

# Public Journalism: Controversies over the Media's Role in 1990s America

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## I INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 1990s, an increasing number of media organizations in the United States have started to practice what is called public or civic journalism. They listen intently to the voices of readers and viewers, frame their reporting agenda based on the people's voices, and cover stories accordingly. They not only report straight facts and uncover hidden problems but also suggest solutions and encourage people to participate actively in community affairs.

There is a premise behind the idea of public journalism. It is that American journalism is not working well; the media are disconnected from people, not reporting what people want to know, and making people turn away from community affairs. The media has stopped functioning as a catalyst engaging people in the process of democracy. Public journalism, advocates say, is an effort on the part of journalists to "reconnect" journalism and citizens in order to revive public dialogue among ordinary people, and thus maintain democracy.

Not all journalists are receptive to the idea. Mainstream journalists in particular are strongly critical. Some accuse public journalism of

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violating the principle of objective reporting. Others are wary of tapping into people's voices for guidance in the construction of a reporting agenda, because they fear that editorial independence may be in jeopardy. Some even claim that public journalism could erode citizens' trust in journalism and undermine democracy.

Can public journalism survive this criticism? Can it really work to save democracy, as its advocates hope? To answer these questions definitively, one will have to wait and see for some time, since ongoing efforts in dozens of cities all over the United States are still in an experimental phase. There will be more trials and errors before the end results of the experimentation will become clear. The best one can do at this point is to assess accurately where these controversies came from, where proponents and opponents of public journalism stand, and where the debates are leading. By doing so, one can perhaps better understand the issues that American journalism faces today, and have a fair perspective on the future of public journalism.

## II WHAT IS PUBLIC JOURNALISM?

One of the first proponents of what came to be known as public journalism was Davis Merritt, editor of the *Wichita Eagle* of Kansas, who covered the 1990 election in a nontraditional manner. His attempt was featured in a trade magazine in 1992, but the term "public journalism" or "civic journalism" was not used until sometime in 1993.<sup>2</sup> By 1997, the term was being widely used, yet no clear-cut definition of it has yet been established. Merritt himself wrote in 1996 that "those of us thinking and writing about this idea are hardly monolithic; we differ on many points."<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of public journalism, according to Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University and another proponent along with Merritt, is "to engage people as citizens, to improve public discussion, to help communities solve problems, and to aid in the country's search for a workable public life."<sup>4</sup> Both Rosen and Merritt intentionally avoid describing concretely what journalists should do to practice public journalism. Merritt sees it rather philosophically as journalism that involves these "mental shifts":

It moves beyond the limited mission of 'telling the news' to a broader mission of helping public life go well, and acts out of that imperative.

It moves from detachment to being a fair-minded participant in public life.

It moves from worrying about proper separations to concern with proper connections.

It moves beyond only describing what is 'going wrong' to also imagining what 'going right' would be like.

It moves from seeing people as consumers—as readers or nonreaders, as bystanders to be informed—to seeing them as a public, as potential actors in arriving at democratic solutions to public problems.<sup>5</sup>

He expects that journalists “who accept the challenge of the philosophy will, as journalists always have, develop their own rules over time and through experience.”<sup>6</sup>

In practice, there now seem to be a few common components in public journalism projects currently being experimented with at various levels. First, journalists build their reporting agendas around the concerns of local citizens, using public opinion polls, interviews, focus groups and public forums. Second, they not only report factual news but also encourage people to get involved in solving the problems of their own community. And third, there are a number of media organizations that carry out their projects in partnership with other news media. Newspapers share costs with television stations by getting together with them to conduct polls or to sponsor public hearings. They also share results of news coverage to enrich stories or programs.

Merritt was driven into public journalism by his deep frustration with the campaign coverage of the 1988 presidential election, which was dominated by negative attacks and the abuse of symbols such as Willie Horton, Boston Harbor, and the Pledge of Allegiance. It was widely described as one of the worst campaigns in modern history. The media's coverage of the campaign turned it into a horse race, characterized by the “who's-ahead-who's-behind” type of candidate-oriented stories. Citizens' concerns about their communities or their interest in policy issues were more or less ignored by the politicians and the media.

In the 1990 gubernatorial campaign in Kansas, Merritt changed his way of covering politics. Pledging to give readers “the opportunity to understand in great detail the candidates' positions on every major issue Kansans face,” his newspaper tried to take the momentum of the campaign away from the pollsters and handlers.<sup>7</sup> The *Wichita Eagle* conducted public opinion polls, and based on the polling results, focused

their coverage on the issues voters were most concerned about. The two candidates for governor were asked to make clear where they stood on those issues, and their positions were regularly scrutinized in the paper. The approach was named the “Voter’s Project.” The newspaper, in partnership with KAKE-TV, a local ABC affiliate, also encouraged people to register to vote and urged them to go to the voting booths on election day.

In 1992, another election year, a few other newspapers followed suit. One of these papers, the *Charlotte Observer* of North Carolina, based its coverage of the election campaign on a “citizens’ agenda” which it shaped through wide ranging interviews and pollings. The newspaper also formed a partnership with WSOC-TV, a local television station, which broadcast special programs related to the election in coordination with a series of feature stories carried by the *Charlotte Observer*. The newspaper later extended this new practice to cover areas other than elections. One of the projects, called “Taking Back Our Neighborhood,” was initiated in the fall of 1993 to focus coverage of problems in a few crime-ridden neighborhoods and to try to find solutions in cooperation with the residents. The newspaper mainly concentrated its efforts on reporting on those communities, gathered volunteers with the help of local organizations and urged citizens to take part in the effort to solve problems.<sup>8</sup> While some papers like the *Star-Tribune* in Minneapolis have sponsored neighborhood roundtables in readers’ homes, others like the *Wisconsin State Journal* established a panel of community leaders to give feedback before stories were published.<sup>9</sup>

A different sort of public journalism is also reported. At the *Spokane Spokesman-Review* in Washington, the editorial pages underwent a drastic change. In early 1994, declaring a “reinvention” of opinion pages, the newspaper announced that “we have turned the majority of the space on these pages over to you [readers]—now do something with it.” The paper offered new space for essays by readers, maintained a page a day for readers’ letters or cartoons, cut the number of editorials from thirteen to eight a week, and ran fewer syndicated columns than before. The newspaper even renamed the editorial page editor the “opinion editor.”<sup>10</sup>

These are just a few samples of early cases of the public journalism experiment and do not necessarily represent the movement that followed with much wider scope of thoughts and actions. Due to the

ambiguity of the notion and the lack of concrete practical guidelines, there have been some confusion and excesses among those who tried to promote public journalism. However, the experiment has taken deep root in the field of American journalism.

To Davis Merritt, public journalism is about something more than just a few changes of technique in news reporting. If it had been a matter simply of how newspapers cover stories, the idea would not have caused such a controversy. "Public journalism is much more than technique," Merritt writes. "It requires a philosophical journey because it is a fundamental change in how we conceive of our role in public life."<sup>11</sup> What he means, in other words, is that "why" one practices public journalism is more important than "how" one does it.

### III WHY PUBLIC JOURNALISM NOW?

The fact that dozens of media organizations carry out public journalism in one way or the other in many cities in the United States, only a few years after Merritt launched his first experiment, shows that there are a considerable number of journalists in the profession who share Merritt's view about the media's role in American society. To Merritt, "journalism is an integral part of the system of public life," and journalists are obliged to do their job "in ways that are calculated to help public life go well by reengaging people in it." Public life going well means "that democracy succeeds in answering its core question: What shall we do?" through deliberation. The answer "should be found by informed and engaged citizens," Merritt says. "Public journalism does not attempt to forge its own answer to the question. Rather, it actively seeks to help citizens arrive at their answer."<sup>12</sup>

It was not only Merritt who was frustrated with the media's reporting of the 1988 presidential election. David Broder, a prominent political columnist for the *Washington Post*, expressed concern in his column in 1990 about the media's campaign coverage. "It is time for those of us in the world's freest press to become activists, not on behalf of a particular party or politician, but on behalf of the process of self-government," he wrote. "We have to help reconnect politics and government—what happens in the campaign and what happens afterward in public policy."<sup>13</sup> This call for "activist" journalism in fact is said to have inspired Merritt's adventure in public journalism.

The failure of journalism to engage people in the democratic pro-

cess is only a part of broader problems faced by the American media. Two major forces have been at work since the 1970s in American journalism: infotainment and bottomline journalism. With the technological renovation of electronic news gathering (ENG) and satellite news gathering (SNG), television news coverage has become more entertainment-oriented. Presenting news with visually appealing pictures has become more important than presenting substance without visuals. TV has changed politics from a matter of substance to a matter of image. Every four years the presidential election symbolically represents the fight for superficial image selling.

TV has also influenced how newspapers report news. To compete with television, newspapers now use more color photos and graphics, enhancing visual quality. They clearly use more soft stories than hard ones to make newspapers more readable and appealing. These efforts have simply amounted to making newspapers more like television. As a result, news reporting in the 1990s is becoming increasingly more entertaining, reporting gossip and scandal. News reporting along these lines is labeled "infotainment." Election coverage that focuses on candidate chit-chat and superficial images is only an extension of this infotainment trend. Howard Kurtz, media critic for the *Washington Post*, summed up how the media have changed: "Where once newspapers embodied cultural values, they now seem mired in a tabloid culture that gorges itself on sex and sleaze."<sup>14</sup>

Infotainment aims to attract more readers and viewers. Newspaper readership has been declining steadily for some time. Television stations are waging a fierce war for ratings. Battles for survival in the newspaper business, in many cases, have resulted in chain-ownership acquiring more independent papers. As of 1996, American dailies under newspaper chains made up roughly four-fifths of the total number. In the early 1960s it was under one-fourth.<sup>15</sup> In the broadcast media, there were a number of mega-mergers involving all three networks. In the mid-80s ABC was bought by Capital Cities, NBC by General Electric, and in the mid-90s, ABC merged with Disney, an entertainment giant, and CBS was bought by Westinghouse, another electronic giant. More mega-mergers were announced in the past year involving cable television, digital satellite broadcasting and other communication companies.

Some of these corporations, which have little or no journalistic background, do not seem to care much about the quality of journalism.

They care more about making a profit by demanding more efficiency in the newsroom. Inefficient investigative reporting or costly programs are squeezed out. Even at the three networks whose news divisions are known for their solid achievements, a downsizing of news staffs has been carried out. These and other results of so-called bottomline journalism have degraded the quality of U.S. journalism, particularly in television.<sup>16</sup> It is safe to say that the lamentable state of American journalism in the 1990s has certainly functioned as a seedbed for public journalism. Here is one of the two premises on which public journalism is based.

The second premise, as Edward M. Fouhy of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism put it, is that "something is eating at the foundations of our society."<sup>17</sup> Violent crimes, disintegrated families, and the poor quality of public schools are some of the factors suggesting that society is far from healthy. People appear to be reluctant to become engaged in community affairs; voter turnout is at its lowest level for post-war presidential elections. There are many people and organizations who believe that something has to be done.

One of those organizations is Pew Charitable Trusts, a Philadelphia-based foundation which is committed to the cause of restructuring the community and revitalizing democracy. In early 1993, one of the Pew-sponsored conferences decided to do something to overcome the alienation of American citizens from their communities and their government. It also determined that the news media had played a role in the disintegration of public trust. By September that year, Pew had set up the Center for Civic Journalism to underwrite new experiments.<sup>18</sup> The Center, which provided roughly three million dollars over the next four years for media organizations applying for funds to carry out public journalism style projects, has quickly become a key factor in promoting the cause of the new idea.<sup>19</sup>

Pew has no particular interest in how journalism goes about its business, says Rebecca W. Rimel, the president of the Pew Charitable Trusts. But Pew does "see it as an issue if journalism can be used as a tool, as a way to get the public reconnected, reinvigorated, recommitted to democratic values . . .,"<sup>20</sup> Rimel continues. Whatever its intention, there is no doubt that Pew's commitment has encouraged more organizations to jump onto the idea, and has energized the movement. The fact that this foundation, with no journalism background, has emerged as a major force championing public journalism shows that

Davis Merritt's concern about American journalism today is not limited to those within the media business.

A few other private organizations are also involved in supporting the cause of public journalism, such as the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio, the Poynter Institute for Media Studies of St. Petersburg, Florida, and the American Press Institute of Reston, Virginia. The content and level of their commitment varies. But without support from Pew and these other institutions it is doubtful whether public journalism, which started as the personal effort of one Mid-Western newspaper editor, would have grown as it did, reaching its current level of prominence.

#### IV CROSSING THE LINE

By 1995 public journalism had spread mainly among small and medium sized media organizations, with more than one hundred and fifty news organizations having tried the new practice in one form or the other.<sup>21</sup> Noisy praise and criticism were being exchanged on trade magazines and newspapers. Some of the arguments have been very fierce; "not since 'advocacy journalism' has a new direction in news aroused such furor."<sup>22</sup> When James Fallows expressed his support for public journalism in his 1996 book *Breaking the News*, Howell Raines, the *New York Times* editorial page editor, condemned Fallow's position as poisonous to the values of the newsroom, branding him "a fount of dangerous nonsense."<sup>23</sup>

One of the most controversial issues is whether journalists should be detached observers. Merritt and his followers say that simply telling the news is not enough. Journalism should encourage citizens to be engaged in public life and help them find solutions to community problems. Journalists are unavoidably players, not mere observers, they say. Critics accuse this of being a gross violation of the basic principle of objective reporting. Under that principle, journalists are required to be detached, to stay neutral and to report things as they see and hear them without injecting any subjective observation or opinion into their stories. Crossing the line that defines objective reporting means going over to bias or advocacy, which is an anathema to American journalism.

If journalists repudiate objectivity by getting involved in public affairs, they will place the credibility of the news media at risk.

“Political involvements turn observers into actors and ‘news’ columns into propaganda displays,” says Richard Harwood, a former press ombudsman of the *Washington Post*.<sup>24</sup> Readers seeing a vested interest in a newspaper’s reporting may suspect that the newspaper has many other vested interests and imagine that its reporting on those issues is likely to be affected by them. “As a practical matter, can a paper objectively report on a burning community issue when the editor sits on the commission that is promoting a particular point of view on the matter?” asked William F. Woo, then editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, in a lecture at the University of California in 1995.<sup>25</sup>

While maintaining that the press should go beyond merely reporting factual matters, proponents of public journalism do not totally discard objectivity principles. They rather appear to separate objectivity from detachment, embracing the ideal of impartiality while rejecting the indifference often associated with it. Merritt writes:

One can be objective in looking at the facts and still care about the implications of those facts. For instance, a scientist seeking a cure for a disease must be objective in evaluating results, but he or she can still care very much about whether a cure is found. That’s the difference between objectivity and detachment.<sup>26</sup>

Merritt’s position indicates that public journalism is reluctant to cross the line into advocacy journalism. One interpretation of his position is that “if public journalism encourages a commitment to the quality of public life, it does so only if ‘quality’ remains vague or defined by consensus. If public journalism seems aimed at making the community work, it is not aimed at making it work in any particular way.”<sup>27</sup> The line between Merritt’s position and advocacy journalism seems painfully vague and thin. It can easily be stepped over with innocent carelessness.

Another issue that has invited heated debate is how much journalism should rely on public opinion in creating its reporting agenda. Public journalism advocates emphasize the importance of listening to the voices of citizens. In fact, many journalists today tend to sit behind their computers, analyze figures and statistics, call a few experts, and write a story without ever hitting the beat. It is clearly valid for public journalism proponents to say that media reporting should include more of the voices of everyday people when the topic affects their community. Critics, however, find it too much for a newspaper to sponsor

town-hall meetings, to call in focus groups in search of clues to how ordinary people feel and think, and then to write reports based on those findings. “We are abandoning a piece of our own jobs if what we are doing is asking people what we should do,” *Philadelphia Daily News* editorial page editor Richard Aregood has been quoted as saying. If journalists draw up panels of readers and ask them what they want and put it in the newspaper, he said, “we may as well go into the mirror business.”<sup>28</sup>

The more subtle danger of this practice of listening to people’s voices is that it may intensify the media’s inclination to pander. If a newspaper relies on people’s voices heavily for its reporting agenda, it will be difficult to work against that consensus. And the consensus is not always right. One of the media’s roles in a democratic society is to defend minority views or to be willing to take unpopular stands. If this role is weakened or diminished by listening to the consensus of community opinion, the community will not be served well by the resulting less diverse views and less active dialogues.

Media partnership is also a subject of controversy. Michael Gartner, former president of NBC News and editor of the Ames, Iowa, *Daily News*, strongly criticized the “media coalition” in North Carolina in which six newspapers, five commercial television stations and the state’s public television and radio networks took part in joint coverage of the 1996 election. He said the media coalitions “homogenize the news and reduce the number of voices gathering it.” And, even worse, Gartner argues, is the negative effect that this type of coalition has on independent, investigative journalism. “What would reporters and editors be doing,” he asks, “if they weren’t involved in this ‘civic’ effort? What rocks would get turned over? What issues would be explored that didn’t turn up in polling data?”<sup>29</sup> To this, Jennie Buckner, editor of the *Charlotte Observer*, one of the six newspapers involved, responded that the stories the partners shared were just several of many, and that the effort did not limit coverage but rather expanded and improved it.<sup>30</sup>

All through these arguments, one cannot help but feel that the debate is “like arguing over a Rorschach test.” As Philip Meyer of the University of North Carolina aptly points out, “each sees in it [public journalism] the manifestation of his or her fondest hopes or worst fears.”<sup>31</sup> This is mostly due to the lack of any clear definition of public journalism, its philosophy and its practice. Proponents of the idea have

intentionally left it vague because it is an idea in development, they say, and they don't want it limited or confined. Merritt himself complained at one time that "the fundamental ideas of public journalism remain largely unexplored by the profession at large."<sup>32</sup> But proponents are perhaps more responsible for the confusion than opponents, who tend to find its ambiguity suspicious.

There has been another, more philosophical, level of argument regarding public journalism and community, mainly among academics. These debates have been, broadly speaking, between the communitarians and the individualists. Since the early 1980s, communitarianism has been focused upon as a philosophical alternative to individualistic liberalism. Responding to the excesses of "Me-ism" in 1980s America, communitarians emphasize what they call "common goods"—communal values—instead of individual rights. To them, public journalism, also called community journalism, is a means for preventing fragmentation of community. It assumes that "the community is ontologically (in terms of its being) and axiologically (in terms of values) prior to person," says Clifford G. Christians of the University of Illinois, Urbana.<sup>33</sup> The community, not the individual, is the center of value. Individuals must act morally in ways that strengthen and perpetuate community. "At a more mundane level," Louis W. Hodges of Washington and Lee University writes, "that means that journalists must function to sustain and build community."<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, to John C. Merrill, a journalism professor at the University of Missouri, this is "a vague rhetorical war" waged by "the new communitarians" against individualism and libertarianism. He interprets the communitarians as saying that "we need a more responsible media system, in which journalists, as members of the society, are willing to sacrifice their own freedom to the good of the whole." He continues:

The new civic journalism proponents stress media responsibility, not press freedom. They also stress the public (or social) leadership in press matters. . . . Listen to the people, they say. Find out what they want and give it to them. Increasingly, this rhetoric resembles what the old Soviet media managers meant when they talked of freedom of the press.<sup>35</sup>

Merrill, an individualist and libertarian, believes that journalism should be given full autonomy with maximum freedom in decision making. He says, "libertarians of the press respect free flow of infor-

mation, the concept of pluralism of information and perspectives, and the belief that a diversity of ideas and opinions is good for society.”<sup>36</sup> Merrill admits freely, however, that the liberal position he prefers is not flawless. It can bring about social stress in a community. It can disrupt the harmony of a community. Yet he rejects the communitarians’ suggestions that American journalism needs a more monolithic, responsible restructuring, that individualism is a flawed foundation for journalism and must be supplanted by a more collectivized, group-oriented and cooperationist theory. Communitarian journalism appears to him to be “a kind of moral imperialism.”<sup>37</sup>

Merrill is joined by Ralph D. Barney of Brigham Young University in criticizing communitarianism and public journalism. Barney, a media ethics expert, worries that community-oriented thinking deprives journalism of its self-determination. He suggests that “communitarianism ultimately corrupts itself and denies its members their rights to develop their own moral reasoning.”<sup>38</sup>

It is undeniable that public journalism and the communitarians’ call for a new media ethics have a great deal in common; both want to see changes within journalism in order to improve community and in a larger sense, American society. Some academics specializing in communication and journalism are now discussing public journalism in the context of communitarianism vs. individualism. It seems, however, that the idea of public journalism was born not as a result of the theoretical development of communitarianism but through the practical efforts of journalists to renovate the media’s coverage of politics and community affairs. Few of the articles and books about public journalism written by journalists, including Merritt’s, discuss the subject in terms of communitarianism.

A fusion of public journalism and communitarianism appears to be taking place. Communitarians may need a practical vehicle to implement their value, while public journalists may need a theoretical foundation to press their movement ahead.

## V EVALUATING EXPERIMENTS

How far has public journalism come? What has it achieved in the numerous experiments attempted so far? It is difficult to grasp a total picture of the public journalism movement, since there have been at least two hundred projects involving a wide variety of practices and

materials. A few sporadic assessment reports have been published on individual projects. One relatively comprehensive evaluation of multiple projects is *Civic Lessons; Report on Four Civic Journalism Projects Funded by The Pew Center for Civic Journalism*, published in April 1997. Four independent evaluators, including Professor Esther Thorson of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, examined four projects in four cities between January and November 1996.

The most significant finding of the evaluation is that "on the whole, civic journalism is making progress toward its goals." The report continues:

It benefits both the communities it serves and the overall democratic process. Most people surveyed who were aware of the four projects chosen for study reported being more knowledgeable and concerned about their communities as a result and indicated they had a stronger sense of their civic responsibilities, especially as voters.<sup>39</sup>

The findings were not all positive, however. The evaluators found "newsroom responses were frequently ambivalent or even negative." Not surprisingly, some journalists opposed news organizations going beyond solely reporting and analyzing the news. Others believed that public journalism can harm objectivity, and still others, the report says, "object[ed] to news organizations accepting even indirect support for such efforts, arguing that if a project is worth doing, it should be done with internal resources."<sup>40</sup>

It is ironic that there is abundant skepticism in the newsrooms despite the fact that readers and viewers are relatively positive in accepting the products of public journalism. The report says that at most of the media organizations they studied, public journalism has not been integrated into general news coverage, beyond the specific projects themselves. The *Charlotte Observer* has moved to incorporate the principle of public journalism into daily reporting, the report continues, but even these efforts are fairly new.<sup>41</sup> At the *Wisconsin State Journal*, and its partner WISC-TV, the project "We the People/ Wisconsin" was widely perceived in both newsrooms as a management effort. The report "found less sense of ownership or understanding of (public journalism) principles in either newsroom than we'd have expected."<sup>42</sup>

There is some evidence, however, to the contrary. A 1997 survey of journalists undertaken by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found that the majority of respondents approved of four of the journal-

istic approaches most commonly associated with public journalism. Significantly, the survey had not labeled these approaches in any particular way. Ninety-six percent approved of a newspaper reporting on alternative solutions to community problems. Eighty-eight percent approved of newspapers developing 'enterprise stories' to focus public attention on a community problem and helping the community move toward a solution. Seventy-one percent approved of a newspaper polling the public to determine the most pressing community issues, then trying to get candidates to focus on those issues. And sixty-eight percent approved of a newspaper conducting town meetings to discover key issues in the community and following up with stories focusing on these issues and possible solutions.<sup>43</sup> It should be noted that the first two approaches could easily be understood within the framework of traditional journalism rather than public journalism.

Though tentative and limited, these findings contain significant material for our consideration. First, the fact that community residents generally acknowledged the positive effects of public journalism projects proves that the direction of the experimentation is not totally misguided. The findings, however, do not indicate if citizens have any concern about the possibility of public journalism projects being dominated by interests groups, political or otherwise. Neither do they give any clue regarding the concern of critics of public journalism that media partnerships may narrow choices of information in longer terms. It will take much longer for people to be able to assess the impact of public journalism in these areas.

Second, it is evident that there are a lot of issues for public journalism proponents to work out with their fellow journalists rather than with citizens. Public journalists could reduce the level of misgivings about their idea if they define the philosophy and practice better. But there will remain some hardcore issues regarding which proponents will find it difficult to persuade skeptics and opponents. In addition to the question of objectivity and editorial independence, financial issues, including outside funding to public journalism projects, will be problematic for their supporters in future.

## VI COMMON GROUND

Whether public journalism gains more practitioners in the rest of the 1990s remains hard to predict. The number of media organizations

participating in experimental projects is growing. Yet many elite news organizations are still adamant in staying away from public journalism. The rancor surrounding it has left a deep gulf between its proponents and opponents, at least rhetorically. Neither side shows any sign of reconciling with the other. Philip Meyer attributes the source of the controversy among journalists over public journalism to "tension between core values and their current application." He says that, in the latter half of the 20th century, "journalism has been tugged at by two competing sets of values, libertarian theory on the one hand, and social responsibility theory on the other."<sup>44</sup>

While arguments are confrontational and polarizing at the level of theory, in practical terms there seems to be some common ground between the claims of the two parties. Above all, there is not much difference in their goals for journalistic activity, either of public journalism or of the more traditional form. Leonard Downie, executive editor of the *Washington Post* and one of the staunchest critics of public journalism, defines his ideal of journalism as being "to provide citizens with as much as possible of the information they need to conduct their lives, private and public, and to hold accountable the increasing number of powerful people and institutions that hold sway in our lives."<sup>45</sup> This ideal can easily pass for that of a public journalist. The difference lies in how this goal is achieved.

Proponents of public journalism claim that traditional journalism is not functioning well. Proponents for traditional journalism openly admit that journalism today faces serious problems. "Yes, we have been isolated, detached, arrogant, disconnected, narrow in our definitions of what's news and what isn't. . . . Damn right that we should listen to the public," says William F. Woo.<sup>46</sup> There are enough reasons for public journalism proponents to be frustrated with the way current journalism handles the news, he believes. Even a critic like Max Frankel of the *New York Times* agrees with them that "American journalism sorely needs improvement."<sup>47</sup>

One of the hardest issues to overcome for those looking for common ground between the two forces is the principle of objective reporting. Both proponents and opponents tend to believe that there is a line that divides objectivity from advocacy. And some critics tend to look at the division in terms of a good and bad, or right and wrong, accusing public journalism of crossing the line from good to bad. But in real journalistic practice, the line is not so clearly drawn. Rather, objectivity

and advocacy are simply at opposite ends of a continuum.

In principle, news pages should be free from the subjective views of reporters or editors. Advocacy should belong only to editorial and opinion pages. In practice, however, there is no denying that, in the news columns of any newspaper today, we have news analyses and features that reflect a writer's or an editor's personal values, judgment and even prejudices. Straight news stories are also not totally objective, one can argue, since they are affected by journalists' values and judgment in the very process of being selected as newsworthy. Purely objective reporting is hard, if not impossible, to achieve. While traditionally journalists have been told that objective reporting should be their ultimate goal, objectivity is just a matter of degree. In that sense, this issue should not be a barrier to finding some middle ground between the adversarial camps in achieving necessary improvements in American journalism.

Another issue is whether journalists should listen to the people's voices. Public journalists explicitly emphasize the importance of listening to public opinion and being guided by it. To do this they sponsor polls, town-hall meetings and focus groups. While opponents do not particularly promote the idea of listening to people, no journalist denies that listening to the voices of those concerned in an issue is one of the basics of journalism. Obviously, both sides share the idea that listening to people is an essential part of a journalist's job. The difference, again, is how. Some opponents say it is too much for a news organization to hold public hearings or to sponsor focus groups. If a newspaper's news coverage is framed and guided by pollings or hearings, it runs the risk of becoming "user-driven" journalism pandering to its readers. Proponents counter that traditional journalism simply ignores the voices of ordinary citizens, only reporting those of experts and politicians.

A real problem here is the question of whether journalists today are listening to people's voices adequately. With advanced communication technologies and public relation systems, information is abundantly available in newsrooms, making it possible for journalists to write stories without going out of their offices in search of ordinary opinions. "For a journalist to spend time with people on the street or in their homes is not as common as it once was," writes David Broder of the *Washington Post*, calling for improving political reporting by covering the news "the old-fashioned way." He says "there is no substitute

for shoe-leather reporting, walking precincts, talking to people in their living rooms. . . . If we do our homework—spend enough time with the voters, early in the campaign—we can and should define that voters' agenda clearly on our pages."<sup>48</sup> Mainstream journalists are also well aware that journalism today is not serving ordinary people and their communities well and thus is not fulfilling its obligation to them. There seems to be room for the proponents and the opponents of public journalism to work together in trying to serve the community better by listening to people more closely.

There are still more areas where the two forces could converge rather than polarize their positions on public journalism. Proponents' views are certainly not as monolithic as are those of their opponents'. It is difficult to find common ground in extreme views and pristine concepts. But there are moderates on both sides who could cooperate by sharing their goal of improving journalism. One of these is Davis Merritt himself. Along with his basic promotion of public journalism, he has laid out the negative elements of "the reflexes" of current journalism, which he describes journalists as having developed "to enable us to perform, under pressure, our daily and hourly reporting miracles." The reflexes, he says, "no longer serve us—or public life—well."<sup>49</sup>

Those "reflexes" include:

- The overvaluation of conflict as a primary narrative device.
- Framing issues at the extremes, which not only has the disadvantages of inaccuracy, but which also relentlessly discourages the ambivalent majority of people from thinking usefully about those issues.
- Indulging in and clearly communicating a snarly adversarialism toward every person and institution instead of maintaining proper and useful journalistic skepticism.
- Imagining readers as our audience or as spectators at an event that we are reporting on rather than imagining them as potential participants.
- Insisting that our credibility arises from our detachment, despite strong arguments to the contrary. This leads us into the trap of publicly claiming to be value-neutral when every person alive knows better.<sup>50</sup>

One can argue that these "reflexes" are still valid and useful. However, fair-minded journalists are not able to deny that most of these points also have negative effects. Even opponents of public journalism agree that these "reflexes" sometimes cause journalism to commit the journalistic sins of sensationalism, bias, distortion, misrepre-

sentation and false reporting. These are the areas that journalists, either public or otherwise, have to deal with squarely in order to improve the quality of journalism to any significant degree.

Rem Rieder, editor of *American Journalism Review*, says that he has been “struck by the wide swath of . . . common ground,” between proponents and opponents of public journalism. He points out a few areas of overlap, including the perception of the need to “get beyond the official agenda and the official sources” in addition to other areas already mentioned above by Merritt.<sup>51</sup> James Fallows also sees “a broader ground of hopeful consensus” beneath the apparent gap that separates public journalism advocates from their mainstream critics.<sup>52</sup> Merritt himself simply says that “public journalism and those traditional ideals are neither in conflict nor mutually exclusive. Public journalism adds to those ideals an additional imperative; concern for whether citizens become engaged in public life.”<sup>53</sup>

As journalism explores common ground in its quest to serve citizens and society, journalists can perhaps use the principle of independence as a guide. Independence is the key to journalistic integrity whether of public journalism or the more traditional form. If a news organization is perceived as a mouthpiece of any political party or interest group, it will lose public trust. One of the critics’ serious concerns about public journalism is the likelihood of its independence being jeopardized by an over-involvement in or an over-commitment to community affairs. The principle of journalistic independence could serve “as a moral gyroscope” regarding the role of journalism in society, clarifying its responsibilities to the public, and to communities.<sup>54</sup> There seems to be reason to believe that public journalism, if practiced properly with high ethical standards, will produce reporting that will convince its critics that journalistic independence can be maintained.

## VII GOOD JOURNALISM

There is a broad consensus among journalists that American journalism today is in trouble and that something has to be done. It has lost the reputation it once had. It does not play the role in the community which it once played. Many journalists share the view of Herbert Altschull, journalism professor at Johns Hopkins University, that “something must be done if we are going to salvage the tradition of journalism from the cesspool into which it seems headed.”<sup>55</sup> But they

are not in agreement on what should be done. Here, the idea of public journalism has arrived.

Although there are serious reservations, public journalism is an earnest attempt to restore journalism's reputation and its original role. In the words of Carl Sessions Stepp, it is "a thoughtful effort to jumpstart a tired industry and to reassert social responsibility in increasingly mercenary times." An important point is that "it offers not just complaints, but a positive program for change."<sup>56</sup> It is a challenge to traditional journalism.

The advocates of traditional journalism, meanwhile, have not offered much to counter the proposition except criticism. It is time for these critics to come up with their own suggestions for the significant improvement, if not reinvention, of journalism. There have been a few mainstream journalists who have called for a conscious effort to reinvigorate journalism, David Broder being one of them. Gene Roberts, managing editor of the *New York Times*, is another. He deplores the trend among newspapers to raise profits by squeezing newsroom staffs, budgets and news hole. He says:

[T]he obligation of the press is, at its heart, very simple: supplying voters with the information they need to make decisions in our democracy. Substantive news coverage is not only vital to democracy; it is vital to the survival of newspapers.<sup>57</sup>

Davis Merritt could have written these sentences. What Roberts is calling for is more talk of increasing coverage, or space for news reports on newspapers, or staff in editorial rooms, rather than of increasing profits and of increasing accountability to shareholders. It is simply good journalism. Howard Schneider, managing editor of *Newsday*, said, "It's the most traditional thing that any newspaper worth anything has always done. This is not a radical new notion that you also report on what the public cares about."<sup>58</sup> To Schneider as well as to Roberts, what public journalism is striving at is nothing new. This is where the common ground explored in previous pages comes into play.

Yet, no detailed steps towards public journalism have been defined by its proponents. No roadmap to good journalism has been clearly drawn by its opponents either. Their goals are more or less the same—to serve the community and to maintain democracy. The process seems to overlap here and there. If journalists in America are to

improve the quality of journalism, the most practical way to achieve it is to start working together on some of the areas where proponents and opponents share similar views. And if their efforts are fruitful, they could find ways to clear away distrust and doubt on both sides. Meanwhile, experimental projects within public journalism will go on. The results of those individual projects will show in time the good and bad points of those experiments. Public journalism will become defined through this process.

In the final analysis, there is another issue to be examined in evaluating the fate of public journalism. It is a fact that most of the news organizations participating in public journalism are small and medium-sized and that none of elite newspapers or major television networks with national influence has taken part. Most of the proponents represent local and regional media, while most of the opponents are associated with mainstream media organizations. And, perhaps not by coincidence, many of the early practitioners of public journalism were newspapers within the Knight-Ridder chain, including the *Wichita Eagle* and the *Charlotte Observer*.

Two assumptions can be made. One is that smaller, regional media organizations have closer contacts with their own communities than larger ones do. They are more sensitive and must be more responsive to the wishes of their communities. The journalists of smaller media organizations are expected to play a more interactive role with readers and viewers. Another assumption is that journalists at smaller media organizations may feel more acutely some of the problems that American journalism faces. Infotainment trends, the downsizing of news staff, and the cutting back of news budgets are some of the problems that have caused public journalism to come onto the scene. Big time media organizations are strong enough to cope with the pressure of this professional malaise, and their editors and reporters have not yet been forced to come to terms with the hard times that their counterparts at smaller organizations are already experiencing.

If these assumptions are valid, the battle over public journalism will not remain limited to being a matter of philosophy or the practice of reporting news. It will also involve the financial health of the media business as a whole. With the emergence of a variety of electronic media, traditional media businesses are being required to fundamentally review their future strategies. Public journalism could be interpreted as an indirect result of the struggle for survival of smaller organizations.

The fact that some critics of public journalism call it a 'management gimmick' shows that it could be used as a ploy to cut costs and expand profits.

So far the financial implications of public journalism have not been a focus of the debate surrounding the idea. Some of the approaches of public journalism, polls or town-hall meetings for example, cost money. While many of the major projects have been supported, at least in part, by outside funds, this support will not last indefinitely. It may be questioned whether the management of media organizations practicing public journalism would continue to support the trend even if outside funds cease to be available, and even if public journalism cost more money. If they are willing to do so in order to improve the quality of American journalism, public journalism will have a better chance to survive.

## VIII PROSPECT

Public journalism is intended to cure the malaise of current journalism. But it has not proved to be decisively effective in experimental application in the past few years, and in the future it may even prove to have negative side-effects. The consensus among journalists is that something has to be done about the malaise. They cannot let it get worse. The appearance of public journalism has caused considerable controversy among journalists as well as academics, and has had the effect of encouraging journalists in particular to tackle the malaise seriously, which is unquestionably a significant contribution by public journalism to American journalism.

Marvin Kalb, director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, recently said in an interview that public journalism "peaked in 1996 and is now on the decline," while admitting "it was at its very best an effort to reconnect journalism perceived to be elitist to the American people." Kalb finds it a serious problem of public journalism that it "obliged the journalist to become a Pied Piper and to lead a parade down the main street."<sup>59</sup>

Meanwhile, Jay Rosen has said that the future of public journalism is "still open." He is optimistic that the public journalism experiment will continue and that those who participated in the experiment "will eventually merge what they have learned into traditional journalism and come up with something better."<sup>60</sup> Rosen seems not to rule out the

possibility that public journalists may find common ground with those who have refused to go along with them so far, and so be able to work together to improve journalistic standards in the future.

It is hard to predict where these controversies will lead and what the outcome will be. But whatever the outcome, the current experiment in public journalism is one of the most significant movements in American journalism in a long time. Its impact will be felt in American journalism in many years to come.

### NOTES

\* denotes materials acquired through internet, thereby page number unspecified.

<sup>1</sup> Basic readings are: Arthur Charity, *Doing Public Journalism* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995); Davis "Buzz" Merritt, *Public Journalism & Public Life: Why Telling the News Is Not Enough* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995); Jay Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right: Public Journalism and the Troubles in the Press* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right*, 49.

<sup>3</sup> Merritt, "Missing the Point," *American Journalism Review*, July/August 1996, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Merritt, *Public Journalism & Public Life*, 113–114.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>7</sup> Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 43–48.

<sup>9</sup> Alicia C. Shepard, "The Gospel of Public Journalism," *American Journalism Review*, September 1994, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Sheppard, "Climbing Down From the Ivory Tower," *American Journalism Review*, May 1995, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Merritt, "Missing the Point," 30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> David S. Broder, "Democracy and the Press," *Washington Post*, 3 January 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Howard Kurtz, *Media Circus: The Trouble with American Newspapers* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 6–7.

<sup>15</sup> Loren Ghiglione, "The Price of Independence," *Presstime*, July/August 1996, 39.

<sup>16</sup> Penn Kimball, *Downsizing the News: Network Cutbacks in the Nation's Capital* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1994), 25–34.

<sup>17</sup> Edward M. Fouhy, "Civic Journalism: Rebuilding the Foundations of Democracy," *Civic Partners*, Spring 1996, <http://www.pewcenter.org/publications/>\*

<sup>18</sup> Alicia C. Shepard, "The Pew Connection," *American Journalism Review*, April 1996, 25–27.

<sup>19</sup> Author's interview with Jan Schaffer, Deputy Director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, 17 September 1997, in Washington.

<sup>20</sup> Shepard, "The Pew Connection," 26.

<sup>21</sup> Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right*, 51.

<sup>22</sup> Carl Sessions Stepp, "Public Journalism: Balancing the Scales," *American*

*Journalism Review*, May 1996, 38.

<sup>23</sup> Howell Raines, "The Fallows Fallacy," *New York Times*, 25 February 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Harwood, "Civic Journalism 101," *Washington Post*, 17 January 1995.

<sup>25</sup> M. L. Stein, "Beware of Public Journalism," *Editor & Publisher*, 6 May 1995, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Merritt, *Public Journalism & Public Life*, 80.

<sup>27</sup> Theodore L. Glasser and Stephanie Craft, "Public Journalism and the Prospects for Press Accountability," *Mixed News: The Public/Civic/Communitarian Journalism Debate*, Ed. Jay Black (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997), 123.

<sup>28</sup> Tony Case, "Public Journalism Denounced," *Editor & Publisher*, 12 November 1994, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Gartner, "Public Journalism—Seeing Through the Gimmicks," *Media Studies Journal*, Winter 1997.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Philip Meyer, "Public Journalism and the Problem of Objectivity," <http://www.ire.org/pubjour.html>\*

<sup>32</sup> Merritt, "Missing the Point," 30.

<sup>33</sup> Clifford G. Christians, "The Common Good and Universal Values," *Mixed News*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> Louis W. Hodges, "Ruminations About the Communitarian Debate," *Mixed News*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> John C. Merrill, "Communitarianism's Rhetorical War Against Enlightenment Liberalism," *Mixed News*, 55.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>38</sup> Ralph D. Barney, "A Dangerous Drift? The Sirens' Call to Collectivism," *Mixed News*, 89.

<sup>39</sup> *Civic Lessons: Report on Four Civic Journalism Projects Funded by The Pew Center for Civic Journalism* (Philadelphia: The Pew Charitable Trusts, 1997), 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>43</sup> Jan Schaffer, "The Best or Worst?" *Quill*, May 1997, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Meyer, "Public Journalism and the Problem of Objectivity."\*

<sup>45</sup> Case, "Public Journalism Denounced," 14.

<sup>46</sup> Stein, "Beware of Public Journalism," 19.

<sup>47</sup> Max Frankel, "Fix-It Journalism," *The New York Times Magazine*, 21 May 1995, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Broder, "Five Ways To Put Some Sanity Back In Elections," *Washington Post*, 14 January 1990.

<sup>49</sup> Merritt, "Missing the Point," 31.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Rem Rieder, "Public Journalism: Stop the Shooting," *American Journalism Review*, December 1995, 6.

<sup>52</sup> James Fallows, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 265.

<sup>53</sup> Merritt, "Missing the Point," 30.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Steele, "The Ethics of Civic Journalism: Independence as the Guide," *Mixed News*, 172.

<sup>55</sup> J. Herbert Altschull, "A Crisis of Confidence: Is Community Journalism the Answer?" *Mixed News*, 143.

<sup>56</sup> Stepp, "Public Journalism," 39.

<sup>57</sup> Gene Roberts, "Corporate Journalism and Community Service," *Media Studies Journal*, Spring/Summer 1996, <http://www.mediastudies.org/mediamergers/roberts.html>\*

<sup>58</sup> Shepard, "The Gospel of Public Journalism," 33.

<sup>59</sup> Author's interview with Marvin Kalb, 15 September 1997, in Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>60</sup> Author's interview with Jay Rosen, 12 September 1997, in New York.