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Beyond Telling the News:
The Mission of Public Journalism, 1996

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

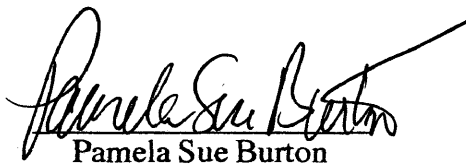
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1996

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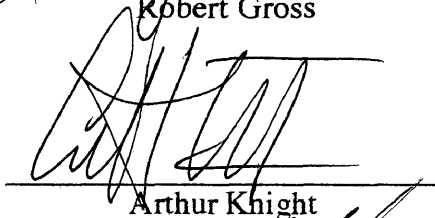
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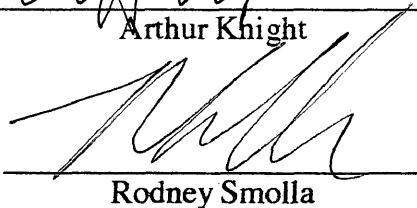
Master of Arts


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ABSTRACT

This work studies “public,” “civic” or “community” journalism, a movement answering to all three names that has taken an even greater number of shapes in newspapers across the country in the 1990s. In practice, public journalism seeks to recast the professional ideal of the reporter and the role of the press in American democracy. In theory, it represents an ideological shift in the understanding of public life and political participation. Public journalists allege that their approach will help provide a common language of civic involvement capable of revitalizing a political system that is woefully disconnected from the public it is supposed to serve. This study tries to evaluate the assumptions behind that promise, as well as the odds that it will be fulfilled.

Public journalism assumes a link between a strong press and a healthy democracy that has long been a cornerstone of this nation’s political culture. It finds a correlation between today’s apathetic and disgusted voters and the collapse of newspapers across the country, arguing that a journalism that treats readers as citizens, rather than consumers, can cure those ills. Public journalism further claims that the search for common ground on public issues is the true work of the press in any democratic community, and that reporting should be done with the purpose of advancing debate, not just passing along information.

History shows that many planks in the public journalism platform are not new. The failure of public journalists to interpret press history in the mapping of their project has thus far undermined their ability to effect change in their profession and in their communities. Figuring largely in the scope of this study, along with those historical misreadings, are a number of political, social and economic forces that have shaped the public journalists’ identity, possibly without their knowledge and certainly without their attribution. Consequently, their approach provides few new tools for self-government. At its best, public journalism spurs its public to a new interest in voicing their political beliefs; at its worst, it mixes a public service message with a brand of sensationalism that promotes only the newspaper involved, not democracy. This study examines how public journalism goes about its work, and how it might do more.

BEYOND TELLING THE NEWS:
THE MISSION OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM, 1996

INTRODUCTION

In March 1885, New York newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer's *World* started a fund-raising drive, asking readers to contribute their pennies for the construction of the pedestal beneath the Statue of Liberty.

By August, the *World* had collected \$100,000, almost all of it in small contributions. This enabled the *World* to picture itself as the champion of working people, to criticize the "luxurious classes," and to promote simultaneously the city of New York, the mass of ordinary citizens, and, of course, the *New York World*.¹

Such fun factoids abound from the days of nineteenth-century "action journalism"; this one carries a certain symbolic weight. The public partners the press in support (literally, in this case) of liberty — the triad inscribed in the Constitution, protected by the First Amendment and maintained by the journalists who continue to insist that news production is somehow set apart from the work done by other private, for-profit industries.

In the early 1990s a group of journalists and media scholars began to get publicity through their call for an "action," or at least more activist, journalism — one which they hoped would better support democracy, serve citizens and in the bargain, breathe some life back into the failing newspaper industry. These "public journalists" blamed the print media for perpetuating a style of news reporting with many failings, above all its tendency to treat readers as either passive recipients of public policy or as consumers to be entertained. This

¹ Michael Schudson, Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978) pp. 105-106.

old approach, public journalism advocates warned, was helping to sap the strength from public life. Their new method — treating readers as citizens both capable of and interested in making rational choices about issues that affect their lives — could turn back the growing tide of political apathy, open the doors within communities of strangers and make newspapers important to the public once again.

The undertaking sounded honorable enough. However, some early critics of this ostensibly reasonable project warned that public journalism was a throwback to the days of Pulitzer and Hearst, when editors put their resources into any crusade in the name of the public good in order to appeal to more readers and boost circulation. My initial interest in public journalism focused on discovering the possible parallels between the often sensational, self-promoting boosterism of Hearst and Pulitzer and the calmer but decidedly activist reporting done these days by “public life” reporters. Once discovered, I wanted to figure out *why* such a style of news gathering had seemingly come full circle in the course of a hundred years, give or take a few decades. Critiquing public journalism projects and reading nineteenth-century journalism history became something of a hobby for me.

But like many hobbies, this one had a serious side. Public journalism should not be solely the concern of practicing journalists and armchair historians like myself. Everyone who reads newspapers or watches television news as part of their daily routines should know about it, because its acceptance as newsroom practice will define what is read and watched in ways we may not even notice if we haven’t paid attention to guiding principles of this fast-growing movement.

The first chapter of this work sets out the major principles of public journalism as argued by two of its biggest advocates, editor Davis Merritt and scholar Jay Rosen, both of whom have put considerable time and thought into critiquing journalism’s ills and establishing their corrective. By moving beyond telling the news to helping create a more productive relationship between government, the citizenry and the press, Rosen and Merritt

claim journalists take up their true work within a democracy — a role they once had but have lost through their own negligence. While Merritt argues public journalism adds fresh perspectives to reporting, Rosen subtracts objectivity from the roster of guiding newsroom principles on the grounds that connecting values and facts is more useful than separating them.

However, there are a few issues public journalism advocates address incompletely or not at all. When, for instance, has the newspaper business and the art of journalism ever been a question of simply telling the news? When forging a way of making public life productive again, we must ask, productive for whom? And why “again”? Has American civic involvement ever matched the ideal public journalism has of it? The answers to these initial questions form the basis of my conviction that more stumbling blocks than just a misplaced belief in objectivity keep today’s journalists from providing a common language of political involvement.

Chapter II examines the social and political conditions that encourage public participation in politics, especially in light of public journalism’s claim that American public life is currently in crisis. Drawing on the work of Harvard scholar Robert Putnam, public journalists point to a decline in “civic capital,” the social and political glue that holds communities together, once embodied by political parties, religious organizations, civic groups, even football clubs. While warning of the impending crisis that the decline in civic associations threatens for both public life and newspaper readership, public journalists simultaneously find cause for hope in a purported grass roots upswelling of independent civic action across the nation. However, there may be more to the story than the bad news of crisis and the good news of recovery.

Rather than reporting on the reasons why the nation appears to be running such a civic capital deficit, public journalism picks the areas it deems to be languishing for its lack and tries to enlist readers’ interest and aid. In focus groups, public forums and polls, public

journalists find the tools they feel are necessary to create the common public language needed to solve the social problems they target. But such tools are less than ideal for exposing the new economic and political landscapes across which media pursuits and public life are now played out — and often most suited only for advertising the public-spiritedness of the newspaper. Unfortunately for public journalism's mission, the corporate values that media chain ownership has incorporated into newsroom culture are not necessarily democratic values, and politicians may be even less interested than big business in voluntarily placing themselves on an even footing with journalists and citizens.

Public journalism offers many perceptive criticisms of those aspects of newsroom practice most associated with the market-minded MBAs who came to dominate newspaper management in the 1980s. For example, the movement has helped alter the reader focus group from a means of targeting and attracting certain upscale consumers to a conversation with readers about their relationships with the paper and public issues. That is no mean accomplishment. In Chapter III, I suggest a few other things public journalists might try to foster a more accessible political world for readers. Simply put, public journalism errs in insisting it can strengthen that world by sending readers to some journalist-inscribed, solutions-oriented public sphere, rather than seeking them out in the venues that allow autonomous political expression. The latter space will likely be unorganized, unmoderated and perhaps a bit overwhelming, and the trip to get there may be hard. But the report that comes back will have the ring of authenticity when it presumes to speak of what Americans are thinking right now.

I. Building the Perfect Public

As a movement still tagged with different names six years after its first published efforts, “public” or “civic” or “community” journalism continues both to excite and to unsettle onlookers as it influences news gathering in newspaper, radio and television newsrooms across America. It’s been likened to a new gospel thumped by evangelists, a philosophy with its own sacred texts, and a cult with a growing number of born-again adherents. Some of them even have been crucified — in print — by such journalistic lights as *Washington Post* editor Leonard Downie and *The New York Times*’ Max Frankel. Still in the minority, yet making converts at newspapers everywhere, public journalism’s fellow-travelers go on the record in response to the *Columbia Journalism Review*’s demand: “Are You Now, or Will You Ever Be, a Civic Journalist?”²

Since 1990, these journalists have made a case, or cases, in defense of their belief in the need for a different kind of journalism. The sponsoring foundations may differ on particulars, but all likely would subscribe to the claim that “journalism can and should play a part in strengthening citizenship, improving public debate and reviving public life.”³ The growing number of experimental projects — over 400 by the spring of 1996 — has focused the at times sharp debate over public journalism’s worth as a theory. But describing the theory in practice, as it leaves the arena of special projects and seeks translation into daily newsroom routine, is proving even harder for its handful of founders.

² Mike Hoyt, “Are You Now, or Will You Ever Be, a Civic Journalist? As the theory moves into practice in more and more newsrooms, the debate gets sharper,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October 1995, pp. 27-33.

³ Jay Rosen, “Making Things More Public: On the Political Responsibility of the Media Intellectual,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 11 (1994), p. 373.

Somewhat coyly, they say it's not up to them to dictate how public journalism gets story-boarded across America as the nation prepares to elect a president in 1996. But elections remain a key concern to these journalists bearing whatever adjectival prefix, because politics is a big part of their fundamental claim that America's public life in the 1990s does not fulfill the promise of democracy — and journalists, they say, are to blame.

Who's who in the world of public journalism? The cast of editors and reporters grows daily, and the founders remain active: Davis "Buzz" Merritt, editor of the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain's *The Wichita Eagle* in Kansas and author of Public Journalism and Public Life: Why Telling the News is Not Enough; Jay Rosen, Professor of Journalism at New York University and director of the Project on Public Life and the Press, which provides advice to neophytes and keeps tabs on projects under way; and Edward M. Fouhy, a 20-year veteran of television and the executive director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, which funds print-broadcast partnerships in public journalism.⁴

The 1988 presidential campaign is described by many as the match that struck the flame beneath the public journalism philosophy. Disgusted by empty campaign coverage and saddened by the lowest voter turnout in 64 years, Merritt began experimenting with issues-based political reporting in the 1990 Kansas gubernatorial race. Merritt later met Rosen, who shared his concerns about the contemporary practice of journalism, writing about some of them in 1991 and 1992. The Center Fouhy heads formed in September 1993. The work of all three depends upon foundation funding, primarily from Knight-Ridder Inc. (Merritt); the Kettering Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (Rosen); and the Pew Charitable Trusts (Fouhy). The Knight Foundation gave the Project for Public Life and the Press \$513,000 in 1993 and another half-million dollars

⁴ Public journalism's inroads in television and radio reportage are somewhat outside the scope of my investigation here; the Pew Center's output is not considered in what follows.

in 1995; Pew provided a \$4 million, three-year grant to foot its Center's bills in 1993. The Poynter Institute for Media Studies has at times partnered Pew Center initiatives.

Their funding has begun to pay off, if professional prizes are considered a sort of profit. Knight-Ridder's *Akron [OH] Beacon Journal* garnered the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for public service for its five-part project "A Question of Race," which, on the heels of the Rodney King trial, sought to report community dialogue on race relations in roughly four areas: housing, economic opportunity, education and crime. The series consistently played on the paper's front page, garnering almost triple the A1 space given to stories from Waco the day after federal agents raided the Branch Davidian compound for the first time.⁵

A summary of the Akron initiative testifies to the methodologies employed in many public journalism efforts, though its scope was considerably wider than the average:

Reporting centered around [sic] discussions in focus groups among blacks and whites, convened by the newspaper, conducted by independent research contractors, and observed by reporters. The groups were questioned about the paper's analyses of quantitative data that showed continuing disparities between blacks and whites. During the series, the newspaper invited area organizations to volunteer to establish projects addressing race relations; publisher John Dotson then hired two facilitators to direct planning efforts among the groups. With the last part of the series, the paper invited readers to return a coupon on which they pledged to fight racism in 1994. The names of 22,000 respondents, about half of whom came from area schools, were published in a special supplement. Planning forums among organizational volunteers began in November 1993. By mid-1994, an estimated 10,000 area residents were involved in some kind of effort to work on race relations in the area.⁶

⁵ Lisa Austin, "Public Life and the Press: A Project Report," Akron initiative summary, Project on Public Life and the Press, Fall 1994.

⁶ Austin, "Project Report," Akron initiative summary.

Polls, coupons, and focus groups led by hired facilitators may seem to swim against the mainstream of newspaper reporting but similar initiatives have happened, are happening and are planned for the future. In 1994 the *Boston Globe*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Wichita Eagle* and *Seattle Times* teamed up with their National Public Radio affiliates on 1994 election coverage in a pilot project to develop a reporting model for the 1996 presidential race. The papers and stations collaborated on issues polling and reporting and the creation of forums, hotlines and citizen panels. Training in the new methods was coordinated for broadcast and print journalists participating in the projects, who attended Kettering Foundation and NPR-sponsored forums designed to give them a sense of how people grapple with issues to reach consensus.

The initiative, an NPR memo of October 1993 stated, was “to develop approaches to political coverage that will reconnect voters and candidates on the one hand and citizens and the media on the other ... ,” stressing “comprehensive issues reporting, voter views and reactions, reporting on the role of the media and ‘citizen commentators,’ while de-emphasizing reporting on horse-race aspects such as polls, negative campaigning and events orchestrated by candidates.”⁷ Voters in 1996 have seen and heard similar coverage, and can expect more of it as November nears.

As a movement that has, in Rosen’s estimation, only recently completed “the demonstration stage (roughly 1990-94),”⁸ public journalism has gained considerable momentum. The term “public journalist” was used by the founders of Columbia University’s graduate school in 1881, who held to the ideal that all graduate work was essentially political training, designed to lead to a career in civil service.⁹ The public journalist of the 1990s serves the public by framing stories within professional parameters defining his or her work as a political science, a civic duty and an art. According to Rosen,

⁷ Austin, “Project Report,” NPR Election Project.

⁸ Rosen, “Making Things More Public,” p. 378.

⁹ Rosen, “Making Things More Public,” p. 366.

What our philosophy says, so far, is that framing [news reports] 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 conversation, participation, deliberative dialogue, public problem-solving; the values of inclusion, individual responsibility, cooperative and complimentary [sic] 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 the things public journalism “advocates” and it doesn’t apologize for that stance.¹⁰

Rosen’s vision of reporters and editors as “artists” of democracy identifies the value of their work with its ability to facilitate the conduct of democracy. Certain long-held values continue to thwart Rosen’s would-be “artists,” including the tendency to see democracy as “what we have,” but he asserts that “if they can find a way of seeing democracy as something we do, or better yet, as something we must create, re-invent, re-imagine, then they’ll be on their way to a new approach. I call it ‘public journalism’ ...”¹¹

At the *Virginian-Pilot*, a Landmark Communications-owned newspaper in Norfolk, Va., that Rosen calls “a bright spot on the map of public journalism,”¹² the Public Life team of reporters and editors drafted this mission statement for their work:

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

¹⁰ Jay Rosen, “Public Journalism as a Democratic Art,” Project on Public Life and the Press fall seminar, American Press Institute, Reston, Va., Nov. 11, 1994.

¹¹ Jay Rosen, “Beyond Objectivity,” *Nieman Reports*, Winter 1993, p. 53.

¹² Jay Rosen, in his introduction of *Virginian-Pilot* editors at a meeting on public journalism hosted by the American Press Institute in Reston, Va., Aug. 14, 1995.

well. We will portray democracy in the fullest sense of the word, whether in a council chamber or a 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.¹³

Where Rosen sees an artist creating democracy and the *Pilot* team sees a doctor nursing it back to health, Davis Merritt — something of an authority on newsroom culture after 40 years editing papers and Washington-bureau news for what is now Knight-Ridder — sees a referee. Merritt argues that the First Amendment has given the press a uniquely free and independent role in the interplay between a democratic government and the citizens it purportedly represents. But its independence comes at a price: Journalists must be responsible for reporting the news in ways that illustrate the importance of a public perspective to often introverted readers if journalism is to fulfill its end of the constitutional bargain. Merritt's referee model stands for the ideal of a journalism both independent and involved, and is worth examining at length:

It is important to remember that the referee doesn't make the rules. Those are agreed on by the contestants — in this case, the democratic public. ... What journalists should bring to the arena of public life is knowledge of the rules — how the public has decided a democracy should work — and the ability and willingness to provide relevant information and a place for that information to be discussed and turned into democratic consent. Like the referee, to maintain our authority — the right to be heard — we must exhibit no partisan interest in the specific outcome other than that it is arrived at under the democratic process. For both journalists and the public, that is the ultimate interest.

Of course sports contests can, and do, go on without referees, and in those games, someone wins and someone loses: There is

¹³ Rosen, "Public Journalism as a Democratic Art," p. 7.

an outcome. However, the outcome is almost always determined on the basis of who is the loudest or strongest, who is most willing to hedge on the rules, who is willing to contest — without resolution — for the longest time, or who owns the ball. The same is true of public life. It can, and does, go on without journalists playing their appropriate role, but outcomes, if they occur, are decided on the same risky basis as the playground pick-up game.¹⁴

Within his sports analogy Merritt has outlined three elements he deems essential to journalism's "appropriate role" in public decision-making: Shared, relevant information; a place or method for deliberation on how that information applies to public affairs; and shared values on which to base decisions about the information.¹⁵ The "rules" of this game are set by shared values in a community, that is, the common ground that the individual can stand on firmly with others while agreeing that serious outstanding differences exist, but need not shut down the debate — or the government. Stated simply, the cultivation of these three elements — the information, the "agora," and the values — by newspapers helps journalists help citizens become a public. Merritt argues that helping the nation act as one community is the purpose the Constitution originally set for the press, but one that has slipped the minds and disappeared from the daily lives of lawmakers, citizens and journalists alike.

Journalists wary of blurring the lines between themselves and the people they report on (and familiar, no doubt, with the occasional bad calls of referees) find the values element of Merritt's troika troubling. Merritt makes participating in the democracy "game" without being partisan sound easy. But critics question: How is the journalist/referee to participate in a game in which he or she has a stake without taking sides, while enforcing

¹⁴ Davis Merritt, Public Journalism and Public Life: Why Telling the News is Not Enough (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1995), pp. 94-95.

¹⁵ Merritt, Public Journalism and Public Life, p. 7.

rules based on constantly shifting definitions of good and bad? And what right does the journalist have to wield authority within the process in the first place?

A discussion of some specific charges of boosterism and self-promotion on the part of public journalists will follow. First, the united front Merritt and Rosen have taken to deflect such charges deserves due attention because their defense hinges on the major flaws they find in journalism's status quo, and on their corrective. In their view, journalists and media critics are unwilling to consider the role of public values in what they do because their acculturated professional reflex is to separate *values* from *facts*, then throw away the values. This emphasis on separation, called "value-blindness" by Merritt¹⁶ and "trained incapacity" by Rosen,¹⁷ advances from a necessary skepticism toward government claims but is doomed to failure because it misunderstands the symbiotic relationship among government, the press and the public that is basic to a healthy democracy.

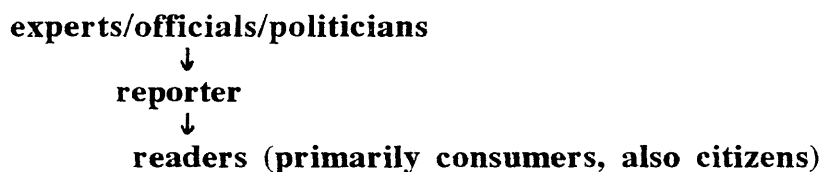
The *Pilot*'s mission statement alludes to one part of this symbiotic relationship: "We do this knowing that a lively, informed, and most of all, engaged public is essential to a healthy community and to the health of these newspapers." Value-blind reporters, trained to get "just the facts," do injury to readers looking for the debate they need to be citizens by presenting issues in a way that distances them from readers' everyday lives, Merritt and the *Pilot* staff argue. The unfortunate citizen withdraws simultaneously from public issues and from the press — hurting more in the process than just the circulation figures of the newspaper. Worse still, in Merritt's view, is an approach taken by journalists that absolutely poisons democratic debate: the shorthand method of juxtaposing extremist citizen A's views next to extremist citizen Z's views and allowing them to stand for the full range of public opinion. The "balanced" result leaves citizens who may have turned to the newspaper for answers hating politicians and journalists and quite happily severing their ties to both.

¹⁶ Merritt, *Public Journalism and Public Life*, p. 115.

¹⁷ Merritt, *Public Journalism and Public Life*, p. 38.

The cultivation of the novel possibility that newspaper readers are intelligent and interested in rational decision-making and discussion is one of the foundations of public journalism, in the hope that approaching them that way will tend to create more such readers in reality. The public journalist's decision to adopt this stance is intended to include himself as a member of the public; his effort to move beyond the "mere" observation and telling of the news allows him "to act as a conscientious citizen would act."¹⁸ The reporter's professional practice — indeed, his conception of himself as a professional — comes to rely on the strength of the parallels between his concerns and those of the average citizen-reader, rather than on his inside track with expert sources.

Public journalism attempts to change the construction of news dissemination from this:



to this: **experts/officials/politicians <—> reporter <—> citizen-readers**

Privileging citizens as the sources who set the press agenda, so the philosophy goes, undercuts the authority of politicians, their handlers, marketing and managing spin doctors, and "experts" of every stripe.

This allegedly new model of telling the news is intended to supersede an older one, which took "government as the actor to which we need to be attentive, people as the acted on, who we might occasionally ask to comment but who otherwise have no role. This is democracy writ backwards."¹⁹ The First-Amendment mandate, that rightly keeps government from interfering with the press's ability to ask it tough questions, has been

¹⁸ Davis Merritt, "Public Journalism: What it Means, How it Works," in *Public Journalism: Theory and Practice*, Kettering Foundation occasional paper, p. 19.

¹⁹ Merritt, Public Journalism and Public Life, p. 73.

turned into a wall with the press and government on one side and citizens out of sight on the other. Journalists and government representatives together hold the authority to decide what information is important for the public to know. Both Merritt and Rosen claim this growing disconnection between journalists and the public is part of Watergate's legacy, as is another, equally harmful break between policy makers and journalists.

The bringing down of a president who broke the rules and ignored the values of the citizenry he was elected to serve reaffirmed the mission of the press in a democracy, but both Merritt and Rosen choose to emphasize a drawback: "The natural and useful arm's-length symbiotic relationship between journalism and government had dissolved into all-out war."²⁰ After Watergate, the watchdog turned into an attack dog, operating with the single-minded assumption that each government official must be guilty until proven innocent. The adversarial value of the press hardened into a newsroom ideology, a way of being that sanctioned any attack on a politician and any sort of tough question as valuable — even the questions that had little to do with public concerns. Here, the press erected a second wall, this time as a barrier to any sort of productive relationship with the government.

In the post-Watergate era, Rosen worries about the formation of a professional code that journalism educators let pass with little criticism:

If anything the graduates of journalism schools are the most stuck in the waiting-for-Watergate mode. They want to challenge presidents, not their peers. Let me be careful in what I'm saying here: What I am calling intellectual weaknesses are not the property of individual journalists. They are built into the structure or codes of the profession — especially the ethical codes.²¹

²⁰ Merritt, *Public Journalism and Public Life*, p. 57.

²¹ Rosen, "Getting the Connections Right: What Public Journalism Might Be," Project on Public Life and the Press presentation, American Press Institute, Reston, Va., June 13, 1994.

The reporting ideal that Woodward's and Bernstein's work represents can serve as a model — but one which, when self-indulgently imitated, turns the symbiotic relationship between press and politicians into cannibalism rather than constructive government. And the public has no reason to value cannibalism, except as sensational spectacle. Democracy as public spectacle is what the attack model of journalism has degenerated into in the '90s, according to public journalists — the spectacle of journalists-as-cops inventing conflict rather than enabling discussion.

From Merritt's standpoint, revitalizing our ability to understand what is missing from our own debate

requires places for true deliberation to occur and an information flow designed to move the discussion along. It means framing issues more broadly than as an either / or situation; taking the risk, if there is a risk, but certainly the burden of moving beyond the politicians' polarized formulations. ... One could simply call it good reporting, but of a different kind: reporting with the purpose of advancing debate as opposed to merely passing along information.²²

Public journalism's "good reporting with a difference" claims a middle course between merely providing information and turning the agora into an arena for journalistic bloodsport.

Its focus on advancing debate acknowledges that the practice of journalism has never been as simple as putting information into print and out on the street. Sharing historian Michael Schudson's view of newspapers as social institutions run by reporters and editors subject to the same social forces as the wider culture, public journalists frame their work along the lines of the *ritual* model devised by communications theorist James Carey. As Merritt's description implies, the *transmission* model — newspaper "senders" passing on information and ideas to reader "receivers" — is tidy, but the ritual model — newspapers

²² Merritt, Public Journalism and Public Life, p. 74.

creating community by re-circulating ideas its readers already have back to them²³ — acknowledges the newspaper's role as intermediary in a process that lets readers tell themselves what they and their community are all about. When confronted with charges of softness implicit in coverage framed by reader priorities, National Public Radio Director John Dinges asserts "It's not talk radio. ... You definitely have to explore the inconsistencies, talk about the factual underpinnings, whether these are accurate or not. *This is journalism; you don't just transmit things.*"²⁴

Public journalism's pursuit of a kind of news that "constitutes a community rather than transports a message"²⁵ is not new, although the contours of the community it aims to create may be novel. The press, through its subtle, ritualized ability to tell us who we are, is at heart the same cultural invention as any document that tries to represent an entire people. Even our embrace of the Constitution as the ultimate authority legitimating the work of the press in the name of the people is suspect if we view the Constitution, as Michael Warner has, as itself a form of coercion by which "a way of representing the people constructs the people."²⁶ The Constitution written by the American people, who had themselves not existed as "The People" until constituted thus by the document, was actually authored by a very elite and finite group of men. As a similarly evolving mechanism running in the same self-legitimizing orbit, the newspaper may employ the republican ideal of public service while simultaneously bringing into existence the public it claims to serve. The stories framed as news — what the people are talking about — thus reflect not just the public's needs, but also the kind of public the press has constituted to receive its service: consumers, or voters, or newly energized citizens.

²³ James Carey, Communication as Culture (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), in Michael Schudson, "Preparing the Minds of the People: Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper" (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1991) pp. 426-427.

²⁴ Hoyt, "Are You ... a Civic Journalist," p. 30. The italics are mine.

²⁵ Schudson, "Preparing the Minds of the People," p. 426.

²⁶ Michael Warner, The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990) p. xvi.

What possible ideals motivate public journalists to define the public as they have now that they have annointed themselves to address the interest of the citizenry in much the same way the elite framers of our Constitution did? Two examples from press history offer some interesting parallels to the public journalism project.

Beginning in the 1830s, the democratization of print by the penny papers seems propelled by many of the same social values public journalism embraces today: community connectedness, social conscience expressed in a certain crusading or reformist stance, greater representation, citizenship. Unfortunately, these ostensibly democratic values had their own drawbacks, which were noted by nineteenth-century critics and resurface in media debate today. The growing shallowness of the equation of the newspaper's commercial good and the public good inevitably revealed itself. The nineteenth-century shift to an information model that privileged a healthy business climate also meant that part of the press's responsibility became tied to "withholding whatever was thought to lead to further ills (for some, this was news of crime or violence) and that did not elevate people and society."²⁷

The developing commercial press may indeed have offered representation to a greater range of people and information than did the earlier partisan press, but the community reflected in its pages was one that had to appeal to advertisers if the press was to stay in business in a time when fewer families controlled more of the nation's wealth than ever before and the trend toward concentration of business ownership became well-defined. In other words, the community that reporters wrote into being was unitary without being whole. As Dan Schiller has emphasized in his study of one penny paper devoted to crime news,

²⁷ Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) p. 111.

... the young commercial press suggested and cultivated a new social role through its declaration of protection of the public good. Independence, virtue, impartial defense of life, liberty, and property: support of these core values facilitated the transformation of the infamous self-interest of the elite press into an interest that seemed to embrace the whole people. The penny papers' defense of this ostensibly unitary and universal interest in turn enabled them to wrap themselves in the mantle of public rationality.²⁸

Public journalism picks up that mantle in the 1990s and continues the tradition, placing its mirror of the people at an angle to reflect their "citizenship" features to best advantage.

With the economic incentive offered by advertising came the concomitant imperative to appeal to the widest audience. As diversity proved to pay off, the belief that every individual had worth — at least enough worth to merit coverage in the newspaper — flourished. In its pursuit of individual readers, the press in the nineteenth century came to associate itself with the public good — maintaining, advancing and promoting society's goals, with its editor the interpreter of a community rather than a lone oracle. Not only did it represent the social conscience of the polity, it "became a public good, a collective and visible good, important in part precisely because it did not pass, like rumor, from person to person but, like divine instruction, from a printed text to hundreds of people at once."²⁹

If nineteenth-century newspapers managed to interweave stories about individuals not previously glimpsed in news columns under the banner of the public good, twentieth-century newspapers have marketed their populist rhetoric nationwide. In his analysis of Gannett's News 2000 program — a company-wide regimen intended to reconnect the Gannett chain's 83 daily newspapers with the communities they serve through reader panels, public forums, and coupon forms — former journalist Doug Underwood

²⁸ Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) p.76.

²⁹ Schudson, "Preparing the Minds of the People," p. 435.

argues that News 2000 is merely a way of getting small local papers to follow the reader-driven formula of *USA Today*. Underwood claims that what Al Neuharth, the now-retired chairman of Gannett, left behind was

a company and a newspaper that pretend to speak for the nation, that reflect an amalgam of the chamber-of-commerce values of Gannett's many smalltown journalists with the sophisticated financial and marketing concerns of a corporation that has come to set the pace for newspaper profit making. ... its view of America as one homogenized "we" out there ... epitomize[s] a newspaper world reinventing itself around marketing principles and advances in communications technology.³⁰

Underwood blames Gannett's commercial motives for undermining its newspapers' ability to create community and making its use of "us" and "we" ring false. "We see its underpinnings of marketing ... and we know its vision for the nation is a happy-face reflection of how corporate America would like the country to be."³¹ Though public journalists counter that their vision of community-building is meant as a remedy for Gannett-style commercialism, the tools they are using are the same ones, in many cases, that built the *USA Today* monolith. The *Virginian-Pilot* acknowledges it looked closely at News 2000 principles in its reworking of political coverage,³² while the corporate management theory known as Total Quality Management (TQM) influenced its decision to form a public life "team" of formerly independent reporters.

Perhaps public journalism can't be faulted for attempting its own revision of the common ground in public life — the ritualizing power of past newspapers and the Constitution itself set historical precedent for creating an apparently unified public realm

³⁰ Doug Underwood, *When MBAs Rule the Newsroom: How the Marketers and Managers are Reshaping Today's Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) pp. 98-99.

³¹ Underwood, p. 105.

³² Cole Campbell, "The Public Journalism Journey of The *Virginian-Pilot*," presentation to the Project on Public Life and the Press summer session in Reston, Va., Aug. 12, 1995, pg. 8.

long before corporate-owned chain newspapers came on the scene. Those who agree on the existence of the problems with journalism that Merritt and Rosen have pointed out argue that the public sphere, like public transportation, needs a critical mass in order to function, and today's journalists do little to advance real cohesion as a useful aim.

However, rather than thoroughly probing the conditions that allow mass participation, public journalism attacks journalists' reliance on objectivity as a guiding principle that fosters apathy more than action. Polls showing the press losing more and more credibility with its readers are pointed to as proof of the weakness of objectivity as the cardinal rule of American reporting. Outside the profession, the argument goes, no one really believes journalists work unaffected by the same forces that motivate celebrities, politicians and others in the spotlight. And within the profession, the ingrained reflex toward staying detached may be the greatest single obstacle to the creation of better journalism, public journalism advocates contend.

They reserve their strongest language for sniping at objectivity as a professional ideal and a practical standard. "Nobody else," Rosen insists, "takes this notion seriously anymore."³³ The "stumbling block of objectivity — also known as naive empiricism" is a dangerous, distorting and stifling myth,³⁴ a "lifeless doctrine" which has at its root "the wish to be free of the results of what you do."³⁵ Objectivity may be of use in separating the truth-teller from the consequences of telling the truth and the facts from the values, but ignoring those consequences and values gives the journalist an incomplete — and often negative — picture of the world she is supposed to be recording flawlessly. It also ensures that journalists trained to hold themselves aloof from the people and places they purportedly serve will be transients, hopping from paper to paper or station to station as occasion warrants. Finally, public journalists argue, objectivity offers no reward for the act of

³³ Jay Rosen, "Beyond Objectivity," p. 49.

³⁴ Rosen, "Beyond Objectivity," p. 51.

³⁵ Rosen, "Making Things More Public," p. 375.

imagining a better world; publicizing crises is always less risky than finding solutions to them.³⁶

Neither Rosen nor Merritt turned a deaf ear to the outcry that ensued after their early suggestions that objectivity should be replaced by a value more constructive in daily newspapering. Rosen concedes that

a big part of the difficulty is that some separations remain critically important. There *is* a difference between doing journalism and doing politics, between observation and action, between telling the truth and selling a product. But these differences can be worked out, discovered anew in the effort to re-imagine journalism as an exercise in connectivity.³⁷

Advocates of public journalism insist that altering the footwork of the objective stance doesn't signal an end to toughness toward those in power. They maintain that reporters still will ask tough questions of government officials. When 1990 gubernatorial candidate Joan Finney's rambling made her position on abortion difficult to understand, *The Wichita Eagle* printed her words at a press conference verbatim, in their original incoherency. (Finney later provided a translation.) Another tack, taken when silence is more of an obstacle than white noise, was early demonstrated by the *Charlotte [N.C.] Observer* in its "Your Vote in '92" campaign, a joint initiative between the paper and the Poynter Institute meant to build on the *Wichita Eagle*'s earlier model. The paper left white space after the names of U.S. Senator Terry Sanford and another Senate candidate when they refused to enunciate their positions on issues which *Observer* readers had pinpointed as the focus of their concerns. (The candidates later relented and replied.) Likewise, during a live, televised candidate

³⁶ Merritt, *Public Journalism and Public Life*, pp. 18-19.

³⁷ Rosen, "Getting the Connections Right," p. 11.

forum co-sponsored by the *Boston Globe* and NBC affiliate WBZ-TV in Boston in June 1994, U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy grew angry the first time he took questions from a citizens' panel, asking the panel "what right" it had to question him. In all these cases, the editors and producers responsible for interpreting politicians' words felt a good-faith effort to address the concerns of voters warranted unusual measures.

A reevaluation of objectivity is a key unusual measure advocated by public journalists, as a way to close the distance between writers and their subjects, reconnect those subjects to readers's lives and ultimately end the political apathy that has put democracy in crisis. But such logic assumes two things: democracy is dying, and objectivity in the press has killed political participation. Both assumptions may be misguided.

Both Merritt and Rosen point to voter turnout rates of 50 percent or a little above in the 1980s and 1990s as evidence of democracy's decline. Yet, as historians Michael Schudson and Michael McGerr both point out, voting rates sank just as low in the 1920s and the 1830s. Alienated and apathetic voters were on the scene at least forty years before Vietnam and Watergate precipitated the next slide in participation. At first glance, any parallel between the present and voter behavior in the 1920s might seem to bolster Rosen's distrust of objectivity — its biggest booster, Walter Lippmann, made his arguments for scientific method in reporting during that decade. And Lippmann's philosophy is in some ways public journalism's worst nightmare.

Knocking the public from the pedestal democratic rhetoric had fashioned for it, Lippmann argued that the ideal of citizenship was unattainable, that training for citizenship was different from training for political leadership and that scientifically trained experts directing mass opinion were the best hope for a democratic nation. Worse still is Lippmann's observation that "a problem arises only if someone objects to current policy — insofar as there is general agreement, *the public has no interest* in politics and should have

no interest.”³⁸ The community consensus that public journalism seeks, according to Lippmann, would ensure an outcome directly opposite to what public journalism promises — a public that cares little about how public life goes, or even whether or not it exists.

But was the rise of objectivity as a journalistic value after the First World War alone responsible for the subsequent decline in voter participation? McGerr attributes the end of the nineteenth-century golden era of high voter turnout — with average presidential contest voting rates of 69 percent from 1840-1872 and 77 percent from 1876-1900³⁹ — to a change in political styles after the Civil War. The intense partisanship that linked membership in a community with the often boisterous, very public announcement of one’s party gave way before the ideals of a group of “liberal reformers, whose sense of social and political peril ... led them to recast the rules governing the conduct of public life.”⁴⁰ McGerr’s nineteenth-century reformers and the educated editors who created independent newspapers that promoted their liberal ideals resemble the public journalists of the 1990s in many particulars.

Like Lippmann, the reformers whom McGerr contends transformed the party press and political life from the partisan style, emotionally appealing to voters from a range of social classes, into an educational style, making rational choice free of party loyalty seem virtuous, feared the political power of the masses. Worried that partisan voting by the influx of immigrants granted universal suffrage could threaten their power and property, the liberal reformers from the 1860s through the 1890s decided educating the otherwise ignorant voter was the only way to end the reign of partisan political machines. “ ‘If we cannot take the suffrage from the ignorant class,’ reasoned the *New York Times*, ‘can we not do still better by requiring that there should be no ignorant class?’ ”⁴¹

³⁸ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News*, p. 124.

³⁹ Michael McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 5.

⁴⁰ McGerr, p. 10.

⁴¹ McGerr, p. 52.

Thus began a style of political participation more didactic and elitist than that expressed in the party papers; one that asked questions of officials in order to publish the answers for an educated electorate, and established a variety of extra-party organizations around hot-button issues or social problems. Crusades to reform and correct selected ills were a hallmark of the educational campaign and McGerr targets the educational pressure group (or political action committee) as the Northern liberal elite's biggest contribution to politics as we know it today.

Certain aspects of the popular politics embodied by the party press perhaps inevitably faded from view. As national headquarters increasingly orchestrated party campaigning, identification with the party cause through local outposts weakened. Likewise, the growth of monopoly business and its combat with labor made it more difficult for a single candidate to draw support from voters of different classes. Politics grew more complicated — but the reformers' brand of explanation alienated more voters than it motivated, and popular participation waned from the '90s on. As the established party and sensational press adopted the reformers' didactic and crusading styles, respectively, McGerr finds evidence that “In ways their publishers and editors perhaps did not understand, the independent, sensational and party papers helped to diminish popular political involvement after the Civil War.”⁴²

McGerr further argues that those who subsequently decried non-voting in the 1920s, organizing the Get-Out-the-Vote campaign in 1924, were convinced the blame lay with the best and brightest ignoring their responsibility, rather than with the lower classes whose expression was stifled when partisanism passed away as a political mode. Once again, the elite organizers' fear of the ballot power of a radical lower class was expressed by one writer in the *Saturday Evening Post* this way:

The true answer to the question of how to offset the success of minorities in cramming their bogus reforms down America's

⁴² McGerr, 134-35.

esophagus lies in bringing enough of America's inarticulate conservatives to the polls to send the radicals back to the tall timbers, whence they could never have emerged if the people of the country had taken the proper interest in the business of government.⁴³

The imagined actors in this 73-year-old piece of journalism remain current in the writings of Rosen and Merritt: a vast, inarticulate middle-of-the-road public that has shirked its electoral duty, and a band of extremists in the margins that has grabbed the media spotlight and stepped into the vacuum to direct public policy. Another crisis of democracy is at hand.

Can a philosophy so similar to McGerr's educational style of political life that (arguably) snuffed out voting in the 1920s hope to revitalize popular politics in the 1990s? Merritt argues that a fair and correct formulation of the journalist's job in the 1990s "is not detachment on the one hand or Hearst-like meddling on the other. ... Between [them] is a huge and promising middle ground. Public journalism operates in that ground, retaining neutrality on specifics and moving far enough beyond detachment to care about whether resolution occurs."⁴⁴ Balancing the authority of Lippmann's educated expert with the moral power of the crusader will, public journalists believe, allow the "new" reporter to have a hand in changing our political habits of mind — and in making us vote again. If this new reporter succeeds, his route will be unprecedented, since history suggests it was the partisan tradition that allowed voters to imagine new political alternatives and the possibility for change⁴⁵ even as the educational reformers began closing off some of those avenues. In other words, a voter must have some kind of political framework before she can imagine bending the frame into a new shape. The political focus of the "public" that public journalism is in the act of ritually bringing into being is the subject of the next chapter.

⁴³ McGerr, p. 192.

⁴⁴ Merritt, Public Journalism and Public Life, p. 116.

⁴⁵ McGerr, 218-19.

II. Quelling Crisis, Providing Hope: What Public Journalism's Dual Vocabularies Reveal about its Politics

As part of William Randolph Hearst's championing of the urban poor, a *New York Journal* reporter was sent to cover a Hearst-financed expedition of New York City children to Coney Island. Unfortunately, her employer supplied only one container of ice cream to be rationed between the urchins:

When at last I placed a dab on each saucer, a little fellow in ragged knickerbockers got up and declared that the *Journal* was a fake and I thought there was going to be a riot. I took away the ice cream from a deaf and dumb kid who couldn't holler and gave it to the malcontent. Then I had to write my story beginning: "Thousands of children, pale-faced but happy, danced merrily down Coney Island's beaches yesterday and were soon sporting in the sun-lit waves shouting, 'God bless Mr. Hearst.'"⁴⁶

In January 1993, the Detroit *Free Press* launched its Children First campaign, publishing in April a 24-page special section highlighting summer-recreation needs of disadvantaged children and raising \$500,000 to benefit 5,700 children. The Project on Public Life and the Press summary of the initiative does not say whether any of the children who benefited from the *Free Press* crusade blessed the publisher afterward.

As noted in the previous chapter, Davis Merritt anticipates charges of "Hearst-like meddling" to greet efforts like the Children First campaign. Editors like those at the *Free*

⁴⁶ Allen Churchill, *Park Row*, p. 70, in Marvin Olasky, *Central Ideas in the Development of American Journalism: A Narrative History* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1991), pp. 113-114.

Press argue that their papers take great pains to explain to anyone willing to listen the reasons for their activist role and to make full disclosure of the extent to which newspaper staffers had a hand in events the newspaper covered in its news columns. They refer to the longstanding partnership between newspapers and The United Way in many communities as evidence that occasional work with charities is nothing new.

More to the point, public journalists argue unusual problems — like violence against Detroit’s children that never seemed to cease no matter how often it was “objectively” reported — warrant unusual methods, even when they might raise some eyebrows. When the *Charlotte Observer* ran white space next to the candidate who didn’t want to give his position on the environment because his strategy dictated such revelations should come later in the campaign, its editors broke the rules of political reporting because they felt they were faced with a choice: Let the politician call the shots as usual, or take action to ensure that the issue readers had identified as a prime concern got addressed.

This claim to offering better choices for the solution of political and social problems is a vital part of the public journalist’s mandate, for, in Merritt’s rather grim estimation, “If we continue to insist that engaging actively in the search for solutions ‘isn’t our job,’ we will soon, in fact, have no job. Unless we as journalists reestablish the public compact, our communities — including the national community — cannot stop the further erosion of public life.”⁴⁷

The erosion allusion is significant. The ground is falling from under the feet of journalists; their future holds neither jobs nor community. Merritt and Rosen (who finds not one but six different “alarm bells ringing for the press”⁴⁸) forecast a crisis for journalists everywhere and offer public journalism not just as a corrective but as a sort of savior. The doomsday edge to their advice was duly noted by many who heard the

⁴⁷ Merritt, “Public Journalism,” p. 25.

⁴⁸ Rosen, “Making Things More Public,” p. 381-382. The alarms are depressingly wide-ranging: Economic, technological, political, occupational, spiritual and intellectual.

“gospel” early on, and the industry perhaps has had a little too much fun mocking the movement’s religious overtones, but what I call a **crisis vocabulary** is very much a mark of the public journalism message. Of course, the language is not entirely unique to public journalists, as this lead paragraph from a 1992 *CJR* evaluation of the movement indicates:

Two familiar refrains: if newspapers don’t learn to listen to readers and adapt to the way they live, they’ll die. And if newspapers treat their content as a mere commodity, they’ll lose their souls. And damage democracy. And die anyway.⁴⁹

The rhetoric of death and dying has spurred frantic redesigns of news pages and more user-friendly formats, but readers this decade nonetheless report a loss of interest in their newspapers. Along with declining circulations and loss of advertising base, public journalists cite a 1993 poll showing citizen confidence in news reports in newspapers falling from 50 percent in 1988 to 20 percent in 1993,⁵⁰ and a national survey in 1994 by the Times-Mirror Center for the People and the Press showing that 71 percent of Americans think the press actually “gets in the way of society solving its problems.”⁵¹ Another oft-quoted statistic claims that one of every five journalists polled in 1994 said they expected to quit the field within a few years⁵² — interpreted to mean that the general rottenness of news performance is eating away at its core as much as at its consumer.

Of course, polls are not above suspicion in an age when campaigners passing themselves off as pollsters ask questions designed to subtly influence potential voters during the course of the “poll.” For instance, the same 1994 poll that found journalists

⁴⁹ Michael Hoyt, “The Wichita Experiment: What happens when a newspaper tries to connect readership and citizenship,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, August 1992, p. 43.

⁵⁰ Merritt, *Public Journalism and Public Life*, p. xv.

⁵¹ Jay Rosen, “Where is Public Journalism? The Search for a New Routine,” Project on Public Life and the Press presentation, American Press Institute, Reston, Va., March 25, 1995.

⁵² Rosen, “Making Things More Public,” p. 372. Poll results courtesy Wilhoit, G.C. and Weaver, D., “U.S. Journalists at Work, 1971-1992,” a paper presented at the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication convention, Atlanta, Ga., August 1994.

ready to quit also confirmed that journalists by and large say they love their work, if not their work conditions. Another survey, which goes unmentioned in public journalism literature, found that corporate profit expectations — *not* deadlines, questions of accuracy, or other traditional newsroom stresses — caused editors the most unhappiness.⁵³ Perhaps the journalists who expect to jettison their jobs for the greener fields of public relations (or public polling) are merely unhappy with their pay or the corporate structure of their chain-owned hometown paper. But surveys of even broader opinions than the one a reader holds about a newspaper suggest a matching dissatisfaction among Americans with their quality of life and their future. And public journalists take unhappiness with *the news* as only part of a larger worry society has about *what's new* — that is, how life seems to be going these days.

The surveys cited earlier measuring confidence in the press and its problem-solving power also indicated that between 1988 and 1993, the percentage of Americans who reported they were dissatisfied with the way things were going in the nation rose from 55 percent to 75 percent.⁵⁴ And more recently, the distrust felt by the general public was said to outstrip that of the professionally cynical media class, when a 1995 Times-Mirror survey found “cynicism toward the government, corporate executives and religious leaders is greater among the American public than the media.”⁵⁵

Though it is debatable how or even whether the perception of the nation's failing course is linked to the coverage of that course by the press, the bad news in both spheres seems to have grown apace. In the search for who or what is to blame for these twin declines in Americans' prospects and their press, public journalists link both as facets of the same crisis and look to their work for answers. Why such soul-searching? The

⁵³ Bill Gloede, “Stress has Significant Presence in Newsrooms,” *Editor & Publisher*, November 12, 1983, pp. 12-13, cited in Underwood, pp. 28-29.

⁵⁴ Merritt, citing a Yankelovitch Partners poll, *Public Journalism and Public Life*, p. xvi.

⁵⁵ Times-Mirror Center for the People and the Press poll conducted in March and April 1995 contrasting “the views of newspeople, opinion makers and the general public,” as reported by the Associated Press.

profession might instead insist that politicians change, or that the public set for itself the hard questions that will ultimately lead to solutions in its own future.

Advocating change on the part of the government and in the independent thinking of citizens does seem at times a part of the public journalists' plan for shoring up the "erosion" of which Merritt warns, but ultimately the calls for drastic action don't place those actors at center stage. Government representatives are thought to lack the will necessary to change a system that, for the most part, keeps them very comfortable; the public will not change on its own without knowing the possibilities that change might create.⁵⁶

That leaves journalists, conveniently, to tackle the problem of what or who is to quell the crisis and take control of the future. Once that responsibility is accepted, it follows that editors will aggressively inform their readers about selected issues, setting the terms of discussion and prioritizing the information that will get into print. Public journalism's poll-assisted construction of the American public landscape in the 1990s as one requiring life-or-death decisions locates journalists between government and the people, advancing the supposed symbiosis of the three in the middle distance between them — the space public journalists say "public life" inhabits. It is there, in a third sphere between that of the state official and that of the private citizen, that public journalists say is "the place you want to send readers to, so they have a chance to return as citizens."⁵⁷ This view of press work distances it from any need to link officials with individual citizens (the work of talk radio and television) and through the separation, tries to make the press important again.

The issue of control — sending the reader somewhere, in Rosen's terms — lies behind public journalism's insertion of itself in public life and its understanding of the First Amendment freedom to operate there. Control — public journalists prefer the slightly more diplomatic word "authority" — is behind the vocabulary of crisis, although it is not among the terms (democracy, connection, consent) they tend to highlight.

⁵⁶ Merritt, *Public Journalism and Public Life*, p. 81.

⁵⁷ Rosen, "Where is Public Journalism?", p. 18.

Public journalists seek support for their authority during a time of crisis in the work of Harvard scholar Robert D. Putnam, whose writings on “social capital” have made the term one of the hottest of public journalism’s buzzwords. Putnam and his associates watched the development of Italy’s regional governments over the course of 20 years after each locality was given the same resources and playbook by the central government in 1970. Despite this even playing field at the start, some regions prospered while others failed; neither geography nor history appeared to account for the difference. In 1993, Putnam’s sociological analyses of the regions pointed to two factors as being partly responsible for the success of those regions with the highest quality of life: civic involvement (measured by citizen activity in social, cultural, political and recreational organizations) and newspaper reading.

Voter turnout, newspaper readership, membership in choral societies and football clubs — these were the hallmarks of a successful region. In fact, historical analysis suggested that these networks of organized reciprocity and civic solidarity, far from being an epiphenomenon of socioeconomic modernization, were a precondition for it.⁵⁸

A tradition of independent civic association within a society — like that commented on by Alexis de Tocqueville during his American sojourn in the 1830s — acts as a tool to facilitate group productivity, in much the same way that physical capital and human capital foster individual productivity; hence the term social capital. Though Putnam acknowledges the mechanisms that create civic activity are complex, his findings in Italy prompt the blunt assertion that life is easier in a community blessed with social capital.

But in America, the picture is less rosy; the nation has changed a great deal since Tocqueville discovered that people here “of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions

⁵⁸ Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy*, Summer 1995.

constantly form associations.”⁵⁹ In a later essay, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” Putnam finds evidence of an across-the-board generational decline in American participation in political, religious, civic, fraternal and volunteer organizations of all kinds. He draws his title from the “whimsical but discomfiting” discovery that though more Americans bowl today than ever before, organized league bowling is in sharp decline. Though nearly a third more citizens bowled at least once in 1993 than voted in the 1994 congressional elections, they did so “alone,” outside league organizations.⁶⁰

Of course, one can argue, there’s alone and then there’s *alone*. Putnam doesn’t explain why bowling with a few friends outside a league is more detrimental to the formation of social capital than formal membership in a league; one presumes the same sorts of quasi-civic discussion occur in the bowling alley in both cases and that people aren’t really heading to the lanes *by themselves*. Nevertheless, Putnam presents a persuasive case for a decline in civic cohesiveness and a correlating rise in public distrust. The only kind of organization Putnam finds expanding in America is the support group, which doesn’t function in quite the same way as a civic association. Putnam refers to the findings of one support-group-watcher, who emphasizes:

Small groups may not be fostering community as effectively as many of their proponents would like. Some small groups merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others. The social contract binding members together asserts only the weakest of obligations. Come if you have time. Talk if you feel like it. Respect everyone’s opinion. Never criticize. ... We can imagine that [these groups] really substitute for families, neighborhoods, and broader community attachments ... when in fact they do not.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), II, p. 106.

⁶⁰ Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” p. 70.

⁶¹ Robert Wuthnow, Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community (New York: The Free Press, 1994), p. 45, in Putnam, “Bowling Alone,” p. 72.

The admiration public journalists have for Putnam's research is understandable. His findings support their values: the most flourishing societies have deep civic roots. Good government depends on interaction between its citizens in the civic sphere. Naturally-occurring associations are the basis of economic, political and social health. Public values are, in Rosen's formulation mentioned earlier, "the value of hope, understood as a renewable resource." Citizens have the power to create all this, and best of all, those that do tend to be *newspaper readers*.

The creative power that citizens are thought to wield when they band together is one that public journalism desperately wants to tap, for the good of the country and for the good of newspapers. The press still has power, but not the authority that used to come through its association with public institutions when *they* symbolized the civic good in citizens' mind. As public institutions, particularly government institutions and party organizations, lose their strength as repositories of the public trust, journalism bypasses them for other avenues.

Though public journalism's crisis mode serves to get attention, its authority develops from a more complex self-conception expressed through a separate vocabulary of hope. It is one of the ironies of the movement that its two favorite modes of expression — crisis and hope — are poles apart. Or perhaps dual vocabularies are one of public journalism's greatest strengths — the listener willing to bend an ear toward news of crisis is likely different from the one drawn to hope, allowing public journalism a wider audience. And finding an audience while maintaining control of its own future, I would argue, is at the bottom of many public journalism efforts.

Consider the second condition grounding public journalism as the right way to tell the news now: Hope. Staffers at *The Dallas Morning News* sought to document last year what they took to be a diverse and spontaneous movement by people across the nation, coming

together in their communities to solve their own problems with little government funding or expert advice. A vertical bar of display type that ran with each main story in the multi-part, eight-day series entitled “The We Decade: Rebirth of Community” explained “The name ... comes not just from the current of community building that pulses across the United States, but also from the growing realization among Americans that our lives and problems are intertwined. This project is the result of five months of reporting by 14 writers and one photographer that included hundreds of interviews and visits to communities” like Chattanooga, San Antonio, Dallas, Baltimore, Phoenix and Washington, D.C. The *Morning News* writers detailed grassroots efforts to improve the environment and health care, combat crime, strengthen the family and improve public education in support of the series’ main premise: A new spirit of civic revival is abroad in the land.

Merritt believes the validity of that thesis is backed up by the results of a 1994 survey, based on two-hour personal interviews with 4,000 Americans, indicating a shift away from distrust, cynicism and stress and “an increase in the acknowledgment of a personal obligation to make a contribution to the community, a growing realization of personal responsibility for outcomes, and, interestingly, an inclination ... to explore ‘the upside’ of life.”⁶² Merritt does not address how these results appear to conflict more than a little with the 1995 poll finding that citizens are more cynical than the media, or explain why public journalists can selectively embrace these findings while dismissing polls taken by politicians and their handlers. He focuses instead on how the awakening of America to a new optimism might bode well for its journalists.

Tapping into this new source, Jay Rosen asserts that “public journalism wants to be in the room when politics goes well ... with the Welfare Alumni [a group of Chicago women who are now off welfare and meet to discuss their lives and support one another]

⁶² Merritt, *Public Journalism and Public Life*, p. xvii details the findings of the 1994 Yankelovich Monitor, a study that has attempted to track consumer social values since 1971.

Isabel Wilkerson found a naturally occurring deliberative body, and learned from it.”⁶³

Wilkerson is the New York Times reporter who wrote about the Alumni.

Rosen’s point would be well made, but he takes it one step further into an area that is a real quagmire of the public journalism project. Rosen wants to put the reporter in the room; fine — but he further maintains that “Sometimes it [public journalism] has to create the room in order to be there, and if this is activism then indeed we need a more activist press.”⁶⁴ However, this form of activism — providing the agora, in Merritt’s parallel view — is directly contradictory to the “naturally occurring deliberative body” which Rosen and Putnam glorify as the key to a healthy community. Furthermore, the deliberative body represented by the Welfare Alumni resembles a support group — the kind of pseudo-civic group that Putnam finds flourishing in America to the detriment of the civic associations Rosen says public journalism must help advance.

Public journalists quite rightly maintain that no tenet of journalism bars reporters and editors from caring about and working toward a healthier civic life. But there is a fundamental flaw in convening a focus group or hiring a third party to canvass a readership, then revealing the newspaper’s part in the end result — as though that disclosure somehow makes the process a more natural civic phenomena that portends a change in politics as usual. It is at this point that many people with a stake in how journalism is practiced balk, crying “The *Journal* is a fake” like the nineteenth-century urchin on the Hearst-sponsored beach jaunt. Journalism, like democracy, indeed may have everything to gain from a close connection with people, but newspapers with declining circulations also have a great deal to gain from adopting just the *appearance* of that connection. Newspapers that follow public journalists’ advice and abandon their detachment to act as if they had a stake in their communities may be doing just that — acting.

⁶³ Rosen, “Where is Public Journalism?”, p. 10.

⁶⁴ Rosen, “Where is Public Journalism?”, p. 10.

If public journalism upholds the differences between doing journalism and doing politics, and between telling the truth and selling a product, as Rosen says it does, the focus group is surely an odd tool for drawing those dividing lines. Focus groups are, after all, the creation of marketers and lobbyists who rely on them to sell products and pitch candidates. Will Merritt's "true deliberation" really occur in such contrived spaces, or is his "referee" journalist adjudicating a fixed game? Many of the editors who have seen their public journalism projects develop into community action insist the talent lies in stepping aside at the right moment. The editor of the Cox-owned *Dayton* [Ohio] *Daily News*, Marty Steffans, planned as part of an ongoing series about youth violence some 25 town hall forums: "the largest public policy discussion in our community since the Great Flood of 1913."⁶⁵ But Steffans claims to know when to drop out: "If you're doing a good public journalism project, you let the other organizations take the lead. ... If newspapers become overly involved in a project, chances are good that it will ultimately fail."⁶⁶

Drawing on an earlier approach taken by the Spokane, Wa., *Spokesman-Review*, Steffans' paper at one point offered a free pizza to any family or local group who would host a meeting in their home to discuss juvenile crime. Whether ice cream or pizza, some pitfalls in journalism have endured over the decades — more than 400 people responded to the offer and the paper ran out of money for pizzas.⁶⁷ Critics charge that the "drop-out" disclaimers of Steffans and others are only an example of circulation-hungry editors trying to have their objectivity and their pizza giveaway, too.

Efforts like Steffans' also bear an uncomfortable resemblance to an affair in Manchester, N.H., on Oct. 11 reported by *Los Angeles Times* reporter Eleanor Randolph. Its description was problematic:

⁶⁵ Alicia C. Shepard, "The Gospel of Public Journalism," *American Journalism Review*, September 1994, pp. 32-33.

⁶⁶ Shepard, p. 33.

⁶⁷ Austin, "Project Report," PPLP, Dayton "Kids in Chaos" initiative.

No, not a convention exactly, nor even a micro-convention. Wednesday's Republican "candidates' forum" was a media event, not created by a campaign or a candidate, but generated by a member of the media. The political extravaganza that drew 10 Republicans running for president, hundreds of their supporters, dozens of political aides and about 200 national reporters was put on courtesy of Manchester's ABC-TV affiliate, WMUR. And after it was all over, some wondered whether the station was creating news or whether it was generating its own advertising? The answer to both questions was an easy yes.⁶⁸

The "debate," moderated by WMUR chief political reporter Carl Cameron, marked the first time Bob Dole had taken the stage with his nine opponents. Randolph observed that most television news shows and major newspapers made some mention of the event, and "each time a television station ran a snippet or a newspaper ran the group picture, WMUR's logo came with it."⁶⁹ All the elements for deliberation are there: The public, the media, the politicians and at least the possibility of dialogue which the station could pride itself on having provided. WMUR's spectacle illustrates one of the ironies of a public journalism approach: While trying to free journalists from the encroachment of counting-room values, it depends upon the very marketing techniques so key to those values. Budget-battle-scarred veteran editors like Merritt who worry about where the advertising is to come from in the age of New Media seem to overlook what is evident in WMUR's brand of reporting: Newspaper advertising (at least of itself) now can be woven right into the news it creates. The thing created is more a new space for the media than additional room for citizens to form, develop and debate their beliefs with one another.

In his book's opening section, "A Word about Terms," Merritt defines his:

⁶⁸ Eleanor Randolph, "Station Creates Media Event in 'Candidates' Forum," Los Angeles Times wire service report moving Oct. 13, 1995.

⁶⁹ Randolph, "Station Creates Media Event in 'Candidates' Forum."

Journalism is used as a generic term without reference to its form or delivery system. ... *The media and the press*, though convenient terms, are not used to describe journalism or journalists, except, of course, in direct quotations by others. ... The media and the press are commercial endeavors that may or may not include journalism as part of what they do. This distinction is important. We deal here with the parts of those businesses that involve journalism.⁷⁰

These distinctions work neatly in a book, less so in the real world. Merritt is welcome to focus on the *art* of journalism within the media *business*, but how distinct can the two really be when the “artists” depend on the business for their livelihoods and the business’ primary stake is in making money, not investing in the community or fostering democratic debate? Newspaper acquisition by publicly held corporations became all the rage in the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s because of newspapers’ traditionally high operating returns, and as Merritt points out, “... the stock market insists that returns increase, or at the very least, remain steady, year after year. When revenues are not increasing, as is the general case today, the return must be maintained or increased by reducing costs. When that pinch reaches a certain level, quality is sacrificed.”⁷¹ But unlike J.D. Squires, who railed against the impact of corporate ownership on good journalism in his exposé on the Tribune Company, Read All About It (while floating to earth on the golden parachute Tribune provided after forcing his departure), Merritt sees no alternative to corporate ownership at present and advises “Some other, non-resource-based, things must change first.”⁷²

Merritt’s pragmatism is reflected in the words of one of my own editors at the Tribune-owned *Daily Press*: “Tribune has never interfered with our editorial content or our

⁷⁰ Merritt, Public Journalism and Public Life, p. xii.

⁷¹ Merritt, Public Journalism and Public Life, p. 41.

⁷² Merritt, Public Journalism and Public Life, p. 41.

political endorsements. The only thing Tribune has ever told us to do is to make money.”⁷³ On a superficial level, this traditional division between business and editorial seems to work admirably — but in truth, the simple edict “make money” *does* affect newspaper content, and always has, in a variety of ways. And public journalism, as a growing philosophy experimented with in corporately owned chain newsrooms across America, is in part a symptom of that stress. In its telling of “good news” stories that simultaneously boost the reader-citizen and advertise the public-mindedness of the newspaper, public journalism crowds editorial content on one end while profit expectations squeeze it on the other.

Three examples previously mentioned illustrate this kind of battering. The Pulitzer-winning *Beacon Journal* piece on race captured more A1 space than the Branch Davidian catastrophe in Waco, raising the possibility that Waco, and probably other stories, may not have been told as thoroughly as they should have been. Secondly, the teaming up in 1994 of five newspapers with their National Public Radio affiliates on election coverage, which public journalists tout as an ideal media partnership to reach more of “the people,” also guarantees a homogenization of news coverage. This is especially true in partnerships and the cross-promotion of stories between small local papers and television stations. If the news medium across town that used to be your competitor is now your partner, that’s one less story they’ll have the time and resources to investigate and beat you on — and likely, one less story that gets told. Lastly, a large-scale public journalism project like *The Dallas Morning News*’ “We the People” series, while it may make entertaining and uplifting reading, represents the focusing of ever-dwindling money and manpower on one large (self-promotional) subject, possibly at the expense of others. Even journalists from newsrooms committed to public journalism will admit this: Liz Chandler, a *Charlotte*

⁷³ Myrtle Barnes, then *Daily Press* Administrative Editor and after a newsroom reorganization in June 1995, its Reader Editor, April 24, 1995.

Observer reporter who worked on its “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” series in 1994 admits that some staffers “thought we spent too much time and energy on it.”⁷⁴

The public journalist’s critique of objectivity — as professional detachment that encourages transience in journalists, blinds them to the significance of values in their work, and ensures cynicism — targets it as one of those “non-resource-based things” that Merritt says must change before journalism can serve democracy. But that is only part of the story — objective detachment is not the only force that sets reporters, editors and designers on the road from one newspaper to the next, damaging meaningful (defined as publicly rooted) press content in the process. The public journalism imperative to become “connected” to a community requires a type of experience that only comes with time. *Wichita Eagle* reporter Jon Roe has such experience: he came to the newsroom at age 17 as a copy boy in 1957, leaving and returning four times,⁷⁵ and has acted as lead reporter on both the paper’s “Your Vote Counts” (1990) and “People Project” (1992) initiatives. Roe is much the same anomaly within his own newspaper chain as he would be anywhere — at the *Eagle*, half the editorial staff comes from somewhere other than Kansas.

A desire to put down roots in a community is rare among young journalists not because their objectivity stands in the way, but because those roots offer few professional rewards. Reporters quickly learn that status, money and more challenging beats come through getting clips, winning prizes and moving on — preferably from the smallest of a chain’s properties to its largest. Status through stasis is a more risky proposition: At a small paper that dream promotion may well require years of maneuvering, and even if accomplished may offer only a gradual rise on the company pay scale.

Before his death last summer, Knight-Ridder Chairman James K. Batten, who had committed his newspaper chain to public journalism experiments, criticized newsrooms

⁷⁴ Mark Jurkowitz, “The Public Talks Back to Journalists,” *The Boston Globe*, wire service report moving Feb. 26, 1996.

⁷⁵ Hoyt, “The Wichita Experiment,” p. 46.

“overstocked with journalistic transients who care little about the town of the moment,”⁷⁶ but directed a corporate network that fostered and rewarded the strategy that caused such transiency even as it pushed public journalism experimentation. It comes as no surprise, as Doug Underwood is quick to point out, that the fellowships bearing Batten’s name underwrite a two-year degree program at the University of Virginia designed to train future media managers — by awarding them MBAs. Batten’s philosophy promoted community rootedness while his chain offered little to the Jon Roes of the nation for the knowledge they could offer from decades spent in one community.

Former *Washington Post* ombudsman and newspaper consultant Richard Harwood has observed the contradiction and issues this challenge:

Big chains own most of our newspapers today. If they are serious about making “connections” to their audiences, there are a few things they might consider. First they could ensure that the people who put out their papers are themselves “connected” to the communities in which they work. This means long-term assignments, personal involvement in community activities and very probably, financial incentives to dampen the allure of big-city offers. Second, they will need to make available to their publishers substantial funds for community investment and the authority to use them.⁷⁷

Both Rosen and Merritt, of course, argue that reporters must to a large degree convince themselves of the necessity for public journalism enterprise, since the reporter’s personal future is only a small cog in the wheel which turns to enlarge debate, to forge community consensus and ultimately, to fix democracy. Compensation for the public journalist, for now, is expressed in spiritual and intellectual terms rather than realistically

⁷⁶ Hoyt, “The Wichita Experiment,” p. 46.

⁷⁷ Richard Harwood, “Making a Connection,” *The Washington Post*, Final Edition, May 8, 1995, Section A, p. 21.

financial ones, since the question of the future practice of journalism “is only part of a larger question: what’s going to happen to American democracy?”⁷⁸

Public journalism’s vocabularies of crisis and hope devote a few words to the pressure chain ownership exerts on newspaper content and authority, but obfuscate the issue of corporate values and the shallowness of their link to the public. What many corporations took in the 1970s to be anti-business bias in the press motivated them to aim as much as a third of their advertising budgets toward people as *citizens* rather than *consumers*.⁷⁹ Perhaps today’s corporate-owned newspapers are on the trailing, rather than leading, curve of that trend. Self-government may entail more than the symbiotic sum of citizen, elected leader and journalist, particularly if the leaders and citizens must be “educated” into maintaining their part of the symbiosis. In his enthusiasm for blending effortlessly with the crowd, the public journalist’s authority is measured by his ability to persuade that crowd of his good intentions.

Since good persuasion skills — formerly associated more with an advertising rep than a reporter — at bottom depend on how well the persuader is liked, fears about public journalism’s boosterism will always undercut the authority it has to act in citizens’ best interest. This warm and fuzzy representation of the authority a newspaper wields — “persuading” rather than “dictating,” “deciding,” or “setting the agenda” — disguises the power public journalism has to manipulate public opinion as thoroughly as any marketer or lobbyist. The following summary of a story written by the Knight-Ridder Washington Bureau’s Jodi Enda, intended as a sidebar in a package exploring the activity of lobbyists in Washington, indicates how thin a line public journalism walks:

LOBBY-3: Creating fury where there once was none at all is all in a day’s work for one of Washington’s more innovative lobbying entrepreneurs. Jack Bonner earns what he acknowledges

⁷⁸ Rosen, “Getting the Connections Right,” p. 16.

⁷⁹ Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 183.

is a handsome living by sparking and then corralling rage in otherwise disparate groups of people. By conjuring up the illusion that there is a spontaneous uprising afoot. And by getting Congress to do something about it.⁸⁰

Insert “public journalist” where the lobbyist now stands in this job description, replace “Congress” with “consumers,” and we have an outline for how public journalism generates both news and its own authority — perhaps not exactly a “handsome living,” but a living with a more assured future.

If journalism that focuses on how officialdom acts on the public is democracy writ backwards, as Merritt contends, focusing on the cued actions of citizens who are said to constitute a public is still something less than democracy writ forward. Critics are correct to worry that a journalism that seems to want to persuade people of its interest in their concerns will focus more on molding consent than examining dissent on any issue. The rules of the support group, as described earlier — talk if you feel like it, respect everyone’s opinions, never criticize — are lacking as tools of healthy self-governance. It is conflict resolution, without the conflict.

At least two critics have attacked public journalism over its reluctance to tell truths that the public doesn’t want to hear. *Newsday* editor Tony Marro, remembering virulent reader opposition to a series on segregated housing patterns on Long Island, observed “if we went out to people and said ‘what are your concerns?’ this would not have been one of them. A lot of time people don’t want to talk about the most important stories.”⁸¹ On the same note, media critic John Bare has remarked that if Southern editors who raised lone voices to protest racism during the civil rights struggles three decades ago “had established

⁸⁰ Budget line from KRT News weekend budget, moving Sept. 25, 1995.

⁸¹ Marro quoted in Hoyt, “Are You Now ... a Civic Journalist?,” pp. 29-30.

their news agenda by survey research ... , they certainly would have found that citizens wanted something else.”⁸²

These specific charges of softness in the face of social division have struck enough of a nerve in Rosen to merit a response:

Public journalism doesn't say avoid uncomfortable truths. It says you need a connection strong enough to withstand the strain of telling unwelcome truths — which is indeed part of the press's job. Starting where citizens start doesn't mean you end where citizens end. All the great Southern editors who told the truth to their communities had authority ... because they knew a great deal about them. They were fellow Southerners ... The ideal of informing people from a professional distance, telling them what they need to know without needing to know much about them, is either an illusion or an arrogance. ... Public journalism starts with ... a conversational bid rather than an assumption of information deficiency.⁸³

Rosen offers no evidence to support his contention that civil rights-era editors making unpopular stands were trusted because of some empathic track record they had with their readers, and makes no allowances for how fragile that trust can be. In North Dakota, one reader of the *Grand Forks Herald* who had watched the paper's effort to involve readers in a conversation about the region's future in general and the building of a new civic center in particular, voted for the civic center. But not without these telling reservations:

This is not driven by a grassroots group. This is driven by a newspaper, which is a business. They have a vision for the community. ... There is a progressive element in our newspaper,

⁸² John Bare, “Case Study: Wichita and Charlotte: The Leap of a Passive Press to Advocacy,” *Media Studies Journal*, Fall 1992, p. 157.

⁸³ Rosen, “Where is Public Journalism?,” p. 15.

radio and television circles who feel our Mayberry approach to government is outdated.”⁸⁴

Such a reader’s allegiance to his paper and his town does not blind him to the difference between civic spirit and economic development as motives. The *Herald* staff will insist that the future of their paper depends on the former; the reader knows that their future depends equally on both. The campaign of education so useful to nineteenth-century progressives continues to serve the interests of their descendents, and still in the name of the people. But the “Community Conversation” initiated by Grand Forks newspaper likely isn’t carried on by everyone in town. It falls far short of the rules of most natural conversations, since its topic was pre-selected — and once begun, no one was allowed to change the subject.

If the majority of newspapers now operating have not jumped on the public journalism bandwagon, embraced the cause of enhancing public conversation, and reworded their jumplines to read “In order to participate, please turn to page 12A,”⁸⁵ their hesitancy may be summed up in three words: It’s a gamble. Merritt’s referee has a stake in the outcome of this game after all, both as a journalist and as a citizen, beyond the stated goal of restoring public life. Ending journalism’s reliance on the usual political suspects or parties to generate instant authority for news reports may seem like a safe bet at a time when Ross Perot has gained enough support to force a third political party onto many state ballots and Colin Powell has fired the hopes of millions before dashing them. American political culture at the moment privileges the appearance of independent action.

But in stressing its apparent union with citizens and the power of citizens’ union with each other as the source of its new authority, public journalism appropriates the methods of lobbyists and corporate marketers in the guise of the public good. In the process, this

⁸⁴ Jurkowitz, “The Public Talks Back to Journalists.”

⁸⁵ “What is Fair,” a *Wichita Eagle* article on affirmative action, June 11, 1995, in Hoyt, “Are You ... a Civic Journalist,” p. 31.

refashioned journalism may have inadvertently dealt the winning hand to government and big business, which have their own established avenues of power and little reason to bemoan a circumscribed civic sphere. As editors involved in both the Pew Foundation-funded “People’s Voice” project, which provided some New Hampshire citizens the opportunity to question Lamar Alexander, Phil Gramm and Richard Lugar before the state primary, and a similar effort in Sanford, Maine, will attest: politicians show little enthusiasm about responding to the public’s agenda. “The candidates don’t want to play this new game.”⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Jurkowitz, attributed to Jeannine Guttman, *Portland Press Herald*.

III. Journalism and Citizenship

In his remarks to participants attending the Project on Public Life and the Press Spring seminar in 1995, Jay Rosen noted that public journalism has reached a critical phase in its evolution. The period of “attention-getting” — spent getting funded, named, debated and written up in trade journals — is over. Experimentation through special projects has led to work on a new newsroom routine; at the same time, the more dubious aspects of the public journalism approach have created the reputation that now precedes it — “the widespread suspicion that public journalism is another name for advocacy journalism, that its main message is: get involved, become a player, be the story instead of just reporting the story, and while you’re at it, try a little boosterism too.”⁸⁷

In a more serious vein, Rosen sets the next hurdle in the movement’s attempt to rejuvenate journalism: Longevity. Next steps, he suggests, are crucial ones, for

the more I look around at the American press, the more potential I see for public journalism to either catch the wave and zoom ahead or, alternatively, to disappear. We may be on to something that will change the American press, or we may be part of a curious episode that came and went without much effect.⁸⁸

Rosen consistently seems fond of black-and-white choices that advance the public journalism gospel; the words “get it while it’s hot — you snooze, you lose” are almost visible between those lines. When journalism historians and media critics in 2095 look

⁸⁷ Jay Rosen, “Where is Public Journalism?”, p. 2.

⁸⁸ Jay Rosen, “Where is Public Journalism?”, p. 2.

back at the early 1990s, they may see a passing fad, a significant shift, something in between or nothing at all. Will those critics still remark, as *The Washington Post* did last year in a front-page article, that “layoffs, budget cuts and a changing approach to journalism ... combined to make 1995 the most depressing year in recent newspaper history.”⁸⁹?

Perhaps so, but if history allows us to predict anything, it is that twenty-first-century media critics will be decrying the flaws of their industry and its failure to inform a democratic public with familiar vehemence. Historian Dicken-Garcia finds one such detractor, George Lunt, warning as early as 1857 that a newspaper converted its reader into “one of those feeble and wavering creatures,” “swayed by the weakest impulses and ... insensible to the highest duties of manhood and citizenship and religion ...”⁹⁰ Though these concerns in some ways boosted a new attention to standards for journalistic conduct in the next century, Dicken-Garcia points out that early press critics were more adept at raising issues of responsibility than resolving them. After 1850, Dicken-Garcia argues, “the focus shifted subtly from whether the press shaped public opinion toward how it did so, the importance attached to the press by the public, and implications; by the late 1880s, another theme was its declining influence and predictions that the ‘newspaper age’ was ending.”⁹¹

Newspapers, then, have been both dying and a threat to the citizenry for at least the last century, if not longer. Michael Schudson seems aware of this when he describes the commercial press’s reader-as-participant, only to warn, “... I don’t want to let the romance of this phrase — the conversation of the community — prevent our recognizing how much the newspaper as it has come down to us is only vestigially conversational. ... the newspaper is today, and was to a large extent much earlier, distinctly not conversational,

⁸⁹ Howard Kurtz, “The Bad News Starts at Work in Nation’s Newsrooms,” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 30, 1995, A1.

⁹⁰ Dicken-Garcia, p. 174.

⁹¹ Dicken-Garcia, p. 161.

even anticonversational.”⁹² Schudson links the growing self-consciousness of the commercial press with a widening distance between its voice and its readers — and its tendency to stifle as much conversation on the one hand as it generates on the other. Public journalism’s chance of reversing this anticonversational habit seems slight, given its methods. If the degree of consent needed to make a conversation out of a babble of voices is contrived — if the space where these voices are heard is itself manufactured, as in Rosen’s “naturally occurring” dialogues, brought to you by public journalism — the citizenship symbolized by the private act of reading a newspaper is unlikely to be the kind of citizenship bounded by real consensus.

Does reading a newspaper help or hinder citizenship? Robert Putnam and public journalists maintain that it helps. Others approach the enigma of the commercial newspaper with more irony, including Theodore Dreiser, who created an entire fictional character to embody concerns over drift in the modern age:

“All day and all day, here he sat, reading his papers.
The world seemed to have no attraction.”⁹³

The “papers” referred to are newspapers; the reader is G.W. Hurstwood of Sister Carrie, whose slow slide into the margins of society in some ways steals the novel’s ending from Dreiser’s protagonist, the up-and-coming Carrie. Hurstwood connects with the infinite variety of urban life through the pages of metropolitan dailies, for “Each day he could read in the evening papers of the doings in this walled city”⁹⁴ of New York in the 1890s.

Hurstwood is the consummate newspaper reader in two paradoxical ways. The more information he gains from his reading, the less he seems able to act on that information; he is simultaneously fulfilled and finished off through his consuming relationship with the

⁹² Schudson, “Preparing the Minds of the People,” p. 441.

⁹³ Theodore Dreiser, Sister Carrie ed. Doubleday, Page (New York: Bantam Books, 1992) p. 281.

⁹⁴ Dreiser, p. 261.

press at the expense of his relationships with other people. The newspapers, filled with the stories of people he had known in his commercially successful Chicago days, are a force in Hurstwood's definition of himself and his place in the world. As those successful days recede, his self-image suffers and he buries himself in his newspapers.

Dreiser orchestrated Hurstwood's decline to show the transformation of an active man into the kind of passive reader whom the mass media create as their audience. Ironically, at a time when more newspapers were reaching more Americans with greater speed than ever before, Dreiser presented us with the perverse figure of George Hurstwood, the newspaper reader: passive, disenfranchised, doomed. The public record has no power to pierce the wall of Hurstwood's private reveries. His story contradicts the American ideal of informed, enlightened, active individuals connected in the democratic arena of public discourse through their buying and reading of daily newspapers. Hurstwood's predicament foreshadows the era when global news diffusion ensures that citizens will come to know too much about events they can't alter, causing them frustration and alienation.

Public journalism can't lay the ghost of George Hurstwood to rest. In fact, it has him walking abroad again. Hurstwood, stripped of his nineteenth-century clothes, has become in the 1990s "Harold, the Rutabaga Man":

Somewhere down the Information Superhighway lives Harold, the Rutabaga Man. He's not a bad sort, just overly internalized. Harold cares only about rutabagas, but he cares intensely about them, everything having to do with them ... It is his singular concern and passion as he sits in his cubicle with its electronic tentacles reaching anywhere in the universe ... Because he wills it, nothing else can impinge on his consciousness; he controls the keyboard and the modem.

The problem is, Harold can vote. Wouldn't probably, but could. Harold and his cyberspace friends will redefine community,

and perhaps democracy. Each is in electronic touch with a handful of similarly obsessed brothers and sisters, but there is no whole. By realizing their dreams of self-interest, they have fulfilled public life's most horrific nightmare.⁹⁵

It is easy to see public journalism's demonization of Harold on the internet as springing from purely economic fears: Cyberspace users are "horrific" because they can obtain their information from ground newspapers have only recently begun to plow. As the nineteenth-century press debates suggested, some Americans have been happily self-centered for years without having electronic "tentacles" to draw them there — why blame the new medium for an old phenomenon?

The citizen with the independent capacity to drop out of public life has long been a troublesome unknown quantity in the commercial press formula. Harold and company remain a problem in the era of megamedia corporate mergers. Although public journalists acknowledge that their mission will be fruitless if solitary — citizens and social institutions must take part on their own initiative — their criticism downplays the missteps created when a city paper *acts* like a citizen, or becomes *the* social or political institution that "leads" the reader to the problems worth solving, creating the appearance of a supposedly unified public. The central question that public journalism attempts to answer is: Given today's social and political circumstances, how is citizenship defined, and what is the role of the press in shaping the citizen? Here is a shortlist of my recommendations for what the press should do:

- **Improving democracy should not be the primary goal of newspapers.**

In no era has news dissemination ever approximated a civics lesson, and it is only misguided nostalgia to imagine so. On the contrary, the period of heaviest political participation in this country, roughly between 1840-1900 as McGerr and Schudson trace it,

⁹⁵ Davis Merritt, Public Journalism and Public Life, p. 105.

witnessed a popular politics that was sensational, emotional and truly for public consumption — not cerebral, rational and instructive. Even as people turn to the paper for a snapshot of their community, they expect to be entertained and allowed an escape from their circumstances. One of the things I find most disturbing about public journalism is its complete disregard for the value that has powered newspapers through their entire history: a good story, well told.

• If public journalists really want to understand their readers, they should try to listen to them with as much fervor as they try to manage them.

As its similarities with Gannett's News 2000 program suggest, public journalism is essentially a manager's philosophy. Its revolutionary edge is blunted by its relentless problem orientation; hence a vocabulary mired in "solutions," "resolution," and "outcomes." Naming a problem is taken to be the first step toward solving it; that there is a problem that can be solved is simply taken for granted. The public journalism universe is orderly to the point of oversimplification, as a sizable number of editors and reporters have had to learn the hard way, after the problems their well-intentioned projects were meant to solve failed to go away. Public journalism continues the division between "two journalisms" explored by Schudson and embodied by the *New York Times* and the *New York World* in the 1890s.⁹⁶ The former adopted the intellectual and informational style well suited for readers of the classes most in control of their own and other lives. The latter spoke to the less independent classes who could identify their own experiences in often sensational stories. Public journalism has cleverly appropriated a style of tabloid sensationalism in its crusading for safe streets and nurtured children⁹⁷ while continuing in the *Times* tradition of high-culture rationality.

⁹⁶ Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 88-120.

⁹⁷ In explaining the need for a changed approach by media, *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* and *Times-Union* Public Affairs Editor Blair Claflin cites this danger: "If we remain static, we just kind of get lumped

Harold/Hurstwood's continued existence on the American scene should be documented as part of the story of American public life today, instead of targeted as a problem for the newspaper to fix. Talking *about* Harold could lead to greater civic involvement among listeners; organizing his opportunity to speak runs the risk of re-creating journalism not as a democratic art but as a community league, or worse, as the dreary civics class Harold likely slept through in school.

• To create a more accessible political world for its readers, public journalism could devote some of its energy to showing them how corporations and government institutions influence today's opportunities for citizen action.

This means leaving the contrived forum and quasi-grassroots panels behind, to delve into discovering how actors in the private sphere, such as lobbyists, corporate executives and the media itself, influence the decisions made by elected officials at the state and national levels. Like the average citizen, public journalists may have to suffer a painful readjustment period in today's political climate of smaller government, relatively weak party organization and single-issue constituencies. Explaining the reasons for the ascendancy of PACs and narrowly based coalitions, rather than "correcting" their extremism through an appeal to some consensual middle ground, will better allow Americans to examine their options for acting as citizens — and lets them make their own decisions.

in with the tabloid media." Public journalism wards off that unthinkable outcome by basing its crusades on a rational appeal. Quotation in Jurkowitz, "The Public Talks Back to Journalists."

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