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Beyond the Public Journalism Controversy

Public journalism—the term “civic journalism” is also becoming common—is a movement that has taken hold over the last few years at several newspapers across the country and among some theorists of the trade. Its development has been anything but predictable; as my colleague Peter Levine has written, “diverse ideals and projects” are often advanced in its name. For this reason, trying to figure out what exactly public journalism is, and how it differs from the kind of journalism with which it is contrasted (for lack of a better term, I shall call it traditional journalism), can be frustrating.

It can also be contentious. Sometimes, proponents seem to regard public journalism simply as a synonym for good or in-depth or serious journalism—probing the issues that voters really care about, say, rather than providing horse-race election coverage—leading a bystander to wonder why anyone would oppose it. But those who revile public journalism—and among traditional journalists there seem to be many—naturally describe it in different terms.

Two features of public journalism stand out. One is its proponents’ ready acknowledgment that their values shape what they do. In contrast to the “just the facts, ma’am” stance of the traditional journalist intent on maintaining objectivity, neutrality, and detachment, public journalists believe their values not only do, but ought to, shape their reporting. More specifically, they see themselves not as adopting the iconoclastic stance

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of much contemporary journalism—where the point is not simply to state the facts but to expose them—but as playing a role in creating what Jay Rosen, the leading academic theorist of public journalism, calls “a

Public journalism asserts its reliance on “the people” as a source of decisions about what stories and issues to cover.

healthy public climate.” Journalists, Rosen insists, shouldn’t just report the news; 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 the community how to grapple with—and not only read about—its problems.”

The other noteworthy feature of public journalism is its asserted reliance on “the people”—the readers of a newspaper or the viewing audience—as a source of decisions about what stories and issues to cover. “In a democracy,” writes Arthur Charity, “the public arena ought to be arranged on the public’s own terms. So public journalists have invented ways to let Americans set the terms of the ‘national debate’ themselves.”

Examples of public journalism include the *Charlotte Observer*’s decision to tap its readers for ideas about how to cover the 1992 presidential campaign; the same paper’s “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” project, aimed at identifying the sources of crime in Charlotte and encouraging the community to find solutions; a project in Madison, Wis., to increase public deliberation through town-hall meetings, debates among candidates, and interactive civic exercises; and the efforts of the *Huntington Herald-Dispatch* in West Virginia to galvanize its community to deal with vanishing jobs and a crumbling economy.

However admirable these projects appear to some, many hard-nosed journalists recoil from them. “When journalists begin acting like waiters and taking orders from the public and pollsters, the results are not pretty,” David Remnick wrote recently in the *New Yorker*. Reacting to the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*’s mission statement, which exhorts its journalists to revitalize a sick democracy and to “lead the community to discover itself and act on what it has learned,” Remnick responds: “Excuse me while I run screaming from the room.”

Leonard Downie, executive editor of the *Washington Post*, is slightly more restrained but no less critical: “Too much of what’s called public journalism appears to be what our promotion department does.” The sole responsibility of journalists, he says, is to give people “as much as possible of the information they need to conduct their lives.”

My aim in this essay is to sort out the issues that divide public journalists from their critics—or seem to—and to see how far we can go in resolving the controversy between them.

Public Journalism as “Nice” Journalism

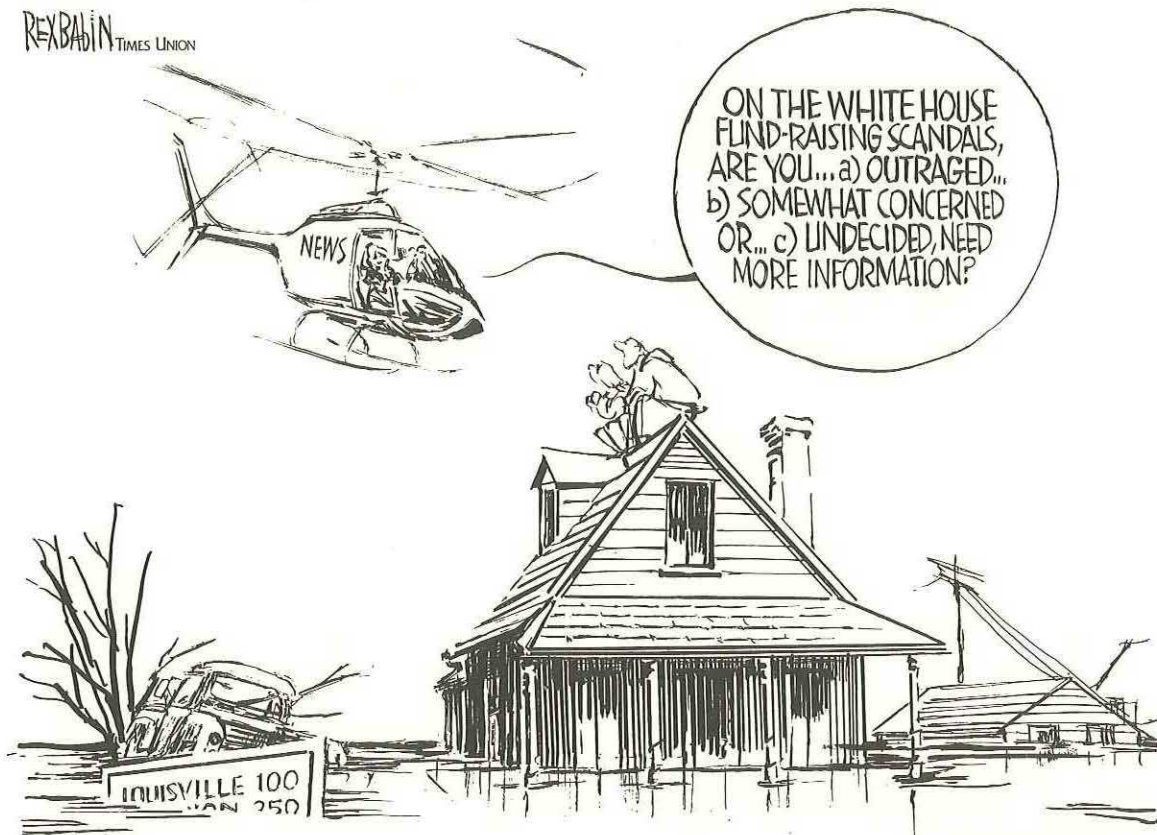
Begin with public journalism’s assertion that journalists should help foster a healthy public climate, that they should participate in the public’s search for solutions to social and political problems. This might seem a rather innocuous claim. Who, after all, could be against a healthy public climate; who could oppose solving our society’s pressing problems? The only question, we might think, is how best to achieve these goals.

Traditional journalists who object to this commitment to health and solutions seem to have two things in mind. One is a fear that journalists will become lapdogs rather than watchdogs—that public journalism is “nice” journalism, exhorting reporters to *accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative*. And nice journalism, it can be inferred, is not good journalism. Without necessarily going so far as to claim that good news is no news, the critics believe that much news is bad news, and that public journalists aim to bury the bad news. (Or that even if they do not *aim* to bury the bad news, that will be the upshot of their rose-colored view.)

The good news/bad news controversy is harder to evaluate than might at first appear. For one thing, it’s not always easy to tell the good news from the bad news. Consider this example. A recent *New York Times* story headlined “New Test Finds 2 in 3 Know Basics of Science” began this way: “In what education officials hailed as progress toward meeting national goals in science, a test of fourth, eighth and 12th graders from across the country showed that 2 in 3 have a basic understanding of the subject.” The same day, the headline on the front page of the *Washington Post* read, “U.S. Students Do Poorly in Science Test.” The lead: “A rigorous new test of what American students know in science has revealed that many of them are not demonstrating even basic competence in the subject in certain grades.”

Is the difference between public journalism and traditional journalism that one sees the glass as half-full, the other as half-empty? How do we decide whether two out of three students demonstrating competence is a lot or a little, something to be celebrated or deplored? We may be able to find no answer better than “Compared to what?” Whether we should be optimistic or pessimistic depends in large part on which way the trend is going. But even that may be difficult to determine.

More often, perhaps, the dispute is not so much about how to spin a particular set of facts but which facts to spin at all. The question is sometimes put in terms of



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reporting on solutions versus reporting on problems. For example, as part of its two-year "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods" project, the *Charlotte Observer* devoted considerable energy and resources to "talking and writing about solutions" to neighborhood crime, according to assistant managing editor Jim Walser. The paper tried to draw "a picture of what had worked in other neighborhoods that had faced similar problems," and it emphasized "local revitalization efforts."

Do traditional journalists mean to say that stories of this kind, that focus on "solutions," aren't newsworthy? It's hard to believe that they do. Solutions are solutions to problems, and without understanding the problems to be solved you could hardly report workable solutions. The *Observer's* project began by analyzing crime statistics for every neighborhood in Charlotte. The paper identified the ten most violent neighborhoods and conducted polls asking residents, among other things, what *they* saw as the problem and what their lives were like. This is not just feel-good journalism.

On the other hand, it would be equally absurd to maintain that stories about "problems" that do not also emphasize solutions are not newsworthy. Again, it's hard to believe that public journalists would disagree. So what's the dispute? Is it simply a matter of emphasis? Isn't there room for both—for many—kinds of stories?

Neutrality versus Engagement

What really worries the critics of public journalism is perhaps something else—something that goes to the heart of the traditional conception of the journalist's role. They fear that the seemingly laudable commitment to contribute to a healthy public climate and to help the public solve its problems pushes journalists over the line from their proper stance of detachment to an improperly engaged posture, and thus hampers their ability to report the news fairly and without bias.

Now, one response to this objection would be explicitly to challenge the traditional journalistic commitment to detachment, to embrace wholeheartedly a conception of the journalist as an advocate, a passionate political animal who seeks to bring about social change. And certainly we can think of journalists—I. F. Stone comes to mind—whose commitment to a cause in no way undermined their fidelity to truth. How that balance between the desire for a particular social goal and the unwavering commitment to truth can be maintained is an interesting and important question, but answering it is not necessary to counter the current charge against public journalism.

The reason is that this objection to public journalism rests on two related confusions. One is a confusion about different levels on which one might or ought to

be value-neutral. It makes sense to say that journalists should not allow their political beliefs to distort their coverage. In attempting to provide the public with useful information, journalists must be careful not to cast those whose beliefs they share in too favorable a light or to give those with whom they disagree short shrift. But from these platitudes it does not follow that a journalist must be value-neutral about whether her society solves its problems or not. Why would someone become a journalist in the first place if she didn't care whether the country survived or thrived? (Well, there might be lots of reasons—excitement, the desire for celebrity, a love of words—but surely public-spiritedness might be among them.)

The second point emerges from the first. It is impossible to make sense of the special privileges allocated to the press in our society—privileges of which journalists constantly remind us, trotting out the First Amendment at every opportunity—except on the assumption that the press is supposed to serve some important public good. Why is the press exempt from restraints and restrictions that fall on others? Because we believe that the information journalists provide contributes to the search for truth, to democratic citizenship, and to the solution of social problems. If journalism doesn't serve these goals, then it is nothing more than a business (some would agree immediately) and deserves no special protections. Press freedom rests on foundations that are not value-neutral.

So the criticism that public journalists' commitment to a healthy public life represents a departure from standard and defensible journalistic norms of detachment is misguided. Journalists must remain detached in the sense that their particular political views must not distort what they say. But no one thinks they should be indifferent to the welfare of their community or their society, and their concern about such matters is a legitimate motivation in choosing what issues to cover and in what manner.

Setting the Agenda

Perhaps the thorniest question in the controversy about public journalism concerns decisions about what's news and where these decisions come from. Proponents often suggest that the terms of public discussion, and the standards for what is newsworthy, ought to be set by the public: the people are supposed to let it be known what they are interested in or find important, and journalists are then to follow their lead in deciding what stories and issues to cover.

Critics of public journalism find this approach problematic, and it's easy to see why they might be worried. What sort of commitment to the public's interests do public journalists make? Are they indeed, in

Remnick's phrase, "acting like waiters and taking orders from the public and pollsters"?

A look at what newspapers have actually done in the name of public journalism suggests that the answer is no. Consider, again, the *Charlotte Observer's* series "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods." The impetus for the project, as Walser describes it, came from editors and reporters who felt that the standard police blotter approach to reporting urban violence didn't fully capture the problem or the experience of people in the affected communities. As the series developed, *Observer* staff continually had to make judgments about how to report events at the neighborhood level. Who were the local activists whose stories ought to be told? How could the success of revitalization efforts be judged, and which ones could serve as models for other communities? At many levels, essential decisions had to be made by the journalists themselves, not at the behest of pollsters.

More worrisome, to many critics, is the approach the Charlotte paper took in covering the 1996 Senate race between Jesse Helms and Harvey Gantt. The *Observer* convened citizen panels that identified issues they wanted to see the candidates address, with the understanding that reporters would emphasize those issues

*Press freedom rests on foundations
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in their stories. (Reporters were free, however, to cover other issues as well.) The paper didn't merely send pollsters door to door, tabulate the surveys, and then allow people's unreflective judgments to guide its coverage—although you might get that idea from listening to some of public journalism's critics. Instead, it offered citizens an opportunity, through a process of deliberation, to develop their views about what issues were important.

Contrary to Remnick's view, then, these public journalists didn't simply take orders from the public. They responded to beliefs that had been submitted to deliberation and dialogue—procedures meant to transform mere public opinion into the informed and reflective judgments of citizens.

But some critics take public journalism to task for reasons just the opposite of Remnick's. According to Michael Kelly, the citizen panels convened by the *Observer* identified eight important issues, but the *Observer* decided to concentrate on only four. Moreover, Kelly notes that although the panels ranked Taxes and Spending equal in importance with Families and Values, the *Observer* chose to ignore the latter,

which was clearly a more contentious, divisive issue. (The “nice” journalism issue rears its head again.) Kelly argues on this basis that the paper’s stated commitment to having citizens set the agenda was not entirely sincere—and that under cover of the citizen panels, the paper actually imposed its own agenda, limiting its coverage to those issues that *it* felt were most important and had less potential for turning ugly.

The Existential Journalist

It now becomes clearer why the controversy about public journalism is hard to grasp: although traditional journalists protest public journalism’s deference to the public as a source of decisions about what to cover, they may also object upon learning that public journalism isn’t as deferential as it appears. The first objection is that when journalists allow the public to set the news agenda, they cede their independence and an essential part of their role, becoming followers where they should be leaders and allowing others to usurp their autonomy. The second objection is that, in practice, public journalists take *too active* a role: what they should do—what journalists have traditionally done—is let others set the news agenda and not assume this task for themselves. To do otherwise is to abandon the journalist’s tradition of detachment and objectivity.

These contradictory objections reflect an unresolved tension in traditional journalists’ understanding of how they should go about their business. Journalists want to be independent of external pressures, whether from elites or from the public at large—but not so independent that they can be accused of setting the political agenda. They want to be responsive to external events, but not so responsive as to be manipulated—whether by politicians and spin doctors or by the unwashed public with its vulgar demands. And so public journalists get it from both sides: accused by some of arrogance and agenda-setting, by others of subservience and passivity.

For many journalists, it is almost an article of faith that their job is simply to “report the facts.” But this supposition is naive. The problem is not that there are no facts (no postmodernist am I) but that there are way too many. Leonard Downie’s assertion, cited earlier, that all journalists should do is give people “as much as possible of the information they need to conduct their lives” is only slightly more viable. By speaking of what is *needed* to conduct one’s life, Downie implicitly acknowledges that choices must be made to determine what, of the vast quantities of information out there, is “needed.”

When traditional journalists rely on stock phrases to describe the act of deciding what to cover, they fail to address the fundamental, it is tempting to say existential, significance of that act. The question of selection—

which facts and which stories, out of the vast if not infinite number available, a newspaper or news program should report—is the single most important question confronting journalists and news organizations, and constitutes the true heart of the problem of objectivity. News organizations have managed to convey to their audiences the illusion of inevitability, from Walter Cronkite’s famous sign-off, “And that’s the way it is, Tuesday, January 13 . . .,” to that authoritative look about the front page of the daily paper.

Now, the public journalist might assert that this is precisely his point—that the news could be, and should be, different than it is, that there should be less coverage of certain sorts of events and issues and more coverage of other sorts of events and issues. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of public journalism—like that of traditional journalism—oversimplifies the process by which news *becomes* news.

It is not enough to say, as Arthur Charity does, that “the public arena ought to be arranged on the public’s own terms.” For even public journalists, as we have seen, must *decide* what’s news; they can never pass this

The rhetoric of public journalism—like that of traditional journalism—oversimplifies the process by which news becomes news.

responsibility along to anyone else, whether the public or the politicians. Journalists cannot abdicate autonomy of judgment; in this, their predicament parallels the one in which we all find ourselves. That someone (no matter who) says something is never sufficient reason for believing it; that someone (no matter who) commands something is never sufficient reason for doing it. Always required is the individual judgment on the part of the listener or the commanded that this person ought to be believed or obeyed. For the journalist, the judgment takes the form: this is worth reporting.

There is a danger that journalists will take this view in the wrong way. It is not a license to do just as you please. It does not render reporters immune to criticism, on the grounds that “it’s up to us to decide,” or that “we journalists are the experts here; we know better than anyone else.” The autonomy principle does not mean there are no criteria for good journalism. And public journalists have rendered a valuable service in reminding us what some of these criteria are: that the well-being of people and communities is an essential component of good journalism, and that ordinary people are often especially well-placed to play a role in defining the issues that need coverage.

But two caveats are in order. First, ordinary people are not the sole authorities in these matters—not the

sole authorities in answering questions, and not the sole authorities in framing the questions to be answered. Second, defenders of public journalism beg important questions in speaking of the people or the public or the community, as if these were well-defined and uncontested concepts. The question is always which people or which community, out of all those that come within the news organization's ambit, shall have their voices heard or their concerns addressed.

Civic Connections

Public journalism has emerged alongside a revival of interest in civil society and civic participation. There are at least three connections. First, by improving the quality of news coverage—for example, by replacing coverage of political strategy with analysis of substantive issues—public journalism hopes to change the nature of public discussion of politics. At the same time, it seeks to give the public an enhanced role as an actor in the public sphere rather than just a spectator of debates among elites. In so doing, public journalism reinterprets the cliché about a free press giving citizens in a democratic society the information they need to make decisions. The press, public journalists say, can also give citizens *opportunities* to make decisions (by organizing or acting as catalyst to public meetings and discussions) and new ways to *conceive* the choices before them.

Finally, public journalism rejects the model of the journalist as outsider, the neutral observer who tells us how things are but plays no further role in public life. I have been questioning the coherence of this model, arguing that it makes no sense to think of the role of informant as being as passive as the model suggests. We might then see public journalism as making a virtue of necessity, or rendering explicit what has been implicit: reporters do shape public discourse and guide public life, and therefore they might as well do these things self-consciously. The journalist is also a citizen—perhaps a citizen first and then a journalist; at the very least a citizen and a journalist at the same time.

In thinking about these connections, we may find ourselves wondering how exactly public journalism differs from more traditional approaches. Don't these ideas sound familiar? Haven't we heard them a million times in connection with the justification of the First Amendment and the role of the press in a democratic society? Haven't theorists of the media been talking for

years about the agenda-setting function of the press? I've met reporters who are angered by what they take to be the meaning of public journalism but who (in the spirit of Molière's *bourgeois gentilhomme*) seem to have been public journalists all their working lives—covering underreported communities and telling stories from the point of view of those communities' members.

We may suspect that much of the disagreement between public journalists and their critics is terminological. Such tiresome disputes persist when people speak in vague generalities. Although they may sometimes disagree when they get down to cases, my guess is that, more often than not, journalists will reach consensus about what constitutes *good* journalism. Or at least they should.

—Judith Lichtenberg

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