of the power of framing, by its willingness to say, “Wait a minute: How are we positioning people here?” And by asking: How should we be positioning people? Again, we don’t know the answer to this question, but it might go something like this. When journalists position people, as they inevitably will, they ought to place them as often as possible in the position of
citizen. Now that sounds good, but what does it mean?

To position people as citizens means to treat them:
- as making their own contribution to public life.
- as potential participants in public affairs.
- as stakeholders, with a personal interest in public affairs.
- as citizens of the whole, with shared interests.
- as a deliberative body — that is, a public with issues to discuss.
- as choosers, decision makers.
- as learners, with skills to develop.
- as connected to place and responsible for place.

Public journalism is the art of positioning people as citizens, where the world comes at them in a certain way. We’re still learning about what this art involves. Albert Einstein once asked himself: What would the universe look like astride a bolt of lightning? (The result was the theory of relativity.) We’re asking: What would the public world look like if it came at us in a way that invited us in as citizens? When, for example, candidates for office are treated as manipulators of public sentiment, devising clever strategies that play on our fears, we’re invited to mistrust their rhetoric and see through their phony appeals. That’s one kind of invitation. When candidates for public office are treated as job candidates, with job descriptions, résumés and a statement of their qualifications, that’s another kind of invitation. Both may be necessary. But they position us in different ways.

Over time, the positioning effect tells us whom to be when we enter public life, and that’s why it matters. If journalists were regularly positioning us as citizens — finding hundreds of ways to do so — the news might be a more inviting place for people to join in the drama of democracy. It might lead people into public life, instead of repelling them from it.

Shaping a master narrative. Journalists are storytellers and they are pledged to provide a story that is accurate and fair. But we often overlook a certain aspect of storytelling, and that is the ability to shape a master narrative. By a master narrative I mean
the story that produces all the other stories; or, to put it another way, the Big Story that lends coherence and shape to all the little stories journalists tell. In the Bible, the master narrative — the story that produces all the other stories — is the theme of creation and redemption, or the fall from grace and search for salvation. A master narrative is not a particular story journalists write; it is the story they are always writing when they tell the stories they typically tell.

In election coverage, the master narrative is usually winning, despite the endless critiques that have been made of horse race coverage. Winning the race is what the campaign is assumed to be about, and so most of the stories concern who’s winning, how they’re winning, why they’re winning, and so on. In political science classes at every university in this country, freshmen and sophomores learn what democratic politics is about, according to the master narrative many of their professors employ. In this story, politics is government and government decides who gets what. Therefore, to study politics is to analyze the factors that determine who gets what in the marketplace of democracy, which is crowded with interest groups fighting it out.

One more example: In White House coverage, the master narrative is shaped by a tendency first noticed by political reporter Sidney Blumenthal — the notion of a “permanent campaign.” Here, the assumption is that politics is a continuous election; the President is always trying to win votes, his opponents are always trying to thwart him. The President’s approval rating tells us who’s winning the continuous election. As the story gets told and retold this way, the approval rating takes on magic significance — more significant, at times, than the President’s words or deeds, or even the state of the nation. Which is merely to say that master narratives matter.

Clearly, the permanent campaign is a particular way of looking at politics; that is, it’s a kind of framing. What I’m emphasizing here is the productive power of the master narrative, the way it generates an almost limitless supply of stories that add up to one Big Story—the story of the President struggling to remain popular. What can you do with the idea of the master narrative? What’s the cash value, as William James •
would put it? It suggests, first of all, a useful category of self-study. That is, you can ask yourself: What are the master narratives we’re offering the community? What are the stories that produce all the other stories? Imagine a weekend retreat, where a news organization sought to identify the master narratives it relied on to tell the story of, say, Olympia, Washington. Trying to find these patterns, and name them, would be an instructive exercise, for what you’d be inquiring into is a less than conscious use of your own power. Then, of course, the question you would be prepared to ask is: How can we improve our master narratives?

That’s what the *Charlotte Observer* did in its 1992 campaign coverage. It succeeded in changing the master narrative from the story of how the campaign was won, to a new story: the story of citizens voicing their concerns, and listening to what the candidates said about them. Everyone in journalism took notice of this shift because everyone in journalism is tired of the horse race as a master narrative. The editors in Charlotte, following Buzz Merritt’s initial efforts in this direction in 1990, simply determined, on their own authority, that the master narrative would change. Once they made that decision, much else followed. Hundreds of stories flowed from the Big Story: Citizens voice their concerns, and listen for the candidates’ response.

* * *

The election project in Charlotte involved all of the powers I have been discussing. It redefined the journalist’s domain to include a responsibility for the campaign dialogue. It consciously framed a citizens’ agenda and assumed that the campaign could be framed as a discussion of that agenda. It employed the capacity to publicly include in a manner that powerfully included citizens as “players” in the campaign, asking the candidates to face important issues. It positioned people as discussants rather than complainers, as participants on many days before election day. And it chose a new master narrative for election coverage: Citizens define an agenda of concerns,
candidates (and journalists) respond.

Doing public journalism means asking yourself: How are we defining our dominion here, which problems are we willing to own? It means asking yourself: How are we framing the story of public life, and what values lie embedded in our framing decisions? It means thinking carefully about your capacity to publicly include, asking yourself tough questions not only about who gets a voice and a place in the news, but in what capacity are people invited in — as citizens of the whole or as quote machines? Public journalism means asking yourself, “How are we positioning people here, and how can we invent new ways of positioning them as citizens?”

Public journalism is about improving the master narrative, so that it produces good stories that simultaneously tell the truth about public life and create more space for citizens. How do we tell the story of this community in a manner that invites citizens to see their stake and join in the story as informed participants? That’s the challenge for public journalism as a narrative art.

That’s what I’ve tried to do in fashioning the tale I’ve told here. I’ve tried to give the story of public journalism an open quality — emphasizing that there’s a lot we don’t know yet. I’ve tried to make the story both descriptive of where we are and suggestive of where we need to be. I’ve tried to be a good pragmatist, by focusing on the use value of these ideas, what we can do with them. I’ve tried to suggest a lot of different entry points into public journalism, so that if one doesn’t work for you, another might. I’ve tried to lend some coherence to what we’re doing — suggesting a kind of master narrative for public journalism — without overdoing it, and giving the story an artificial order that future developments will overturn. Finally, I’ve tried to be as hopeful as I can while suggesting we have a lot of difficult work ahead. In general, I’ve tried to give the story some of the qualities that will enable others — as well as myself — to move it forward.

But of course I can’t say whether I’ve succeeded at any of this. That’s something for readers to judge.

In closing, let me return to the “as if” approach. Walt Whitman, perhaps our finest poet, once said, “The United States
themselves are the greatest poem.” It’s in that spirit that I remind you that the greatest “as if” statement we have is the United States Constitution. The Constitution is, in theory, authored by the American people, who actually speak in the preamble: “We, the people, . . .” But the Constitution is also the author of the American people, who are constituted as a political community by the same document they supposedly authored. The Constitution is what creates an “us” from a collection of peoples, but it is also what “the people” originally created. It speaks as if an American nation already exists, and thus creates that nation.

This ambiguity has been noted many times by scholars, but here is my point in remarking on it. The Norfolk public life team created its own mission statement. But the mission statement also creates the public life team. It’s an “as if” statement — a kind of hypothesis — for it speaks as if the aspirations it names can become the normal operations of the team. The hypothesis then creates the team’s experiment. We need a little more of that in the American press — envisioning a journalism that is perhaps a little beyond the grasp of the craft, but still within its reach. Citizens, public officials, and other civic actors can help by trying to envision a better public climate, even as the press tries to report on one. Remember, too, that the art of enabling people is what gives meaning to the task of informing people.

To paraphrase Whitman, the United States themselves are the greatest hypothesis. Which is not to equate this little movement with the poetry in the Constitution, or with the constitution of our great poet. It is merely to say that public journalism is a very American thing to do.

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PUBLIC JOURNALISM:
WHERE IT HAS BEEN; WHERE IT IS HEADED

By Davis “Buzz” Merritt

In late 1994, I joined my friend Balbir Mathur for one of our occasional lunches. A native of India and a successful American entrepreneur, Balbir has spent the last decade on a modest personal quest: relieving world hunger. His approach to the problem is enriched by a combination of Eastern vision and hard-nosed Western entrepreneurialism. His charitable organization, Trees for Life Inc., has planted millions of fruit trees in underdeveloped countries and provided materials to teach people in those countries how to use the trees for food, building and clothing materials, and income.

He was aware of my quest, of four years at that point, to try to change the nature of journalism, and after we ordered lunch he asked, “How’s it going?”

“Fine,” I said.

“You’ve been at this for three or four years. Are you seeing any progress?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “There’s . . .”

“That’s too bad,” he interjected.

“What do you mean, Balbir?”

“If this is important change,” he said softly, “if it’s really fundamental and you’ve been at it only three or four years and think you’re seeing progress, then you’re not asking all the right questions and you’re not looking in all the right places.”

As I write this in 1997, I understand in ways I could not have understood on that day the wisdom of his advice, and I relate the story to underscore the truth of his point about fundamental, cultural change, for that is the nature of public journalism.

In 1990, a number of emerging trends and individual
thoughts began to coalesce, like electrons attracted to a nucleus, into a philosophy that eventually came to be called public journalism.

The nucleus that was attracting the disparate elements from journalism, academia, civic associations, and foundations was America’s troubled public life, which is the way that democracy is expressed and experienced. By almost any measure — voter participation, citizen engagement in joint decision making, affiliation with traditional centers of civic action — Americans and American communities were drifting apart at a steadily increasing pace. The drift in itself constituted a threat to democracy, which is dependent for its vitality upon involvement, but was made even more dangerous because the void was being filled quite eagerly by special interests and a politics gone bad. That inexorable and visible filling of the void only increased Americans’ cynicism and feelings of hopelessness about their ability to control their environment and circumstances, and to solve longstanding problems.

The dynamic also threatened the viability of journalism. If Americans are disillusioned about public life and increasingly withdrawn from it, they have little need for journalism and journalists. “The media” was being seen as a part of the unfriendly takeover of public life, a view clearly reflected in public opinion polls, declining newspaper circulations, and falling broadcast news ratings.

Fortunately, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, people and institutions concerned about the leakages in America’s democratic bloodstream began to talk to each other about the problem. For what became known as public journalism, the pivotal moment came in 1991 at a discussion organized by the Kettering Foundation and Syracuse University. It was there that some journalists who had been thinking about the decline in public life — particularly political life — encountered academics, most notably Jay Rosen of New York University, who had been looking at the problem from their different perspective.

The groups clearly shared more than a concern. The participants from both disciplines had separately reached the conclusion that journalism as it was being practiced was
implicated in the decline in public life, and that journalism therefore had incurred an obligation to change in ways that could help reengage people in public life.

The problem for everyone involved was how to effect change, and the nature of that change, in a profession steeped in a tradition of independence, not only from all other institutions but also within its own walls. The challenge included the problem of how to change without putting that essential independence at risk.

Where Are We Now?

My friend Balbir's cautionary words are now three years old as this is written, making it seven years that some journalists and academics have been thinking, writing, and debating about the idea of public journalism. In that time, the roster of journalists experimenting with the philosophy has grown from a handful to thousands and the number of newspapers involved at some level from three or four in the U.S. to several hundred on three continents. We are trying to "look in all the right places" and ask "all the right questions" so that the public journalism philosophy is submitted to the most rigorous tests of practicality.

"Experimenting" is the operative word. From its inception, public journalism has been an idea seeking meaningful application rather than a set of operational principles or set of rules. It is an attitude that becomes a way of doing, not simply a way of doing. People unwilling to make the intellectual journey to understand it are destined to do public journalism badly and, in fact, have done it badly.

The reality of its experimental nature, as much as any one factor, made public journalism immediately controversial within the profession. That's because:

- Journalism as a profession is inherently defensive and tradition-bound. "Congress shall make no law . . .," the First Amendment's negative admonition, gave journalism a protected status that no other institution can claim. All of journalism's hoary traditions refer back in some manner — no matter how tenuous — to that protection and the dire results for democracy should that protection be lost.
The unavoidable absence of a brief, immediately understandable, one-paragraph definition of public journalism invites critics to craft their own straw men definitions and immediately set them ablaze, which dozens have done.

Journalists tend to be pragmatic and shy away from intellectual challenges. As one critic put it, “Don’t those [public journalism] people know that journalists are ‘how to’ people? Just tell us how to do it.” The unacceptable implication of that critique is akin to baseball player Yogi Berra’s plaint: “How can you hit and think at the same time?” How can journalism be thoughtful and still be journalism?

Our profession, in fact our society as a whole, demands instant, measurable results from any proposed change. Public journalism, by its very nature, is long-term cultural change. The accepted practices of today did not spring full blown, they evolved. Changing the culture of a mature profession will take time, as will improving the nature of public life.

It is not yet clear how deeply traditional practices will be affected, thus many critics wrongly assume that public journalism seeks to replace every journalistic tradition. It does not; it is additive, contending that much of the traditional practice is not wrong so much as it is insufficient in today’s environment.

Public journalism suggests that some of the practices that have moved people to the “top of the profession,” the elite newspapers and networks, might not have been altogether appropriate and best for public life or journalism. This offends and somehow seems to threaten those high achievers, who have been virtually unanimous in their condemnation, if not their efforts to understand.

But progress is indeed being made, in part because the initial condemnation of the idea is slowly giving way to more thoughtful consideration and experimentation by many journalists.
The nature of that experimentation has evolved. The first iterations were in massive reporting projects aimed at specific problems within communities, such as *The Wichita Eagle*’s “People Project: Solving It Ourselves” in 1992; *The Charlotte Observer*’s “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” in 1994, and *The Kansas City Star*’s continuing “Raising Kansas City” series. These were useful models of one way of doing public journalism and resulted in the idea becoming closely associated with projects, including the resource expense of such projects.²

However, if public journalism is to fulfill its goal of helping reengage people in public life, it must be more than an occasional major project; it must be reflected in the everyday work that journalists do. The reason lies in the reality that much of what Americans know of public life is learned through the view of it that everyday journalism provides. If the journalism they see positions them as spectators to a public life that is beyond their influence, at least two possibilities exist: public life is in fact beyond their reach, or the view being projected by journalism is flawed, inaccurate, and incomplete. People interested in public journalism believe the latter to be the case and are trying to find ways compatible with most traditional journalistic values to present a more complete and accurate view.

It is in the habits and reflexes of everyday journalism that change is most needed and its particulars are most elusive at this point in the philosophy’s development. Some important principles, however, are being developed and ways found to apply them in “routine” coverage.

They include:

**Reevaluating the use of polar conflict as a primary narrative device.** While conflict over ideas is a natural and useful beginning point for the democratic process, the realization of democracy resides not in the conflict itself but in resolution of conflict. Resolution almost always is found not at the bipolar extremes but in democratic consent in middle ground. The journalistic convention is to frame issues at the extremes, a practice thought to interest readers and certainly a practice that entertains journalists. Such superficial framing, however,
People rely on journalists to sort through the overwhelming flood of everyday facts and events and arrange them in some order of relative importance, a judgment call.

frustrates people and drives them away from both the issue and the journalism that brings the issue to them because they do not see their more moderate views reflected in the discussion. The principle is not to ignore polar conflict, but to recognize that the more accurate view of conflict recognizes the existence of middle ground as well.

Recognizing the difference between journalistic objectivity and journalistic detachment. The terms are used interchangeably in most journalistic discussions, but they reflect different concepts for public journalism. Journalistic objectivity (as distinct from objectivity in the sense of the centuries-old philosophical argument about human objectivity) has come to mean a fundamental evenhandedness that relies on demonstrable facts and independent, unbiased presentation of those facts. To understand the difference between objectivity and detachment, consider Jonas Salk, who discovered the vaccine for polio. As a scientist, he had to be objective about his data, otherwise he could reach wrong conclusions. Also as a scientist, he had to be objective because, under the scientific method, his data had to be used by others to reach the same conclusions in order to validate his work. But he was not detached. He cared very much whether he found a vaccine and his experiments were done with purposefulness. A trained and ethical journalist, like a trained and ethical scientist, can distinguish between necessary objectivity and being totally detached from the implications of the work at hand.

Realizing that journalism’s credibility does not stem from its detachment. People rely on journalists to sort through the overwhelming flood of everyday facts and events and arrange them in some order of relative importance, a judgment call. In what values are those judgments based? The theory of detachment denies the existence of any values except the ephemeral “news value,” yet that cannot be true. Why should people attend to the judgments about the relative importance of things when those judgments are made by journalists who deny sharing any common values with other people? Some basic sharing of broad values is essential to a credible relationship.

Rethinking the nature of democracy. Particularly in political
matters, the traditional journalistic framework is one of a contest that produces winners and losers. In fact, a convention of political reporting is to sort out winners and losers not simply in elections but in all matters of contention. This model denies the essence of democracy, which is to resolve matters in a way that everyone can live with. Sorting “winners and losers” assumes citizens are one-dimensional in their self-interest and encourages them to be so. Even more distressingly, it is a disservice to the core democratic values of consent and compromise. The overriding consideration is whether the process of consent has produced something that ultimately will be good for the society and that all can accept, even though it creates some level of disadvantage for one group and some level of advantage for another.

Distinguishing between adversarialism and skepticism. A healthy skepticism about government, authority of any kind, and the unsubstantiated claims of citizens and institutions is vital to effective journalism. However, skepticism for many journalists has mutated into an unrelenting, all-purpose adversarialism that blinds them to many possibilities and disconnects them from the world on which they report.

Owing up to the fact, recognized by everyone but journalists, that the crucial event in journalism is the decision of how to frame a given story. As Jay Rosen puts it: “We’re trying to talk openly about the values that lie embedded in framing decisions, so that journalists can think carefully about a power they’ve always had but haven’t named, and therefore haven’t owned . . . framing in journalism should proceed from and support certain values, and those are public values, democratic values: the values of conversation, participation, deliberative dialogue, public problem solving; the values of inclusion, cooperative and complementary action; the values of caring for the community, taking charge of the future, overcoming the inertia of drift; finally, the value of hope, understood as a renewable resource . . . (using these) without artificially injecting them where they have no narrative power, without ignoring or slighting in any way the facts that contradict these values.”

Journalism has an even larger, if less obvious and entertaining, stake in issues being resolved rather than having them stew in agitation.
Valuing and encouraging public deliberation. Journalism has a superficial and beguiling stake in foment and agitation; that is the stuff of “great stories.” When, however, foment and agitation are the end product rather than a means to an end, issues are perpetuated rather than resolved, bogging down democracy and creating hopelessness and cynicism. Journalism has an even larger, if less obvious and entertaining, stake in issues being resolved rather than having them stew in agitation. The way issues are resolved in a democracy is through some version of deliberation, formal or informal, so those interested in public journalism are learning to understand, value, and encourage it through the way we report upon issues.¹

Seeing journalism’s “line” in a different way. Traditional journalists talk about “the line” and “crossing the line” into unhealthy involvement in public affairs as if there were one bright line along which lie all possible ethical and professional points and that everyone sees, or should see, that line in the same way. The public journalism model is of a continuum formed by parallel lines. At one side lies total detachment, at the other, total involvement. For public journalists, those extremes, neither of which expresses an ideal, define a middle ground where lies flexibility to deal with special problems in special ways. In truth, traditional journalism has always reserved for itself the right to respond to unusual circumstances in nontraditional ways, but defines those circumstances narrowly and, having ventured out, quickly retreats behind “the line.” Public journalism lives in the middle ground defined by the attachment-detachment continuum, constantly seeking opportunities for proper — note the word — attachment to public life.

Where Have We Been Recently?

If you talk about the foundation of public journalism for 15 minutes or so to a group of nonjournalists interested in public life, heads begin to nod affirmatively; the reaction is, “Of course, that’s what journalism ought to be about. Why isn’t it?” They get it. The same is true with most foreign journalists, particularly in nations where democracy is only now emerging, such as Latin
America and eastern Europe. Those professionals understand and appreciate the dynamic between journalism and democracy because they have experienced firsthand both democracy's absence and its affirming emergence. The puzzlement about, objections to, and outright dismissal of the idea arise only in journalists in the United States, who for the most part seem either uninterested in or fearful of even discussing fundamental change, much less implementing it.

As a result of that difference, commentary on the idea during its first few years has been largely positive in foreign journals and the literature of civic activists, and largely negative in U.S. newspapers and journals.

In a broad sense, one can interpret the consistent differences in reaction as a symptom of the disconnect of most American journalists from the rest of the public; as yet another artifact of the ritual of determined detachment. In a more narrow and barely more charitable sense, one can attribute the negative journalistic reaction to a failure to actually engage the idea itself.

A neutral observer of some exchanges between critics and proponents of the idea could conclude that separate discussions were under way, if not separate agendas at work. Critics point to an individual project or effort and declare that if that's public journalism they are against it because it violates this or that ethical or professional canon. Proponents respond that individual instances, even those involving what everyone can agree are lapses in judgment, do not define or condemn the entire philosophy. Critics contend that if public journalism is not detached then it must be attached, and attachment to causes and institutions threatens journalism's independence. Proponents respond that moving away from detachment does not imply an unhealthy and unacceptable attachment; that there is middle ground and professionals can understand and sense the appropriate middle ground.

In all such cases, critics are dealing with what they see as the results of the philosophy and are not engaging the philosophy itself. At times, that failure to engage has been willful. In mid-1995, Max Frankel, former editor of The New York Times,
decided to write a column about public journalism. He called me and asked, “What is your agenda for the city of Wichita?”

“I have no agenda,” I responded.

“But in public journalism, the newspaper sets the agenda for the community doesn’t it?”

“No, I don’t know what you mean.”

His next few questions indicated that his misperceptions were based on one early West Coast experiment that was labeled as public journalism and on an underresearched article in one journal.

“Look,” I finally said, “if you want to know what I think public journalism is about, I’ve just published a book; it’s short, 130 pages or so, and you can read it in a couple of hours. It’s published just across the river in New Jersey and I’ll have a copy on your desk in the morning.”

“No, thank you,” he replied crisply, and his column on The New York Times op-ed page was both dismissive of and misinformed about the idea.

Such events, and there have been dozens, have led me to note, sorrowfully, that “public journalism has had journalism done to it.” When I say that to groups of nonjournalists, they chuckle and nod in apparent understanding; when I say that to a group of journalists, they simply blink.

Where We Are Headed

Tracing the history and evolution of an idea is a daunting, perhaps impossible, task, and at any rate not an essential task for our purposes. Any broad idea for cultural change takes on a life of its own as more and more minds apply themselves to it. Some attempts to apply change head down dead ends or into territory that is uncomfortable for others. Certainly that has been the case for me, as some experiments have gone beyond where I would go; but such is the nature of experimentation. If one knew in advance the answers and all the possible outcomes, experimentation and the risks it brings would not be necessary.

Some experiments, to my mind, have deserved the criticism heaped on them, but the interesting and encouraging thing about the public journalism idea is that it still exists and is growing despite the best shots of its critics. That fact, after seven
years, persuades me that it has a future, that the essential nexus between journalism and democracy is becoming clearer to more journalists and is urging, if not requiring, them to explore useful change.

The activity in public journalism coincides with and reinforces growing efforts in other sectors to rebuild public life and reengage people in it. The process of governmental devolution from central authority to state and local venues is an important factor as it puts more levers within reach of more people. The realization that government cannot and will not provide ultimate answers to every question leaves people no avenue except to search for answers within themselves and their immediate surroundings. Many civic and social institutions are developing new approaches to the ideas of deliberation and citizen engagement, and across the country neighborhood and affinity organizations are expanding their reach and voices.

As journalism has been a factor in creating disconnects, public journalism is becoming a factor in reconnecting people to each other and to the process of public life. That’s a journalistic purpose beyond telling the news, and it is one that can benefit both public life and journalism.

The ultimate objective is for public journalism to lose its name and become simply journalism. The debate over public journalism is not yet complete, much less the perfecting of its practice. It’s a long and difficult journey. There are many more “right questions” to be asked and “right places” to be looked into. Public life and journalism did not reach their current states in a short time and they will not recover in a short time. How soon the objective is reached will depend on how thoroughly journalists think through the ideas and how honestly and determinedly they turn them into practice. The nature of American journalism, embedded in the Constitution, is that it is free to do what it pleases with the gift of freedom. The retention of that gift is wholly dependent on a healthy democracy; even the First Amendment is not immune to the ravages of a democracy that becomes moribund.

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Notes
1. For a balanced, thorough review of the public journalism debate by a nonparticipant, see CQ Researcher, Vol. 6, No. 35, pp. 817-840, Sept. 20, 1996.
4. David Mathews explains deliberation in this way: "...To deliberate is not just to 'talk about' problems. To deliberate means to weigh carefully both the consequences of various options for action and the views of others. Deliberation is what we require of juries. It is what makes 12 of our peers a group to whom we literally give life-or-death powers. We don't just trust 12 people with those powers under any conditions. We require that they deliberate long and carefully. The same is true of democratic politics. Without the discipline of serious deliberation, it is impossible for a body of people to articulate what they believe to be in the best interest of all -- in the 'public' interest. Deliberations are needed to find our broader and common concerns...without deliberation, governments are left without public direction and legitimacy." (p. 111, Politics for People, University of Illinois Press, 1994.)
5. Deliberation, as Mathews and others point out, does not guarantee that anything will happen, but it "creates the possibility that an action will be taken mindful of the consequences. Deliberation helps us look before we leap." (Ibid, p. 182)
PUBLIC JOURNALISM IN THE NEWSROOM: PUTTING THE IDEAS INTO PLAY

By Lisa Austin

When critics of civic journalism say the approach is "just good journalism," or question whether there's any need for a movement, I don't necessarily disagree — until I start looking for citizens in news reports. I find taxpayers and consumers, plenty of residents and, of course, readers galore. But I don't see many citizens, and I don't think I'm alone. "Readers" have so displaced "citizens" in the journalistic rubric that a vice president of a national media chain stopped discussion in a public journalism seminar to ask: "What does that mean? What's a citizen?" An editor offered this reply: "Citizens get involved in the public process. They either vote or they take a position or they talk to their friends. That is what citizenship is. It is an active verb."

The editor came to that understanding through practice. As experience with public journalism spreads among hundreds of news organizations, and as journalists discuss their experience in interviews and seminars, a multistage progression emerges that covers not only public journalism practice, but also motivations for the work, understandings of citizens and their roles in a democratic society, and definitions of public journalism itself. Successive stages appear to develop only with experience.

Changes in reporting and editing techniques stimulate greater interest in ideas about democratic society and the journalist's role in it. In turn, this deeper understanding sparks new journalistic practices, including efforts to incorporate public journalism into the daily report.

"It's a very difficult concept to understand. It takes a long time to explain it, and you also have to practice it a while before you see the applications of it," said Portland (Maine) newspapers managing editor Jeanine Guttman. "Part of the reason it may be
difficult to understand is that it sounds so similar to what you're [already] doing. Reporters say, 'Yeah, right, I do that.'"

How do public journalism routines differ from other practices? What kinds of stories distinguish civic journalism from "just good journalism?" How might journalists change coverage routines to show what citizens do? In newsrooms where "citizenship" is often a more elusive concept than it might seem, it's a challenge to show the difference between residents and citizens, especially when a story without citizens is essentially accurate, good enough for Page 1A.

**Patterns from the past shaping journalism of the present**

Public journalism emerged in a climate of criticism, as the public at large and journalists themselves began to question the profession, its business interests, and its role in civic life. The critiques centered, essentially, around three dynamically linked forces that had come to drive the practice of journalism in the late twentieth century: economic factors, a change in professional cultures, and questions of effectiveness. As key elements in the rise of public journalism, these developments continue to color the discussion, and in some cases feed misunderstandings that lead to a knee-jerk dismissal of the movement.

A sense of crisis opened the door to public journalism in the late 1980s, when journalists began to admit that downward trends in readership and circulation were an ongoing industry force, not a sociological blip driven by the baby boom's youth. The resulting financial pressures were a stark contrast to the growth period in the 1970s and early 1980s, when resources for news gathering increased as the industry consolidated: morning and evening papers merged and large media companies bought local news outlets.

Along with gains from economies of scale, corporate acquisitions brought new standards, methods, and faces into local newsrooms. Market research for the first time was used to study the "news product," marking the entree of analytic data and consumer preferences into editorial practice. This was a notable change in routines, both driven by and developed out of
the changing character of newsroom staffs. Where journalistic instinct and the gut judgment of editors and reporters with long-standing ties to the community once drove content, now staffs were more transient and standards more outcome based.

In the last half of the 1980s, the term “customer” became ubiquitous in the news business; media companies made it a goal to improve return by giving consumers what they said they wanted. Using “customer” in reference to members of the community emphasized a producer-consumer relationship between journalists and members of the community. If community members were customers, what were journalists? Sales staff? Marketers? Suspicions about this orientation toward readers — and the underlying implication that journalists were merely purveying a commodity — laid the groundwork for both the development of public journalism and lingering resistances to it.

At the same time the news business was changing, public life continued to deteriorate. The cynicism bred by the Vietnam War and political corruption reverberated, rather than quieting with time. Social trends toward isolation and fragmentation accelerated. Communities — local, state, and national — failed to grapple with ongoing problems, as sound bites and spin doctors replaced public deliberation and nuanced reporting.

Journalists began to question whether they were playing a role in the deterioration of public life. They started asking how they might revitalize their profession, moving it closer to its ideals.

A market research study by media conglomerate Knight-Ridder, Inc. couched a new response, showing a correlation between newspaper readership and sense of connection with the community. People who had strong ties to community life — more than just consumers — were more than twice as likely to subscribe; subscribers were more likely to play larger roles in their communities.

In response, Knight-Ridder’s then-CEO James Batten began to champion the importance of addressing readers as citizens, not just as consumers. “If we can help revitalize our communities by cracking through the apathy and indifference, we keep faith with the Founding Fathers and, at the same time, look after our own
important interests.” People wanted to know how to make better decisions in their communities, he suggested; they weren’t just reading for diversion. The difference was as important for the journalists as for the people they served. As citizens, people have rights, responsibilities, and identities well beyond those of consumers. In relation to them, journalists are much more than salespeople or entertainers.

By serving citizens, journalists can play a role in democracy, public journalism advocates believe, thus restoring a professional purpose that is undermined when news is treated merely as one more product in a consumer society. Few journalists garner personal and professional satisfaction from “selling” newspapers. That kind of satisfaction comes from the watchdog and information-gathering roles — looking out for and reporting on the interests of the citizens, as citizens themselves.

Stage one: Beyond the customer — helping citizens get started

Regardless of the kind of critique that leads a journalist or a newsroom to interest in new practices, the conclusion is usually “We need to do better.” “Better” is usefully simplistic, because at this point the journalist rarely has a conceptual foundation for understanding the difference between the limited identity of “reader” and the broader identity of “citizen.” As a result, “better” usually means providing more or a different kind of information. Sometimes that’s as simple as more citizens used as sources in stories. Sometimes it’s a new angle or frame of reference; sometimes a move to offer solutions in coverage.

In such early attempts, public journalism work commonly involves how-to tips for citizens: whom to call, where to send questions, how to get involved, where to go to talk about an issue. The work also often offers how-to advice by example, citing solutions developed by communities facing similar problems. Also typical at this point are plans for a new strategy of contact with the public — more invitations to write or fax, more phone numbers or e-mail addresses into the newspaper, audiotext, more listings.

“Just bringing those voices in every day can really transform a newsroom,” said Mizell Stewart III, projects editor at the Akron
It's a progressive transformation that develops as a desire for better connections with readers sparks changes in reporting techniques.

Beacon-Journal, where a citizen-based series on race relations won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for public service.\(^5\)

Later in the practice of public journalism, efforts often incorporate investigative or computer-assisted journalism to lay out problems, then involve citizens in the development and implementation of solutions. Journalists who are experienced in public journalism talk about "holding citizens responsible" just as they hold politicians responsible. But for beginners who still think citizens just need more facts and phone numbers, there's a risk. Unless the journalist gets on the citizen wavelength and understands how citizens discuss issues among themselves, efforts to "hold citizens responsible" may degenerate into a rationale for more journalism as usual. If only citizens paid attention to our coverage, the journalist can rationalize, they'd do something.

It's not that simple.

Stage two: Public listening

Learning to listen to citizens in new ways is the most transformative step in the practice of public journalism, because it is ultimately humbling. The journalist who drops all preconceived notions of news and instead listens for how citizens see things learns something new, beginning to conceive of a mission other than "the journalist's solemn duty to protect people from their own ignorance," as journalism educator Cheryl Gibbs puts it.\(^6\)

It's a progressive transformation that develops as a desire for better connections with readers sparks changes in reporting techniques. Alternative coverage begins to encompass new sources, group interviews, or a broad source base such as an interview pool of poll respondents. By talking differently with different people, the journalist may begin to change the conception of the source's basic identity. Instead of seeing a citizen they are interviewing as merely a "good quote," a "reader," or (at a commonly muttered extreme) "some idiot," it is possible for a journalist to recognize times when sources step out of themselves and weigh their own interests against the needs of the community.
The change can be a special challenge when demographic differences between newsroom staffers and local residents compound difficulties in understanding. Rising professional standards in the industry over the past 20 years mean journalists are on the whole better educated, and often earn higher incomes than the community at large. Journalists may be further isolated from their communities if newsroom staff are transients on a career track, or if perceptions of conflicting interests serve to formally or informally discourage involvement in community activities.

To overcome the gap in understanding, journalists “have to ask more questions,” says Portland’s Guttman. “When someone says ‘crime,’ say, ‘What do you mean by that?’ It’s more difficult. We’re so used to hit-and-run reporting — go in, get out, do the story and you’re on to something else. That’s what’s hard to unlearn. In many ways we’re addicted to that. We and the government and the bureaucrats speak a common language, but the public speaks its own language that doesn’t necessarily click.”

In Philadelphia, deputy editorial page editor Chris Satullo found himself baffled by the lack of community response to an editorial page initiative that sought to bring together city and suburban residents to tackle common problems. “I was far more interested in the question of the modern postwar suburb hitting middle age and whether in confronting that, suburbs might find new political reasons to ally themselves with cities,” Satullo said. “I have written well-thought-out editorials and columns with beautiful turns of phrase and it makes no difference to the population I’m trying to engage, the suburbanite who says, ‘The city of Philadelphia? To hell with it.’”

But after 80 community meetings and a new round of invitations for input from the community, Satullo began to discover what he called “the first issue.” “They feel like the place they grew up has been stolen from them,” he said. Suburbanites who left Philadelphia say, essentially, “You can talk all you want about economies of scale and land-use planning, but don’t you expect me to let the same forces that stole my boyhood home come out here and do the

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Demographic differences between newsroom staffers and local residents compound difficulties in understanding... journalists may be further isolated from their communities if newsroom staff are transients on a career track, or if perceptions of conflicting interests serve to formally or informally discourage involvement in community activities.
same thing to the home I've worked for in the suburbs."

That's actually a much more interesting conversation for most people than questions of land-use planning. But it's a conversation that can go unnoticed by reporters. It is, as Akron's Stewart said, "a mind-set in terms of looking at people. Instead of looking at them as the great unwashed, we look at their opinions as the ones that matter." 9

Stage three: Deliberation

As journalists begin listening to citizens, putting ideas into practice, they can drop their own expert position and find, sometimes to their surprise, that teaming the media and the citizen generates a powerful new authority that neither citizens nor journalists have alone.

This stage commonly marks a retreat from the suspicion that public journalism sacrifices professional skills and practices. Instead, journalists often begin to recognize that their skills have little meaning without a well-understood sense of the citizen's interest. This new attitude resolves what is, essentially, cognitive dissonance in the professional culture: the traditional journalist's belief that he or she is on the citizens' side, jangling in tension with the sense that the public is poorly served by the press, and with the awareness that stories written "in the public interest" too often result in little change.

"I think the key is not to create another kind of journalism, but to ask how do we help our kind of journalism evolve," said Nancy Kruh, a features writer for the Dallas Morning News who originated a landmark 1995 series on the rising interest in civic life. 10 The stories never mentioned her own industry's work, nor was she familiar with public journalism when she started the series. "...Where else do people get community news? Covering it is a lot more than what's going on in churches or schools. It's a field as much as government is a field, and a field that has been underreported. I think our society suffers from it. Where do you find dialogue?"

Dialogue is the critical element of this stage, the outgrowth of repeated conversations with citizens, where reporters discover that people have a pretty good grasp of basic issues and want to
discuss them. They learn to listen for what Satullo in Philadelphia called "the first" issue, discovering a discussion different than the ones in legislative chambers or city council meetings.

In interviews and the resulting stories, people are more likely to say how their perspective is influenced by personal experience and emotion. They're quicker than lawmakers to talk about links among problems that seem disparate at first glance. (They might say bad schools are related to juvenile crime which, in turn, is related to breakdowns in families, and so on.) And they're less likely to draw conclusions quickly. Decision making isn't a linear process; people take in and consider different ideas again and again until one "just clicks."  

"A report is much less conflict-centered, much more tension-centered," said Cole Campbell, a pioneer of public journalism as editor of the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, now editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. "What are the tensions keeping something from happening, not so much 'Gotcha!' . . . The writing changes, that's what you know. It falls away from the official master narratives of conflict and good guys/bad guys and gets to be exploration of what issues facing community need to be addressed."

Reportage at this stage moves toward encouraging community dialogue by replicating the deliberative process on the page or on the air, over an extended period of time. It covers emerging steps toward common ground and beginning ideas about homegrown solutions, providing a forum where people can consider and "work through" the issues in the common space of the newspaper.

In San Jose, editor Rob Elder worked to develop editorial pages that try to replicate this process on the page. Offering prototypes to focus groups, he found people eager for differing opinions and utterly uninterested in the questions he and fellow journalists had about the new pages. They were scornful of the paper's award-winning editorial efforts.

"They said the most unflattering things like, 'Who do people think they are with the arrogance to tell us what to do about this, with mastheads listing the names of persons in charge, and editorials written by people we don't know?' They went on and
on about who [do] these people think they are?" he said.13 "The difference in perceptions about the need for an institutional voice between journalists and nonjournalists is about 100 percent. Journalists see it as very necessary and readers see it as the first thing to throw overboard. There wasn’t a hint of reverence for institutional voice."

Instead, readers preferred pages with at least one differing opinion, which they saw as an attempt at fairness. They preferred seeing the names of editorial writers on the page. And most importantly, Elder said, "They got it that we’re trying to create a page that’s like a forum, seeking common ground and deliberation," even though the readers had no introduction to these concepts.

Stage four: Framing

Informed by the study of contemporary democratic life, journalists who have engaged in deliberative conversations come slowly to recognize that the basic cut or "frame" citizens put around issues is a different way of looking at a problem than the lens through which journalists or policymakers see things. Consequently, they often drop the claim that their everyday choices about coverage are neutral. They recognize that issue framing itself is an act charged with consequences for public life. Fairness and evenhanded treatment remain as essentials in reporting and editing, but the work is done with an awareness of journalist’s power, informed by the conscious understanding that only citizens can name and frame their problems effectively.

"I think gradually I’m getting oriented to a different outlook," said Doug Floyd, an editor at the Spokane Spokesman-Review.14 "When I’m at these activities where civic leaders with the best of intentions say they’ve identified our problems and they must now build a strong public consensus through our community, I want to stand up and bang on the window and say, ‘How can you do that when you’re deciding what the problems [are]?’ Especially when the ego is being stroked by yourself or by others and you think it is your role and your right to judge for other people as to who has something to say and who doesn’t."
The journalists do not presume to make these decisions, either. A well-functioning public sphere is one in which citizens are involved and take responsibility for their community’s well-being, not one in which journalists wield power to force specific actions or further any interest. The journalist’s goal is for citizens to see new ways to engage in public life, taking on the responsibility of solving the community’s problems for themselves. Those who have practiced public journalism over a period of time begin to talk about holding citizens responsible, obviously reflecting a belief that citizens are not idiots after all.

“There’s a danger of romanticizing average citizens that’s shot through all this — they can get by with saying platitudes and sounding profound,” said Chris Satullo in Philadelphia. “How do we engage them in a respectful way while still holding them responsible, being honest about that without being dismissive?”

He puts forward a strategy suggested by Michael Kinsley in a New Yorker article Satullo keeps pinned above his desk: “We need a new form of democratic piety. It shows respect not contempt for people to hold them to the same intellectual standards you would hold yourself or a friend.”

Stage five: Engagement

The effort to engage citizens is public journalism at its most experimental, not — as critics charge — because the journalists take sides, moving into advocacy, but because engagement is ephemeral, sometimes consistent, more often momentary, and virtually impossible to measure. A community can be engaged by an issue for three months, then resolve the particular problem and move on; likewise, citizens may be merely attentive, interested at the moment but unwilling or unable to tackle their underlying troubles.

Those who practice public journalism do not define engagement as journalistic interest in a specific outcome; in fact, the opposite is true. The only outcome public journalists advocate is an engaged citizenry, moved out of frustration and cynicism into deliberation and resolve. When public journalism is effective, it leaves something behind — a conversational effect, at the least and, at best, an ongoing structure for citizen participation.
It's hard to pin down "engagement," in part because public journalism is still new enough to make it a distant goal for most. Instead, the driving question might be: "What does the community need to know or do to take responsibility for itself?" The answer is not simply more information; rather, the answers build on lessons learned in previous stages about citizens and what they say they need to reengage in public life, from how-to tips to wholesale reframings of the narratives used to discuss major issues.

"This movement seems to diagnose what's wrong with this country as our lack of civic duty," said Nancy Kruh. "We've forgotten how to be citizens. Instead, we're taxpayers and clients of the government — political speeches over the years stop referring to citizens and start referring to taxpayers. . . . What's really going to resonate is this call to come together. I'm waiting for that voice to come to the surface."

That voice rightfully resonates in the community itself, though the news organization may have earlier convened town meetings, hired community coordinators, or published coverage that led new groups to form. The goal is to develop coverage that helps to surface the public voice.

In Norfolk, members of the League of Women Voters clipped the paper for a month to chart the paper's commitment to public journalism, then offered editors a surprise critique. Held to its own standards, the paper drew a mixed review from the league. Nonetheless, the critique was published for all readers to see. And league members did say they could see a difference. Their report pointed out stories that considered all points of view including, say, a victim's, and which gave people a sense of possibility that crime could be fought by showing where citizens could take action.

"Everyone seeks to influence us one way or another, but this was not lobbying, it was performance appraisal," said Cole Campbell of St. Louis, formerly executive editor in Norfolk. "It was doing public journalism: to us — holding us responsible for what we do."

That responsibility in some ways closes the loop journalists open when they start where readers start, bringing the paper
back together with its community. That doesn't happen at a given moment, but in leaps and bounds — and integrated stages.

"Even long term, there's no silver bullet," Campbell said. "You have to get 12 or 14 or 132 things right. You have to get design, and data, and accuracy right, and you have to get the public journalism. It isn't going to be one thing. It's everything, and we're in a war zone all the time."

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Notes

2. Author's interview with Guttman, August 1995.
4. Ibid, p. 15.
5. Author's interview with Stewart, July 1995.
7. Author's interview with Guttman, August 1995.
8. Author's interview with Satullo, July 1995.
10. Author's interview with Kruh, April 1996.
12. Author's interview with Campbell, July 1995.
15. Author's interview with Satullo, July 1995.