



How to Best Serve Communities:

Reflections on Civic Journalism

BY GENEVA OVERHOLSER
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At the Democracy Fund, we believe that creating a stronger future for local news requires us to focus on transforming the relationship between news consumers and news producers. As we develop a new program to support and expand “Engaged Journalism,” we have sought to ensure that our new efforts are informed by the successes and struggles of the past – especially the civic journalism movement of the 1990s. This paper was commissioned for the purposes of understanding that history and what has changed since, so that we will be more likely to succeed today.

TOM GLAISYER | PROGRAM DIRECTOR, PUBLIC SQUARE

“Want to attract more readers? Try listening to them.” That was the headline on Liz Spayd’s debut as *The New York Times*’ new public editor.¹ That she devoted her first column to the need to pay attention to readers’ views shows how central the idea of engagement has become for journalists.

Spayd was building on an emerging trend. *Mediashift* recently published a series of articles called “Redefining Engagement,” inspired by a conference in Portland last October.² (They provide a rich trove for anyone seeking to understand the movement.)

Consider also:

- Conferences are focused on this topic. The ONA London 2016 engagement conference in April examined how audiences discover and interact with the news, and an Engagement Summit in Macon, Georgia, in January that I attended produced this manifesto.³
- Books and reports are being written on the topic. Jake Batsell’s *Engaged Journalism: Connecting with Digitally Empowered News Audiences* explores how news organizations are experimenting with different approaches.⁴ In 2015, the same year Batsell’s book was published, a Reuters Institute report looked at engagement and the 2015 UK elections.⁵
- Universities are exploring the issue. The Engaging News Project at the University of Texas uses research to inform contemporary newsrooms about how to engage online audiences in commercially viable and democratically beneficial ways. The Agora Journalism Center at Oregon is focused on transformational advancements in journalism that enrich civic life for all community members.
- Platforms are being developed to support engagement. Hearken has built a platform that enables journalists to partner with the public to create stories. The Coral Project creates open-source tools for engagement, and more and more newsrooms are naming engagement editors, as Elia Powers describes.

In reflecting on this enthusiasm, and the new “engaged journalism” movement’s prospects for success, the question arises: How is the emerging engaged journalism different from what was called civic journalism in the 1990s? This white paper reviews the short life of civic journalism: its origins and history, its largely negative reception by the profession, and some of its successes. It then examines why civic journalism was met with such resistance, how the overall results were quite mixed, and how the conditions on the ground are now very different.

It also makes some suggestions for those who are pioneering new engaged practices today and care deeply about the important role journalism serves in preserving our democracy.

HISTORY

The symbolic launch of the civic journalism movement occurred more than a quarter-century ago, at the 1989 Associated Press Managing Editors convention in Des Moines, Iowa.⁶ It was there that Jay Rosen, a newly minted academic from New York University, told the editors they needed to fundamentally rethink their relationships with their communities as journalists.

It was a remarkable speech for several reasons. First, news organizations such as APME almost never heard from academics at their conventions. Second, Rosen was taking a shot directly at the heart of newspapers’ convictions about how they should cover their communities.

He told the editors:

“The newspaper of the future will have to rethink its relationship to all the institutions that nourish public life, from libraries to universities to cafes. It will have to do more than ‘cover’ these institutions when they happen to make news. It will have to do more than print their advertisements. The newspaper must see that its own health is dependent on the health of dozens of other agencies which pull people out of their private worlds. For the greater the pull of public life, the greater the need for the newspaper.”⁷

Resurrecting arguments made by the philosopher John Dewey in the 1920s, Rosen argued that democratic institutions of all kinds were fraying, and that democracy itself could be endangered unless action was taken to support civic and public life. He said it was fundamentally the role of newspapers to help provide that support – to go beyond their traditional charge of “informing the public” with interventions that enriched community life. In his 1999 book *What Are Journalists For?*, Rosen described this new formulation as a “craft that builds up the world while simultaneously describing it.”⁸

Doing so, Rosen argued, was not only a proper role for journalism but a shift that was very much in its self-interest. People need newspapers, he said, when they are robust participants in their communities, but much less so when they lead private lives.

Though Rosen was the speaker who synthesized the rationale for civic journalism, in many respects this argument paralleled other efforts in related “civic” fields. The scholar Robert Putnam was beginning his research into the loss of “social capital.” Emerging projects measuring the civic health of a community aimed to unlock community planning processes.

One type of project that emerged was the citizen forum, and perhaps the most well studied were those in Charlotte-Mecklenburg that tried to bridge divides and engage the public productively in development decisions starting in 1988.⁹

In the journalism community, many point to coverage of the 1988 presidential campaign (George H.W. Bush vs. Michael Dukakis), in which horse race journalism seemed to run amok, as a key moment that caused editors to act.

Well into the 1990s, interest grew in what became known as “civic journalism” (or “public journalism” in some circles). Newspaper editors around the country became adherents. Big chain owners like Knight Ridder took particular interest. Institutions like The Pew Charitable Trusts began to provide support. And newspapers started experimenting.

THE PROFESSION PUSHED BACK

For early supporters of the movement, civic journalism was a necessary corrective to newspapers' growing detachment from their communities. By this reasoning, newspapers had grown too focused on the importance of investigating potential corruption and of newsroom ethics rules that discouraged journalists from community participation.

The late *Washington Post* columnist, William Raspberry, captured this sense, observing that while it was obvious to readers that *The Post's* sportswriters wanted the Redskins to win, it was far less clear that Metro reporters were interested in success for the city more broadly.¹⁰

But in advocating wholesale change at American newsrooms, leaders of the civic journalism movement were taking on a supreme challenge. On the whole, newspapers at that time were highly resistant to change and fiercely opposed to any movement that might erode their independence or weaken their focus on investigating corruption and abuses of power in their community. Some of the leaders of the nation's most prestigious newspapers, including Howell Raines at *The New York Times* and Leonard Downie of *The Washington Post*, were firm opponents of civic journalism. Downie wrote that civic journalism erred in “forcing candidates to participate in dialogues with voters, by staging campaign events, by deciding what good citizenship is and force feeding it to citizens and voters, by pressuring citizens to register and vote when, as I say, nonvoting can also be viewed as an honorable and honest way to participate in the democratic process.” Raines, then editorial page editor at the *Times*, wrote that public journalism posed an “insidious danger, and that is that reporters and editors become public policy missionaries.”¹¹

The result was that the civic journalism movement enjoyed only modest success in the 1990s. While newspapers in places like Norfolk, Charlotte, Akron, and Wichita experimented, it was business as usual at most newspapers. And by the middle of the next decade, two other issues consumed newspapers' attention: the arrival of the internet and, beginning in 2008, a related precipitous decline in revenue that would only get worse.

However, in the quarter-century since Jay Rosen's speech, and long after the heyday of civic journalism, the practices associated with it have begun to make new inroads in American journalism. These new practices are fueled by new tools and technology and a hyper-connected audience. The “engaged journalism” of today, while sharing some DNA with civic

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journalism, is a uniquely contemporary trend. Many newspapers are attempting to engage their readers in a variety of ways, including the formation of reader advisory boards. Chains like Gannett have rolled out programs aimed at closing the distance between newspapers and their communities, often through broadening their coverage to more accurately reflect their communities. Many newspapers introduced engagement editors to their staff, a role specifically designed to promote interaction between newspapers and readers.

With their survival no longer certain, news entrepreneurs are trying a host of new approaches and economic models, some of which rely on civic journalism’s core principle of enriching public life. For example, one of the nation’s most successful startups, *The Texas Tribune*, receives a significant portion of its annual revenue through the sponsorship of newsmaker events attended by the public. Discussing the digital news startup *Billy Penn* in Philadelphia, Rosen observed that “things we argued for 20 years ago in the civic journalism movement now get built into news companies like Spirited Media, which owns *Billy Penn* and *The Incline*.”

EXAMPLES OF CIVIC JOURNALISM IN THE 1990S

Jack Swift, editor of the *Ledger-Enquirer* in Columbus, Georgia, was an early pioneer of civic journalism. Seeing little public reaction to his paper’s year-long project that attempted to set an agenda for Columbus, Swift decided to act on his own in 1988. According to Charlotte Grimes’ account of the civic journalism movement, “Whither the Civic Journalism Bandwagon? – Shorenstein Center,” Swift created a community task force and named himself a member.¹² “He hosted backyard barbecues for community leaders and his paper’s journalists,” she wrote. “He deployed the paper’s resources into a campaign of town hall meetings, civic networking and relentless coverage. Reporters wrote about the project for nearly two years.” These were actions, Grimes wrote, that “would become a pattern for much of civic journalism.”

Another pioneer was James Batten, CEO of Knight Ridder, who became alarmed at declining newspaper readership and, like Rosen, suspected that a decline in public life was a cause. Millions of Americans, he said, “feel little interest in – or responsibility for – their communities.” He longed for newspapers that were “warm and caring and funny and human, not just honest and professional and informative.”

Knight Ridder newspapers would become some of the most robust practitioners of civic journalism in the 1990s.

- If Jay Rosen was civic journalism’s theoretician, Davis “Buzz” Merritt, editor of *The Wichita Eagle*, was its leading practitioner. He signed up early to be a test case for Knight Ridder, vowing to cover election campaigns in new ways that put Kansas’ pressing problems at the center of attention. Merritt also traveled the country, giving speeches and appearing on panels to support the civic journalism cause.

- Another major civic journalism supporter was *The Charlotte Observer*. Its 18-month project, “Taking Back our Neighborhoods,” became a civic journalism classic in 1994. *The Observer* profiled 10 center-city neighborhoods in Charlotte that were plagued by high crime rates. In addition to that report, Grimes said the newspaper sponsored neighborhood meetings, drew up a “needs list” for each neighborhood, partnered with the United Way to coordinate volunteer activities, and hired a coordinator to foster better relations with the African American community. These efforts built upon the earlier citizens forums pioneered within the community.
- The *Akron Beacon-Journal* won a Pulitzer Prize for a 1993 series on the city’s race problems, “A Question of Race.” By the time the project was published, the paper had involved 160 organizations and 15,000 residents in some way. A pledge to help improve race relations was signed by 22,000 citizens, and the *Beacon-Journal* printed their names.

The civic journalism movement was significantly aided by several foundations and non-profits. The biggest effort came from The Pew Charitable Trusts and its Pew Center for Civic Journalism. Through a multimillion-dollar effort, the Pew Center sponsored conferences, training programs, and provided cash assistance to news organizations willing to try out new civic journalism approaches.¹³ According to its executive editor, Jan Schaffer, the Pew Center funded 120 newsroom projects.

Writing for NiemanLab last year, Schaffer said, “To be sure, journalism investigations often lead to widespread change.¹⁴ But, to me, so many of today’s journalism success stories seem pallid by comparison to what I saw during the period of civic journalism experimentation.

“Simply put: civic journalism worked... We learned that if you deliberately build in simple ways for people to participate – in community problems or elections – many will engage.”

THE MANY REASONS CIVIC JOURNALISM WAS RESISTED

The civic journalism movement ran up against gale-force headwinds. Among its many challenges:

The newspaper business had become highly profitable, with little economic incentive to change. Throughout most of civic journalism’s heyday in the 1990s, newspaper profits continued to climb, and most newspapers attained a quasi-monopoly status in their communities. The climate of innovation that is rising in journalism today was mostly absent at that time.

Civic journalism was viewed by some to be a challenge to investigative reporting, which in the post-Watergate era had become newspapers’ Holy Grail. The common perception held by many journalists was that newsrooms needed to be willing to take on the power brokers of a community, not cooperate with them.

For many newsrooms, detachment from the community was viewed as a necessary and praiseworthy practice, reinforced by robust ethics codes. Some editors and political reporters chose not to vote, believing that would enhance credibility. Far from encouraging community participation, conflict-of-interest concerns worked powerfully against it.

On the merits of civic journalism's aims, many editors thought the aims of the movement were ill advised. Len Downie, executive editor of *The Washington Post*, said it simply wasn't the role of a newspaper to try to influence the public life of a community. Even a newspaper-wide effort to increase voting participation – a staple of some early civic journalism experiments – was wrong-headed, he said. Others said that newspapers simply didn't have the expertise to decide how to intervene in a community.

There was little agreement on a definition for civic journalism. Its founders and leaders generally argued that this was purposeful – that the movement needed room to evolve. However, the lack of precision made it an easier target for criticism.

Finally, for some editors, the degree to which civic journalists presented concern for community as a revolutionary notion seemed a misreading of journalism's historic nature. Especially for those who had come up through community journalism, in papers that were smaller and that survived because they were embedded in the community, the idea of the newspaper as a caring connector – indeed as the lifeblood of the community – was a given and to present it as a new idea, an insult.

For a combination of reasons, a 1997 survey of APME found that only 7 percent of respondents strongly agreed that civic journalism was “an important way for many news organizations to reconnect with their alienated communities.”¹⁵ Slightly more than one-third strongly disagreed.

EARLY RESEARCH ON CIVIC JOURNALISM FOUND MIXED RESULTS

A 1999 review of academic research about civic journalism by Charlotte Grimes found some positive impact from civic journalism experiments, but also indications that moving the needle on participation in public life was a tall order. While cautioning that media effects are “slow and selective,” and that cause and effect were hard to separate, she made these observations on academic research:

“Citizen-based journalism has moved their attitudes but not their feet”

On the positive side, she wrote, “some researchers see signs that citizens may learn more about issues and candidates, think a little more highly of the news media, and have more of what's called ‘social capital’ – a collection of civic assets ranging from trust in each other to ways to work together – in places where civic journalism has a history.”

One poster child for the success narrative was *The Charlotte Observer's* “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” project. According to one survey, 81 percent of Charlotte residents recognized the 18-month project by name alone.

On broader measurements of civic participation, however, early research was mixed. One academic paper reported that some respondents felt “encouraged” to vote or “think more about politics” because of civic journalism projects. But others found little change. “Citizen-based journalism has moved their attitudes but not their feet,” wrote Philip Meyer and Deborah Potter after a 20-county survey in North Carolina.

Other studies documented the limited effects of civic journalism or, in some cases, challenged fundamental precepts.

One of the organizing principles of civic journalism was that news organizations needed to recommit themselves to coverage of campaign issues and steer away from a preoccupation with horse race coverage. Grimes asserts that a horse race obsession in coverage of the 1988 presidential election was fundamental to civic journalism's birth.

However, the study by Meyer and Potter found no ill effects of poll-based coverage. "The more people know about polls, the more they know about substantive issues," they wrote. Rather than stifle interest in issues, they said, polls "arouse and maintain interest in the campaign, and encourage, albeit in a small way, citizens to learn more about ... the issues."

Grimes also highlighted one huge campaign project, by *The Bergen Record* in 1996, that "by almost every measure," had no effect. *The Record* followed the civic journalism playbook, focusing on candidates' positions on issues and bringing in community voices with 54 pages of coverage. The result, Grimes wrote, "was that compared to readers of other newspapers, *Record* readers were no more knowledgeable, no more interested, and no more likely to vote."

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DRASTIC CHANGE IN CONDITIONS ON THE GROUND

The conditions that were so inhospitable to the civic journalism reform movement are dramatically different today. In particular, the no-reason-to-change argument is gone. The newspaper business has been transformed from an industry licensed to print money to an endangered one in less than a decade as the internet severely damaged its business model. Many believe television news will be the next to be threatened. The implications are profound:

- American journalism's aversion to trying new approaches has sharply diminished. Newsrooms today are increasingly innovative and are furiously trying new strategies to find new economic footing.
- Experiments abound in the hundreds of news startups surfacing each year. Nearly all of them place engagement with their readers and viewers as a first principle of success. Some consciously adopt the fundamentals of civic journalism. These efforts are turbocharged by digital technologies that enable a more robust interaction between journalists and the public.
- For many of these startups, the tensions newspaper editors felt between civic journalism and investigative reporting aren't nearly as sharp because they aren't trying to do both. Newspapers held a virtual monopoly in their communities and felt a responsibility to do it all; digital news operations today rarely have the capacity to manage both civic journalism and investigative reporting and thus no longer carry that burden.
- With the rise of new business models and new editorial strategies, a core argument against civic journalism — that it's not the newsroom's business to promote a community's public life — is diminishing. Many once-sacrosanct principles are changing.

Not all news sites today feel obligated to adopt the objective reporting model. At some news organizations, reporters and editors are encouraged to participate in the life of the community, as long as their actions are transparent to readers. For some digital news sites, fostering public life is the very core of their mission, and an increasing number of them are making money through sponsorship of community events.

WHAT CAN THE CIVIC JOURNALISM MOVEMENT TELL THOSE WHO ARE PIONEERING ENGAGED JOURNALISM?

Today's engaged journalism, civic journalism's replacement in this digital age, enjoys an utterly different environment from the one that confronted civic journalists – one in which disruption prevails, change is the new constant, and innovation is seen, almost universally, as essential. The contemporary movement is landing on far more fertile terrain.

Yet, for those who now seek to both sustain journalism's essential role in society and to nurture a new era of civic vibrancy, the fundamental question that vexed the first movement continues to challenge its successor: How does journalism best serve a community?

Consider some of journalism's traditional, fundamental responsibilities to a democracy: To hold the powerful accountable. To bring societal ills to public view that some might prefer to ignore. By their very nature, these duties provoke discomfort and condemnation in others. To perform them requires a considerable degree of independent mindedness.

Taken to an extreme, the traditional view results in the press becoming a powerful and arrogant institution, out of touch with those whom it exists to serve. An obsession with toppling the mighty can make journalists forget their responsibility to chronicle the humble. The regard of peers can be more alluring than the views of the masses.

Such developments are in no small part what civic journalism rose up to contradict. But the fact that its prescriptions seemed to many to threaten the independence essential to a free press is a substantial reason for the resistance it encountered. That concern remains today. Will journalism that is audience-centered offer the public information that it would never ask for but that is essential for effective self-governance? Will journalism focused on being responsive to the public stand up against powerful know-nothings, science deniers, and the like? Will those participating in the co-creation of engaged journalism agree that promoting the health of one's community requires some content that feels compassionate, but also some that feels aggressive, intrusive, and unwelcome?

EXPECTATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Today, traditional journalism's very existence is threatened; those who provide it seek desperately to determine how it will be supported financially. At the same time, the quality of civic life in communities across the country seems even more endangered than when Jay Rosen gave his seminal speech in Des Moines. More than ever, journalism must foster civic engagement rather than discourage it, and ensure that fairness is as central a value as fearlessness.

Beyond this, though it may not directly affect the bottom line, journalism can rebuild trust through community engagement.

As the problems for news organizations grow, so does the awareness of needed solutions for both concerned citizens and embattled journalists. Those involved in engaged journalism – be it a direct descendant or a significant offshoot of civic journalism – stand to benefit from their predecessors' experience in revealing complex challenges. The field seems closer to resolving such challenges together with communities.

DEMOCRACY FUND TAKEAWAYS

- Engaged Journalism today has to be about more than what the newsroom can do for the community. It must concern what newsrooms and communities can do together. The internet and new digital tools give audiences more power than they ever had during the height of civic journalism. As such, the question is not *if* newsrooms should engage their communities, it is *how* they can do it in a way that enriches the public square.
- The boundaries around what is considered to be the practices and purpose of engaged journalism need to be clear. Without clarity of purpose, no matter how well intentioned the efforts will dissipate if the term becomes a catchall. Meaningless to those who claim it and a target for critics who may be inclined to dismiss it as mere fad. This isn't to say the term needs to be treated like a trademark where it is bestowed upon an activity by a licensor, but rather that care should be taken to delineate efforts that meaningfully leverage a feedback loop between the audience, and the news producers, and those that fake it.
- Engaged journalism must not distract journalists from their watchdog role or infringe on the independence of the newsroom. Instead, engaged journalism and the feedback loop between the community and the newsroom on which it relies must be used to expand editorial judgement not compromise it. For it to succeed, engaged journalism must strengthen the newsroom's ability to take on challenging local stories and hold leaders accountable by bringing the weight of the public to bear in more direct ways.
- News organizations should put in place a way to assess the value engaged journalism brings to the outlet. Does it indirectly increase trust and the legitimacy of the outlet, or the number of people the outlet reaches or the income it generates? Clarity around whether results are meeting expectations will aid those seeking to spread the practice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Geneva Overholser is a Senior Fellow at the Democracy Fund, a bipartisan foundation working to ensure that our political system is able to withstand new challenges and deliver on its promise to the American people. Bringing extensive expertise in the fields of journalism and local news media, Geneva advises the Public Square Program on ways to strengthen journalism at the state and local levels and on efforts to increase public engagement with news.

For more information, please visit www.democracyfund.org.

ENDNOTES

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