

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

5-1-1996

Public Journalism: Attitudes and Practices

Poonkulali Thangavelu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Thangavelu, Poonkulali, "Public Journalism: Attitudes and Practices" (1996). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2342.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/2342>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

PUBLIC JOURNALISM: ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

BY

POONKULALI THANGAVELU

B.A. (Economics), P.S.G. College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, India, 1990

MBA (Finance and marketing) Bharathidasan Institute of Management, Trichirapalli, India, 1992

A Thesis

**Submitted to the University of Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Journalism**

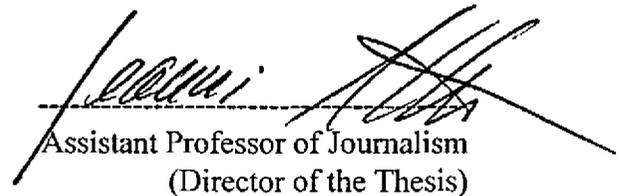
May 1996

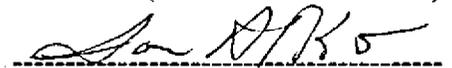
3411.82
.T3724
1996

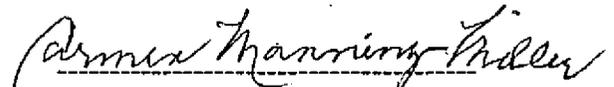
PUBLIC JOURNALISM: ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

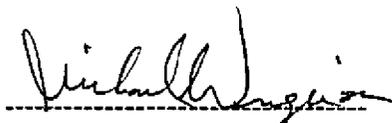
BY

POONKULALI THANGAVELU


Assistant Professor of Journalism
(Director of the Thesis)


Assistant Professor of Journalism


Assistant Professor of Journalism


Dean of the Graduate School

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge here the contribution of the following persons towards bringing this thesis to its final shape:

First of all, my advisor Dr. Jeanni Atkins who painstakingly guided me through all the stages of this thesis and made a lot of suggestions and improvements which shaped the questionnaire, especially, and the final draft of this report.

Thanks to Mr. Joseph Atkins and Dr. Carmen Manning-Miller for taking time off from their schedules to serve on my examining committee and for their suggestions. I would also like to mention that it was Dr. Donald Sneed who first introduced me to the public journalism movement in one of his classes, thus giving me the idea for this thesis

I also wish to thank my parents for giving me a sound education, the culmination of which is this thesis work and the University of Mississippi Department of Journalism for granting me an assistantship which made it financially possible for me to pursue my ambitions of graduate study in the United States.

Finally, I would like to thank all the survey respondents for taking time off from their busy schedules to answer my questions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION	1
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEORY	1
THE OBJECTIVITY VERSUS ADVOCACY DEBATE	3
THE PUBLIC JOURNALISM MOVEMENT	5
PUBLIC JOURNALISM RATIONALE	6
CRITICISM OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM	8
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	9
METHODOLOGY	10
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	10
ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY	11
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	12
THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN THE COMMUNITY	12
EMERGENCE AND NEED FOR PUBLIC JOURNALISM	16
PUBLIC JOURNALISM DEFINITIONS	20
PUBLIC JOURNALISM INITIATIVES	22
PUBLIC JOURNALISM DETRACTORS	32
3. DATA ANALYSIS	40
4. FINDINGS	71
DEFINITION	71
NEED FOR PUBLIC JOURNALISM	71
ROLE OF THE NEWSPAPER IN THE COMMUNITY	72
CRITICISM	73
CONCLUDING REMARKS	75
BIBLIOGRAPHY	76
APPENDIX A. SAMPLE COVER LETTER	81
APPENDIX B. SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE	83
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR	87

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
BACKGROUND INFORMATION	41
Table 1	41
Table 2	41
Table 3	42
Table 4	42
Table 5	43
DEFINITIONS OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM	44
Table 6	44
Table 7	44
Table 8	45
Table 9	45
NEED FOR PUBLIC JOURNALISM	46
Table 10	46
Table 11	46
Table 12	47
Table 13	47
Table 14	48
Table 15	48
Table 16	49
Table 17	49
Table 18	50
ROLE OF THE NEWSPAPER IN THE COMMUNITY	50
Table 19	50
Table 20	51
Table 21	51
Table 22	52
Table 23	52
Table 24	53
Table 25	53
Table 26	54
Table 27	54
Table 28	55
CRITICISM OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM	55
Table 29	55
Table 30	56
Table 31	56

Table 32	57
Table 33	57
Table 34	58
Table 35	58
Table 36	59
Table 37	59
Table 38	60
Table 39	60
Table 40	61
Table 41	61
Table 42	62
Table 43	62
Table 44	63
COMMENTARY	63
Table 45	63
Table 46	65
Table 47	67
Table 48	70
Table 49	70

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Social Responsibility Theory

Human beings are rational animals who can think for themselves and distinguish between right and wrong. This is the postulate on which the libertarian theory of the press, which became widely accepted in the 17th century in the United States, was based. Everyone should be free to express themselves to further a market place of ideas critical to a functioning democracy. The press operates mostly free of government controls which means freedom to be either responsible or irresponsible¹.

In the 20th century however, the social responsibility theory of the press became popular. People lost faith in the self-correcting process of the market and began to demand specific standards from the press, to be enforced by legislation if necessary. Freedom imposes responsibility to society to carry out certain essential mass communication functions, they argued. To the extent that the press assumes these responsibilities, the libertarian theory of free market forces is workable. However, if the press does not assume these responsibilities, an external agency has to see that the

¹

Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, Four Theories of the Press, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956, 45

essential functions of mass communications are carried out. Freedom of expression must be balanced against social interests and the rights of others². The functions of the ideal press according to traditional theory are :

1. Servicing the political system by providing information, discussion and debate on public affairs.
2. Enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government.
3. Safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving as a watchdog against government.
4. Servicing the economic system, primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising.
5. Providing entertainment.
6. Maintaining its own financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests.³

The social responsibility theory accepts these press functions and the view that the press has not performed its duties to the fullest in these respects. While the press should service the economic system, this should not take precedence over promoting democracy and enlightening the public. The entertainment the press provides should be monitored for the public good. According to this theory, some media organizations might be justified even without being financially self-sufficient due to the service they provide.⁴

The recommendations of the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, set up in 1942 by Henry Luce, editor -in-chief of Time Inc., have become the basic reference point for the functions the press should perform. This commission recommended that newspapers should provide:

2

Ibid., 74

3

Ibid.

4

Ibid.

1. A truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning It is no longer enough to report the fact truthfully. It is now necessary to report the truth about the fact.
2. A forum for the exchange of comment and criticism.
3. The projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society.
4. The presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society.
5. Full access to the day's intelligence.⁵

How exactly these functions should be carried out has been a subject of debate. Some journalists say that the only responsibility the press has is to accurately and fairly present the news in an objective manner. Objectivity has become a way of professionalizing journalism and deflecting criticism. However, objectivity as a means to responsible journalism has not been accepted by all in the journalism community. Today, the debate over activism versus objectivity has surfaced again in the discussion of public journalism.

The Objectivity Versus Advocacy Debate

Proponents of the objectivity theory urge reporters to be neutral observers and not participants in the social process. Newspapers should not get involved in community and social affairs but merely report on happenings in a "he said," "she answered," "they meant" format⁶ The rationale for this style of writing is the idea that it is the role of journalists to be independent, neutral observers who provide the readers with verifiable facts and various versions of the truth. The reporter, however, does not give opinions about which version to follow. That is left to readers who draw their own conclusions

⁵

Ibid., 87-91

⁶

Peter Andrews, "The Press," American Heritage, October 1994, 64

and make up their own minds about public policy. Reporters might present evidence for both sides of the argument and make decisions about which sources to use, but they are supposed to maintain a third-person point of view and not become actors in the story. Values and opinions are confined to the editorials and columns.⁷

However, there are those who support more of an advocacy role for the press. They say that there is nothing in the definition of journalism which says that a reporter should not say what is to be done about the facts they report on. Objectivity stops reporters from providing insights when they are needed and does not involve analysis and assessment, they say.⁸ People who condemn this sort of advocacy say that those who step over the boundary become propagandists and lose their credibility.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a brief period of newspaper activism was noted, harking back to the time of Horace Greeley who established The New York Tribune in 1841 and introduced the modern editorial page wherein he put forth his views on everything from clean streets to pure milk for children⁹. A growing number of newspaper reporters, especially those who entered the profession in the late 1960s, were getting involved in the social and political controversies of the period. They did not subscribe to the notion that it was the job of newspeople to report the news and avoid making the

7

Robert Miraldi, Muckraking and Objectivity: Journalism's Colliding Traditions, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990, 15

8

Ibid., 158

9

Peter Andrews, "The Press," 42

news themselves. They argued with editors about “whether or not it was proper for newspeople to participate in protest marches, work for political candidates, wear black arm bands to press conferences, and buy newspaper ads with headlines like, ‘Post Reporters Against the War.’”¹⁰ This movement soon died out though as people condemned this activism as “a bastard form of journalism” and asked reporters to “take out the goddamn editorializing.”¹¹

However, lately, activism has been reborn as newspapers across the country have started getting more involved in their communities in a movement loosely characterised as public, or civic, journalism. Proponents argue that newspapers should do more than merely report on the news. Newspapers should be used as a tool to help improve their communities, they say.

The Public Journalism Movement

This movement had its beginnings in the coverage of the 1988 presidential campaign when many people noted that newspapers did not really give them relevant information necessary to cast informed votes.¹² On the contrary, newspapers were merely reporting on the candidates’ speeches, accusations and counter-accusations without getting out hard

¹⁰

Kent MacDougall, The Press: A critical look from the inside, New Jersey: Dow Jones Books, 1972, 165

¹¹

Robert Miraldi, Muckraking and Objectivity, Greenwood Press Inc., 155

¹²

Alicia Shepard, “The Gospel of Public Journalism,” American Journalism Review, September 1994, 30

core information on where candidates stood on various important issues and their impact on voters' lives. To change this situation, The Wichita Eagle initiated the Voter Project in time for the 1990 election coverage. The Eagle conducted surveys and focus groups to find out what readers thought the crucial issues were. Then, the paper tried to keep candidates focused on these issues and downplayed the usual charge-countercharge campaign rhetoric.¹³

This movement is taking various forms today. In her American Journalism Review article, the "Gospel of Public Journalism," Alicia Shepard describes public journalism:

So far its components include asking readers to help decide what the paper covers and how it covers it; becoming a more active player and less an observer; lobbying for change on the news pages; finding sources whose voices are often unheard; and, above all, dramatically strengthening the bonds between newspaper and community. At its heart is the assumption that a newspaper should act as a catalyst for change."¹⁴

Public Journalism Rationale

Davis Merritt, editor and vice president of the Wichita Eagle, and Jay Rosen, associate professor of journalism at New York University and director of the Project on Public Life, are the two main people who are associated with this movement and who coined the term "public journalism." Davis Merritt says explains the need for this kind of journalism:

1. The viability of public life and the value of journalism are inextricably bound together.

¹³

Ibid., 31

¹⁴

Ibid., 29

2. Public life cannot regain its vitality on a diet of information alone, for there's far too much of it for even the most well-intentioned citizen to digest. If journalists view their job as merely providing information - simply telling the news in a detached way - they will not be particularly helpful to public life or to their profession.

3. The objective of our journalism must be to re-engage citizens in public life. To make that shift, we must take two steps: (1) Add to the definition of our job the *additional* objective of helping public life go well, and then (2) Develop the journalistic tools and reflexes necessary to reach that objective.¹⁵

Public journalism is becoming increasingly important at a time when 71% of the respondents in a Times-Mirror Center for The People and The Press survey view the news media as getting in the way of society solving its problems rather than helping it solve them. Public journalism involves the following mental shifts:

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

Its practitioners remember that they are citizens as well as journalists. When public life goes well, true deliberation occurs and leads to potential solutions

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

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

If we get the proper connections right, the separations will take care of themselves

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

By describing realistic possibilities that lie beyond immediate solutions, it informs people of their potential choices for the future

15

Davis Merritt and Jay Rosen, *Imagining Public Journalism: An Editor and Scholar Reflect on the Birth of an Idea*, Fifth Roy W. Howard Lecture, April 13, 1995, Bloomington: Indiana University.

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

*It therefore relentlessly seeks ways to encourage public involvement and true deliberation; ways to build the public capacity to talk about and form solutions*¹⁶

Merritt goes so far as to caution that if these realities are not taken into account and if people leave public life to the professionals and experts, they will not need journalists.

There is also the danger that the democratic system will fail.

Jay Rosen sees the public journalism movement as “Investing a newspaper’s prestige, editorial effort and intelligence in making the community a better place to live and making public life work.”¹⁷ He wants journalists to see that they have a stake in public life as members of the community, since whatever happens to the community also happens to journalists. But this does not mean that journalists become biased.

Criticism of Public Journalism

This movement has both its supporters and its detractors. The latter mainly accuse newspapers of getting into public journalism to combat falling circulation figures. There is no doubt that newspaper circulation figures across the country have plummeted.

The smell of death permeates the newspaper business these days. Every few months there is a repetition of the now-familiar ritual: the desperate search for a buyer, the anguished countdown, the farewell edition, the grieving in the community, the latest batch of reporters and editors tossed out on the street. More than 150 daily newspapers have folded since 1970. Big, deep-pocket corporations - Time, Gannett, Hearst, Cox - have proved as helpless at bucking this tide as small-town

¹⁶

Davis Merritt, Public Journalism & Public Life, Hillsdale: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, 1995, 113

¹⁷

Rebecca Ross Albers, "Going Public - A new role?" Presstime, September 1994, 28

owners¹⁸

Critics also say that this movement poses a threat to the traditional objectivity of the press. A paper's credibility will be at doubt once it has a stake in the news it covers. They also contend that it is the responsibility of a newspaper to set its own agenda and not let outsiders do it, which is what happens when readers' opinions are sought on what should be covered and what they think is important. They say that public journalism is not an entirely new idea and has been around in different forms for a long time.

The infant public journalism movement is certainly a controversial one. Its supporters say that it is alright for a paper to have a certain stake in the outcome of what it reports and that papers can support causes. Critics say that a paper should not have any stake whatsoever in the outcome of its reporting as this will compromise its objectivity.

Purpose of the Study

The public journalism movement has attracted quite a bit of attention in the last few years. The aim of this study is to find out the views of editors across the country on the pros and cons of the public journalism movement. Questions explored in the survey of editors call into the following broad categories:

1. The role of the newspaper in the community
2. Rationale and need for public journalism
3. Criticism of the public journalism movement

¹⁸

Howard Kurtz, Media Circus - The Trouble with America's Newspapers, New York: Times Books, 1993, 315

4. Public journalism initiatives
5. Support for the movement and the future of the movement

Methodology

A review of the literature was conducted to obtain the background information for the study. Periodicals and books read will be discussed in chapter two. The main source of information for the study, however, is a survey of editors of daily newspapers across the country. From this population, a random sample of 300 was drawn. The sample is grouped into three categories based on circulation:

Large(circulations greater than 90,000)

Medium(circulation between 26,000 and 90,000)

Small(circulation less than 26,000)

A sample of 100 was randomly selected from each category from the Editor & Publisher Yearbook. To ensure adequate geographical representation, about two papers from each state were chosen for each circulation category. Questionnaires were mailed to editors and reminders were sent later to those who did not respond to the first mailing. Seventy-eight responses were obtained and these were then statistically analyzed.

Significance of the Study

This study reports the views of editors across the country on the pros and cons of this controversial movement and gives some idea about how much they support the movement. It will give journalism students a view of the work environment they are going to enter. The information obtained about current journalistic practices in newsrooms could be used by journalism educators to train their students accordingly.

Organization of the Study

The literature review chapter which follows discusses the role of the press, the rationale for public journalism and how it is defined. It also identifies the activities which constitute public journalism and outlines the criticisms of the movement. Chapter three consists of an analysis of data from survey respondents. Chapter four includes a summary of findings and conclusions.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of the Press in the Community

In The Newspaper and Society, Bird and Merwin note that the newspaper influences society and is in its turn influenced by society.¹ They say that a newspaper must have a role in society other than that of being a profit making business enterprise; it must also aid in the formation of public opinion which is accomplished through several steps. First, give readers the news as fully and accurately as possible. Second, a newspaper should explain and interpret events to help readers form opinions. Third, it should guide public opinion by pointing out to readers what seems to promise the most good for the most people after presenting impartially the two sides of every issue. They point out that in small communities, the press ranks right up there with the school and the church in terms of being an ethical and binding power in the community. This presents a lot of opportunity for community leadership.

Rob Anderson, Robert Dardenne and George M. Killenberg write that the people in a community should talk about the direction their community is headed and that the

¹

George L. Bird and Frederic E. Merwin(editors), The Newspaper and Society, New York: Prentice-Hall,Inc., 1942, 353

newspaper should play an important role in such a conversation. Their book, The Conversation of Journalism, says that newspapers form an integral part of any community and should help the community know all about itself.² This requires not merely informing but communicating as well. The authors believe that news should not be merely delivered to the public but that the public should be allowed to participate in identifying issues.. This does not mean that newspapers abandon their traditional role of providing information on crucial matters . It means, however, keeping open the lines of communication between the newspaper and the citizens .

Davis Merritt advocates that the role of the press is to be a fair-minded participant in a community that works.³ The very existence of the press, he believes, depends on the viability of public life. A public that is not concerned about its community has no need for newspapers;therefore, journalists have a stake in the viability of public life. He says that the function of a journalist should be to help facilitate decision-making on the outcome in the manner of a referee. The referee does not impinge on the game yet his presence is necessary to see that the rules of the game are followed. To maintain credibility, the referee should not show interest in the score except to see that it is arrived at following the rules. Similarly, the journalist knows the rules , which have been decided upon by the democratic public, and should see that the process works according to these rules. Other than that, the journalist should not exhibit any interest in the final

² Rob Anderson, Robert Dardenne and George M. Killenberg, The Conversation of Public Journalism, Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1994, 97-123

³ Davis Merritt, Public Journalism& Public Life, 94-95

score. Merritt agrees that public life can go on without the journalist. But in that case, outcomes, if they occur, are decided as shakily as the outcome of games without referees which are determined on the basis of who is loudest, strongest or most willing to hedge on the rules, who owns the ball or who is willing to contest for the longest time.

When Katherine Fanning was a newspaper editor in Anchorage in the mid'70s, she decided that she had to get involved with the local community⁴. So she became a member of the Chamber of Commerce, the United Way, the state Educational Broadcasting Commission, a community planning effort called Operation Breakthrough and the Alaska Repertory Theater. This involvement paid off; she got one of her best stories from the Educational Broadcasting Commission when a state senator transferred the ownership of some state-owned buildings to himself and then made off. She got this information in the course of a confidential session of the commission and decided to resign so that she could run this story.⁵

Other stories came from her other connections. A newspaper that maintains a relationship with the community without surrendering its integrity, Fanning says, will be a survivor. If a newspaper does not maintain this essential connection, it risks being irrelevant and then nothing in the world can save it. So many of the institutions a paper covers such as the public schools and the political system are in trouble, Fanning points out, and as a constitutionally protected business the press has a social responsibility to

4

Katherine Fanning, "Connect With Community or Perish," Nieman Reports, Spring 1994, 60

5

Ibid.

help find solutions to these problems. Newspapers must be citizens and they can't do this by being aloof and distant . The press is not an institution unto itself ; if the community is dysfunctional, the paper is also likely to be dysfunctional. ⁶

Thomas Winship , in his article “The Joys of an Activist Editor”⁷, express pride in being called an activist editor. Under his editorship, The Boston Globe ran some articles on political corruption in the state government which led to a campaign for political reform in the state. These articles, while being factually accurate were not totally objective. Stories were also written on the Metropolitan Boston Transit System, busing and the Vietnam War. The Globe urged Washington to stop the war even though the Massachusetts economy was booming because of Pentagon contracts. The busing stories took a pro-busing stance. The Spotlight team was also set up to investigate political corruption, a favorite topic.

Winship gives this advice to activist editors⁸:

- Don't try it unless your publishers really support you and believe in the importance of newspapers in a free society.
- Be constant with the flow of activist journalism and don't do it just once a year to get a Pulitzer prize.
- Concentrate on issues that most editors would agree are right and ethically sound

6

Ibid., 62

7

Thomas Winship, “The Joys of an Activist Editor,” Nieman Reports, Spring 1994,

63

8

Ibid., 65

for the community.

- Don't lose too many campaigns as neither the boss nor the readers can tolerate habitual losers.
- Keep track of the bottom line and see to it that activism is not at the expense of declining circulation.
- Convince readers that your papers are the most useful in town

Rather than solving problems themselves, Arthur Charity suggests that journalists should be creating the capacity within a community to solve its own problems.⁹ Charity's Doing Public Journalism is a practical manual for public journalism practitioners which tells how to practice public journalism, make newspapers more relevant to people as citizens and cites various public journalism initiatives. He writes that traditionally, when investigative journalism exposes something, some law or the other is changed and citizens are mute spectators. No new capacity is created in the community. With public journalism, on the contrary, journalists know they have succeeded when they add some new ability which people continue to use and which empowers them.

Emergence and Need for Public Journalism

The emergence of public journalism has been traced to the general discontent with coverage of the 1988 presidential elections. Fifty-one percent of the electorate voted in the elections. This was the lowest turnout in 64 years. Merritt had observed in an open editorial at that time,

⁹

Arthur Charity, Doing Public Journalism, New York: Guilford Press, 1995, 160

The constitution requires that we do it again in four years whether we need it or want it, and that's not a pretty thought as we stand in the shambles of the 1988 presidential race and contemplate the threat of another one sometime soon.

The dreary thought has nothing to do with who won or lost the presidency. Rather it has to do with the nature of the campaign, the performance of journalists and candidates in it, and what those say about the future of the election process. . . .

The campaign just concluded showed at its frustrating worst the mutual bond of expediency that has formed over the years between campaigns and the media, particularly television. Together they have learned that feeding the lowest common appetite among the voters is safer, cheaper, and less demanding than running the risk, for the campaigns, and the expense, for the media, of providing in-depth information

The hard truth that journalists and their organizations face is that the campaign people aren't going to change simply because it would be right to do so. The campaigns have learned they can produce results without risk. So changing the contract is up to the media¹⁰.

When the 1990 Kansas gubernatorial elections rolled around, Merritt decided that it was time to introduce change. The change would not be introduced by the politicians who would stick to the tried-and-tested horse-race tactics, nor would it be introduced by the public who did not know the possibilities that change would bring. So the media would have to introduce it, he decided. The Eagle based its coverage of the elections on the philosophy that the candidates were going to have to address the issues whether they wanted to or not. The Eagle had a decided bias about the coverage; the voters were entitled to have the candidates talk about the issues in depth. Merritt was supported in this endeavor by Glenn Guzzo, assistant to Knight-Ridder Vice-President of News, Jennie Buckner, who was looking for a newspaper willing to try new ways of approaching

¹⁰

Davis Merritt, Public Journalism & Public Life, 80

election coverage. Knight-Ridder was prepared to provide budgetary support for such an effort¹¹.

This project came to be known as “Your Vote Counts.” The ABC affiliate, KAKE-TV was roped in as a partner in order to gain a larger audience. The paper ran a weekly issues box on Sundays in which the candidates’ positions were outlined. Voter turnout went up through the state and more so in the areas in which the Eagle’s coverage was available. Also, readers were more familiar with the issues involved in the election in the Eagle’s readership area than elsewhere in the state. The Eagle had got out of the press box and onto the field, as a fair-minded participant with an expressed interest in the process going well, and the effort had paid off. The Eagle had a new purpose from then on; that of revitalizing a dying public process.¹² How the voter project worked and the results will be discussed in the section on public journalism initiatives.

Merritt writes that between the two extremes of total non-involvement and Hearst-like meddling is a promising middle ground in which public journalism operates; while remaining neutral on specifics, practitioners move beyond detachment to care whether a resolution occurs. He believes that credibility is most important in journalism and should not be risked. But he also states that credibility cannot arise from a contrived detachment that sets journalists apart from other citizens. A person who has credibility with others possesses the attributes of intellectual honesty, fair-mindedness,

¹¹

Ibid., 81

¹²

Ibid., 84

thoughtfulness, awareness of events and most important of all, cares about what happens and shares common concerns with others about how life goes.¹³

Traditional journalists, while striving for intellectual honesty, fair-mindedness, thoughtfulness and general awareness, insist that they cannot care about or not be caught caring about outcomes. Merritt cautions that the credibility of journalism is at stake if this attitude persists. Thus, there is a need for public journalism to make a connection for the common cause rather than remain separate. This involves a fundamental shift in the relationship of a journalist to public life and recognition of the fact that people overwhelmed with information and news cannot make the effective decisions vital to a democracy. Democracy requires shared and relevant information and discussion of its implications; journalism must do a better job of providing these things.¹⁴ He advises that the general concept of conflict being the highest coin in the journalistic realm should be reevaluated¹⁵. Journalists should not merely seek to report on conflict but should strive to provide information that helps people make better decisions and make democracy work.

The need for public journalism has also been likened to the economic concept of value added. Jay Rosen says that people will pay for a good or service only if it gives them something they could not have gotten cheaper or better elsewhere.¹⁶ Thus, people will

¹³

Davis Merritt, Public Journalism & Public Life, 117

¹⁴

Ibid., 117

¹⁵

Davis Merritt, "Imagining Public Journalism: An Editor and Scholar Reflect on the Birth of an Idea," Roy W. Howard Public Lecture, Indiana University, 1995, 11

¹⁶

Arthur Charity, Doing Public Journalism, 155

not pay for a Rolls Royce if all they want is transportation. They won't pay boutique prices if they don't mind shopping at a Price Club or Office Depot. Products such as rotary phones, stock tickers or vinyl records are no longer in demand since technology has made them obsolescent. Every successful company has something that makes people buy its products rather than a competitors. Rosen points out that most forms of the newer, better journalism don't have any added value.

If people truly want short, snappy news stories, they can get them through radio, "Headline News," and more and more on-line services - with animation, audio, and video to boot. Sports, business, entertainment, and even political news arrives faster by cable and broadcast TV and is covered in more depth in specialized magazines and newsletters. Communities can connect, in social terms, through public access channels and electronic bulletin boards, as well as through a newspaper. And as to good, old-fashioned, in-depth hard news: people have never wanted that just for its own sake. It has always answered some more basic human need - a need for entertainment; for a good read on a Sunday morning; for details on an event, law, or policy of significant personal interest; or for participation in a political community - all of which needs already are or soon will be answered better by another, newer medium except for one. The only advantage print-broadcast combinations have (and will continue to have) over all other media is their power to reach everyone at once, and the newspaper's ability to help that audience conduct an ongoing conversation in depth.¹⁷

Public Journalism Definitions

No clear definition has emerged as yet for public journalism. Some of the definitions mentioned are:

The idea that newspapers should reach beyond their traditional role of providing news and information to become a catalyst for public awareness and action.¹⁸

¹⁷

¹⁸ Ibid.

Editor & Publisher, October 15, 1994, 6

Public journalism is not a settled doctrine or a strict code of conduct but an unfolding philosophy about the place of the journalist in public life. This philosophy has emerged most clearly in recent initiatives in the newspaper world that show journalists trying to connect with their communities in a different way, often by encouraging civic participation or regrounding the coverage of politics in the imperatives of public discussion and debate.¹⁹

Public service projects that have gone beyond reporting and editorializing to provide hands-on community leadership.²⁰

Public journalism is nothing more than the conviction that journalism's business is about making citizenship work²¹.

The goal of public journalism - a.k.a civic journalism, public service journalism or community-assisted reporting- is to "reconnect" citizens with their newspapers, their communities and the political process, with newspapers playing a role not unlike that of a community organizer. According to the gospel of public journalism, professional passivity is passe; activism is hot. Detachment is out; participation is in. Experts are no longer the quote-machines of choice; readers' voices must be heard.²²

Edward M. Fouhy, executive director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism in Washington, says that civic journalism does not tell the public how to act. Rather, it aims to provide information - even though it may not be traditional "news" - to help people tackle problems.²³ Bailey Thomson, editorial page editor at the Mobile Press Register, sees public journalism as "A very conservative effort to broaden the model a bit and take into account a stake in this enterprise called democracy that goes beyond just

¹⁹

Frank Denton and Esther Thorson, "Civic Journalism, Does It Work," special report for Pew Center for Civic Journalism, 3

²⁰

Gannett newspapers advertorial, Editor & Publisher, March 11, 1995

²¹

Arthur Charity, Doing Public Journalism, 9

²²

Alicia C. Shepard, "The Gospel of Public Journalism," 29

²³

William Glaberson, A New Press Role: Solving Problems, New York Times, October 3, 1994, D6

publishing the news.²⁴

Different projects have been initiated across the country based on these various definitions of what public journalism ought to accomplish. The following section discusses some of these initiatives.

Public Journalism Initiatives

Public journalism projects have been carried out in various states and in different newspapers. Some of the initiatives are detailed below.

The Voter Project

The aim of the Wichita Eagle's Voter Project was to get candidates in the 1990 Kansas gubernatorial elections talking about the real issues involved rather than just engage in horse-race campaigning. This would help citizens make better voting decisions.²⁵ Reports of the Eagle's new coverage strategies gained publicity, both inside and outside Knight - Ridder. Other newspapers and institutions decided to adopt these ideas for the coverage of the 1992 presidential elections. The Charlotte Observer's reporters asked the contenders specific questions about the issues that their readers were interested in, questions that the readers asked were repeated to the candidates by the reporters. The Observer then ran white space under the pictures of those candidates who did not respond. Voter participation for the 1992 elections was 55.9 percent, an increase

²⁴

Judith Sheppard, "Climbing Down From The Ivory Tower," American Journalism Review, May 1995, 20

²⁵

Davis Merritt, Public Journalism & Public Life, 82

over that for 1988 and a reversal of a decades-long trend of falling voter participation.²⁶

Encouraged by this response, the Eagle decided to take this approach beyond the elections and embarked on another project.

The People Project: Solving It Ourselves

This project of the Eagle sought to get people involved in thinking about solutions to problems rather than just reporting on the community's problems in the paper. Other people across the country, such as Jay Rosen in New York, were also seriously thinking and writing about the decline in public life.

The Project on Public Life and the Press

Funded by the John S. And James L. Knight Foundation, and the Center for Civic Journalism, endowed by the Pew Charitable Trust in the amount of \$4.5 million and headed by Ed Fouhy, a former network executive, this project was set up to support new ways of looking at journalism practices.²⁷

We the People/Wisconsin

The Center for Civic Journalism has helped fund various civic journalism projects. One of the most publicized of these projects, We the People, was aimed at measuring the impact of civic journalism. The Wisconsin State Journal, Wisconsin Public Radio, Wood Communications Group, Wisconsin Public Television and WISC-TV participated in this

²⁶

Ibid., 84

²⁷

Ibid., 87

project²⁸. They took into account various ideas regarding why journalism has failed to engage citizens in public affairs. Among the theories considered was the lack of purpose of the news media: presenting news in a serendipitous fashion without zeroing in on things of special relevance to readers. This makes it difficult for readers to understand issues.

This project, aimed at media coverage of the 1994 election campaign for governor and US senator, sought to use techniques such as town-hall meetings and interactive exercises to make the news more comprehensible to ordinary people and to show them how public affairs could affect them and how they too could impact on public affairs. Citizens' attitudes and knowledge about issues, players and the process were measured both before and after the campaign. The Center for Civic Journalism reports that the following results were observed:

1. Public awareness of the project was high.
2. All the media partners caught the public's attention
3. Interest in public affairs was increased. Asked about whether the program "encouraged your interest in politics," 26 percent of those aware of the project answered yes before the campaign. This increased to 32 percent after the project was carried out.
4. People felt more knowledgeable and were, in fact, more knowledgeable. Before the election, 51 percent of the people surveyed said that the project informed them on issues important to Wisconsinites and this increased to 55 percent after the election.

²⁸

Denton and Thorson, "Civic Journalism, Does It Work," 4

5. People felt encouraged to vote. 19 percent of the people surveyed before the election said that “We the People” encouraged them to vote. This fell to 11 percent after the election, perhaps due to disillusionment after the media specifically exposed campaign tactics say Denton and Thorson.

6. The media also benefitted. In response to a question about whether hearing about “We the People” program made them feel more positive about the media participants, 29 percent of the people surveyed said yes before the campaign. This increased to 42 percent after the election. This, say Denton and Thorson, indicates that such civic journalism efforts may well be a way for media to build relationships with readers and potential readers.²⁹

Columbus Beyond 2000

The Columbus(Ga.) Ledger-Enquirer sought to find out what the people of Columbus, Georgia wanted their town to be like at the turn of the century. Editor Tom Kunkel invited Columbus residents to a symposium on the city’s future and used the ideas generated to formulate questions for a survey conducted by KPC Research of Charlotte, North Carolina. A second survey was conducted by an editorial page editor of the paper. A team of reporters was formed to prepare a special section dealing with the city’s problems and prospects. They found out that most people considered low wages and lack of job opportunities to be the number one problem in the city. Other problems they identified included lack of leadership, racial and sexual inequalities, education, the

²⁹

Ibid., 7

condition of the roads and lack of adequate recreational opportunities and facilities. The respondents also said that some prominent industrialist families in the town made all the important decisions that affected its people. The friendliness of Columbus residents, its small-town atmosphere and the quality of life the town afforded were the positive factors the respondents identified³⁰.

Based on these findings, the paper published a report recommending several civic improvements: greater diversification of Columbus' economic base, emphasis on road development, better day care facilities for working mothers, construction of a new civic center and public library, greater involvement of minorities in city life, more support of the arts and aggressive protection of the local environment. The paper did not stop with just publishing this report; a Beyond 2000 Task Force was formed to help implement the report in the community. The Kettering Foundation of Washington was roped in and the paper held some backyard barbecues to discuss some of the issues.³¹

Billy Winn, Editorial Page Editor of the Columbus Ledger-Enquirer, cites the following results of this project :

1. The Columbus city government used many of the paper's findings in planning its own agenda for the city.
2. Frank Martin, Columbus mayor in 1993, ran his election campaign on the Beyond 2000 platform.

³⁰

Billy Winn, "Public Journalism - An Early Attempt," Nieman Reports/Winter1993.

⁵⁵

³¹

Ibid.

3. Columbus voters approved a 1 percent sales tax increase in 1993 to finance more than \$170 million in civic improvements.
4. The increased sales tax was also used to finance some recreation projects which helped Columbus get selected as the 1996 Olympic women's fast-pitch softball competition host.
5. A breakthrough was made in interracial relationships. This, writes Winship, is no mean feat in a city with such a violent racial history as Columbus'.
6. A new class of leaders emerged from the Beyond 2000 Task Force. They are from the heretofore inactive middle class and many of them are black and female.
7. Winship writes that an intangible result is that the city seems to have a more realistic view of itself and a new sense of destiny as a result of the information gathered during the course of the project.³²

Other projects

The Charlotte(N.C) Observer.

The Observer focuses attention for six weeks at a stretch on a single high-crime neighborhood. The reasons for the area's problems are identified and reported with help and suggestions from across the city. Then, the paper's community liaison helps volunteers and local organizations coordinate efforts to improve the neighborhood.³³ In one public journalism initiative, the paper dedicated its coverage of a dispute over the use of a park to exploring possible solutions. The park was in a mostly white residential area

³²

³³ Ibid., 56

Arthur Charity, Doing Public Journalism, 13

and it was being used by young people, mostly black, as a gathering area for cruising in their cars. Officials wanted to bar the youngsters from the park and the situation turned tense.³⁴

Rick Thames, assistant managing editor, says that the newspaper turned from merely reporting the conflict to interviewing people about solutions. A dialogue which wasn't being held anywhere else was initiated through the paper. Although car cruisers remain a cause of tension at a different park in the city, some residents say that the paper played a role in defusing a racial crisis.³⁵

The Cape Cod Times Consulted a panel of representative citizens to set priorities in covering the 1992 elections. After the elections, the panel proposed setting a permanent agenda for Cape Cod and the paper surveyed its readership and promised long-term coverage of their concerns.³⁶

The Dayton Daily News offered free pizzas to respondents to a questionnaire sent in by the paper. A yearlong project "Kids in Chaos" emerged out of the information obtained. This included expert panels, personal stories and a citywide series of deliberative forums on how to respond to the violence.³⁷

The Wisconsin State Journal created "grand juries" and "mock legislatures" made up of

³⁴

William Glaberson, "A New Press Role: Solving Problems," D6

³⁵

Ibid.

³⁶

Arthur Charity, Doing Public Journalism, 13

³⁷

Ibid.

citizens to deliberate a property tax plan, the national budget and health care reform and then reported on the deliberations to spur wider public talk.³⁸ The paper ran a series of articles called "Armed and Dangerous" that sought to educate readers about how political contenders devise strategies to manipulate debates and about the role of political advertisements. It talked about how some candidates try to make promises which are beyond their powers to fulfil.³⁹

The Virginian-Pilot replaced its beat system with collaborative teams of reporters organized around issues such as "public safety" and "public life." A civic-affairs researcher was also hired to train the team members on how to report on the issues so as to engage people's civic interest⁴⁰

The Huntington Herald-Dispatch ran a 12-page special section highlighting citizens' visions for economic renewal and followed it up with a town hall meeting cosponsored by a local university and a TV station. The meeting recommended six task forces to push the issue forward and the paper helped supply the volunteers. By the end of 1994, the city had updated its strategic plan, applied for a federal grant, and put a development initiative on the ballot. Also, the Chamber of Commerce and the task forces had become partners to keep the economic agenda underway.⁴¹

The State of Columbia, S.C. ran a series of articles called "Power Failure" to tell the

³⁸

Ibid.

³⁹

Denton and Thorson, "Civic Journalism, Does It Work," 6

⁴⁰

Arthur Charity, "Doing Public Journalism," 14

⁴¹

Ibid.

truth about state government instead of just reporting in the conventional “on the one hand this, on the other hand that” manner. Five town meetings were held by all the South Carolina papers and TV stations and a citizen’s movement to clean up state government was sparked. A sweeping reorganization of state government along the lines suggested by The State- resulted in 1993.⁴²

The News Journal of Wilmington, Delaware teamed up with a Chamber of Commerce-sponsored think tank and held a summit on the state’s economic problems. The paper held five meetings prior to the summit, promoted the meetings and helped pay for the summit⁴³.

The Battle Creek Enquirer of Michigan organized a town meeting on the problem of teens and drinking and ran stories outlining the problem. The meeting launched community education and intervention programs⁴⁴.

The Idaho Statesman of Boise, Idaho initiated a program called “Public Access Denied” which aimed at improved public access to public information in Idaho. The efforts put in by the paper caused the Boise school board to release names of superintendent candidates and the state legislature to release juvenile crime records.⁴⁵

The Chillicothe Ohio Gazette organized a public roundtable with law enforcement officials after reports showed the Chillicothe area to have one of the worst records of

⁴² Rebecca Albers, “Going Public, A New Role,” 30

⁴³ Shepard, “The Gospel of Public Journalism,” 31

⁴⁴ Gannett Papers advertorial, “We believe in public journalism”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

domestic violence. This resulted in the formation of a task force whose aim was to reduce domestic violence in the area.⁴⁶

The Detroit News runs a weekly section "On Detroit" which provides a solution-oriented discussion of family, school, business and neighborhood problems, the content of which is shaped by an eight-member advisory board made up of readers, educators, clergy and other grass-roots leaders.⁴⁷

The Star-Gazette of Elmira, New York ran newspaper stories and editorials which showed the economic importance of keeping minor league baseball in Elmira. The paper then spearheaded a drive that raised \$200,000 to bring the city-owned baseball stadium up to the standard necessary to keep the baseball franchise in the city⁴⁸.

The Norwich Bulletin of Connecticut gathered a group of urban planning experts and grass-roots community activists and created a proposed "master plan" for the downtown area. A town meeting was held at which the proposals were discussed and this was followed up with an editorial on "Blueprint for Norwich."⁴⁹

The Rockford Register Star, Illinois ran a call for help to raise money for a playground for students with severe handicaps. This helped raise a total amount of \$150,000.⁵⁰

The Tucson Citizen, Arizona ran a series called "Our Violent Children" on juvenile

46

Ibid.

47

Ibid.

48

Ibid.

49

Ibid.

50

Ibid.

crime, which made the community address some significant concerns. The paper held public forums to shape coverage and follow-up community meetings to search for solutions⁵¹.

Public Journalism Detractors

The public journalism movement is not supported by all news people, and it has its detractors as well as supporters. Howard Schneider, managing editor of the New York Newsday, said that a paper doesn't have to lead the parade to report on it⁵². Another person feels that a newspaper should stay out of the community power structure if it is to maintain its credibility. A sharper retort is, "I'm a journalist, damn it, and journalists don't get involved."⁵³

Other points have been raised by detractors. Public journalism is what first-rate newspapers have been doing all along. The latest public journalism movement is just a gimmick to raise circulation. When readers dictate what a paper should write, journalists are abandoning their responsibility and reporters should be community chroniclers rather than boosters.⁵⁴

Eugene Roberts, managing editor of the New York Times, said that papers are running around saying that they've found it(connection) but he is not sure that they ever

51

Ibid.

52

Rebecca Albers, "Going Public, A New Role?," Presstime, September 1994, 28

53

Ibid.

54

Alicia Shepard, "The Gospel of Public Journalism," American Journalism Review, September 1994, 30

lost it in the first place.⁵⁵ John Craig, editor of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, doesn't think that subsidizing and promoting events to get citizens involved in civic affairs is the job of newspapers,

I don't think the press should be an alternate arm of government. I don't see that it's Rupert Murdoch's responsibility to make the American people more connected, and I clearly don't want the Disney Corporation and Time Warner to get together to see what they can do to make the American people more connected.⁵⁶

No matter how strongly he feels about something that's going on, executive editor of the Washington Post, Leonard Downie said his job is not to try to influence the outcome. He just doesn't want to cross the line, no matter how well meaning the reasoning might be for crossing it. Editors might also see public journalism as a way to win popularity, he adds, and boost circulation. Downie hopes that he has been practicing public journalism for the 30 years that he has been in business, and he is opposed to any sort of public participation by journalists. He doesn't vote or read editorial pages and tries not to form opinions on matters covered by the paper. His job, he believes, is only to tell readers what is happening even when the city is in trouble. Even though his readership area has a bad fiscal problem, he does not want his coverage to tell people what to do about this. That is up to the voters, Congress, the city council and the mayor is his opinion.⁵⁷

55

Ibid., 30

56

Iver Peterson, "Civic-Minded Pursuits Gain Ground at Newspapers," New York Times, March 3, 1994

57

Alicia Shepard, "The Gospel of Public Journalism," 33

He said:

Public journalism makes reporters and editors actors on the political stage. They are put in the position of forcing candidates to participate in a dialogue with voters, staging campaign events, deciding what the good of the citizenship is and forcefeeding it to citizens and candidates, and encouraging citizens to vote⁵⁸

Others do not think that the movement is so radical. Howard Schneider, a Newsday managing editor, said, "Great God, this is radical? It's the most traditional thing that any newspaper worth anything has always done. Good newspapers go out to the community. . . This is not a radical new notion that you also report on what the public cares about."⁵⁹ The credibility of a paper will be lost he fears, if it begins to lead the parade rather than report on it. Once a paper loses its credibility and ability to speak with authority, it loses everything. He is of the opinion that newspapers should spotlight a problem, solicit reader feedback and then aggressively follow the story until it is resolved.⁶⁰ Schneider also wonders if the attempts to get more involved in local communities could compromise journalism's traditions of forcing communities to confront painful issues such as the overt racism of the '50s and '60s and the red-lining scandals of today.⁶¹

In the mid-1950s when he was a reporter for the Goldsboro News-Argus in North Carolina, Eugene Roberts, New York Times managing editor, recalls, the paper

⁵⁸

Tony Case, "Public Journalism Denounced," Editor & Publisher, November 12, 1994, 15

⁵⁹

Alicia Shepard, "The Gospel of Public Journalism," 33

⁶⁰

Ibid.

⁶¹

Alexandra Marks, "Public journalism aims to revitalize public life," Christian Science Monitor, July 24, 1995, 12

recognized that the farmers were too dependent on tobacco for a living and wrote about farmers who were doing well without relying on tobacco. This makes him wonder if the public journalism movement is anything new at all. He thought that what happened in North Carolina was a legitimate role for a newspaper and notes that they were careful not to get in or usurp the political process.⁶² The Washington Post' Richard Harwood also thinks that public journalism is just old-fashioned quality reporting. Newspapers already poll regularly, he observes, and asks if a program of public journalism would result in papers' doing anything different than reporting on the poll findings.⁶³

Marvin Kalb, director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, said that a journalist who becomes an actor is overstepping the bounds of his traditional responsibility.

When the journalist literally organizes the change and then covers it, I'm uncertain about such traditional qualities as detachment, objectivity, toughness. . . . The whole point of American journalism has always been detachment from authority so that critical analysis is possible.⁶⁴

The media already have too much influence in the political process as reporters take on the roles of policy experts and opinionmakers, Kalb said. He would like reporters to return to their traditional role of conveyors of information and political watchdogs.⁶⁵

⁶²

Alicia Shepard, "The Gospel of Public Journalism," 33

⁶³

Alexandra Marks, "Public Journalism aims to revitalize public life," 12

⁶⁴

Shepard, "The Gospel of Public Journalism," 33

⁶⁵

Alexandra Marks, "Public journalism aims to revitalize public life," 12

Other criticisms center around substituting the judgements of community leaders for those of editors; when editorial decisions are made based on referenda, newspapers are just feeding readers what they want to read and not what they need to know, say critics.

Richard Aregood, editorial page editor of the Philadelphia Daily News, said:

We are abandoning a piece of our own jobs if what we are doing is asking people what we should do. Are we to draw up panels of our readers and ask them what they want and put them in the newspaper? We may as well go into the mirror business."⁶⁶

Talking to readers is something his paper has always done, he said and is surprised that this is being passed off as something new.

Another point raised is that if newspapers continue to emphasize the topics that readers think most important, they may neglect less publicized or less popular problems. When polled subsequently, citizens may name the same issues as important as they have been exposed to a lot of stories on them. This will result in readers and papers setting and reinforcing each others' agendas. Editors may then create a system that requires issues to gather a lot of reader support before it becomes worthy of attention. This might result in the neglect of issues ,such as prenatal care for unwed mothers, which affect a minority who are unable to push their concerns to the the top of a paper's agenda⁶⁷.

According to Michael Gartner, editor and co-owner of the Ames, Iowa, Daily Tribune, public journalism is a menace that is exemplified by The Washington Post and

⁶⁶

Tony Case, "Public Journalism Denounced," Editor & Publisher, November 12, 1994, 14

⁶⁷

John Bare, "Case Study - Wichita and Charlotte: The Leap of a Passive Press to Activism," Media Studies Journal, New York: Columbia University, Fall 1992, 157

The New York Times' publishing of the Unabomber manifesto. It is his opinion that was public journalism run amok. He feels that public journalism is wrong morally, journalistically and philosophically:

Newspapers are not to take sides - even for Mom and apple pie and the flag. . . . That stuff should be saved for the editorial pages . It ultimately will cost newspapers their credibility. Newspapers should not be convening community meetings, writing legislation or soothing their readers. They're supposed to tell the truth - and God knows that is hard enough to do all by itself. By doing public journalism, newspapers are cutting back on their readers' real needs: Their needs for facts.⁶⁸

Maxwell King, editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer, agrees that the traditional rules about the distance and impartiality of reporters from their subjects are a key source of newspaper strength and he thinks that supporting causes in news coverage, even civic-minded ones such as voter registration, threatened a paper's independence. He does not see any reason to break these rules.⁶⁹

Yet another criticism of public journalism is that it might cause newspapers to relinquish their institutional voices. Ron Casey, editorial page editor of The Birmingham News , said that the newspaper ought to be a voice in the community and not just a mediator. He does not think that giving up a paper's institutional voice is a good idea⁷⁰.

Lynnell Burkett, associate director of the San Antonio Express-News' editorial page, questions whether doing away with opportunities for the paper to express opinion and

⁶⁸

Mark Fitzgerald, "Decrying Public Journalism," Editor & Publisher, November 11, 1995, 20

⁶⁹

William Glaberson, "A New Press Role: Solving Problems," D6

⁷⁰

Judith Sheppard, "Climbing Down From The Ivory Tower," 21

influence opinion is a good idea.⁷¹ What is the point Richard Aregood wonders, if the paper is not speaking as an institution.⁷² Journalists should be jealously guarding their shrinking newsholes, Marvin Kalb emphasizes, and not giving it to “Mr. or Mrs. Jeo Blow just to make them feel good.”⁷³

Responding to all the above accusations, Davis Merritt argues that the debate within the profession has not centered on what public journalism is about but instead has centered on things attributed to public journalism that don’t exist within the idea itself. He believes that the errant notions that exist about public journalism are traceable to what other journalists have written and said about public journalism and not to his writings or the writings of Jay Rosen.⁷⁴

Proponent of public journalism and author of a practical manual for public journalism practitioners, Arthur Charity writes,

To turn the whole question around, public journalists could well argue that the mainstream’s rule of noninvolvement is the one that realistically threatens the public. In cities such as Huntington, W.Va., and Dayton, Ohio, social problems were going largely unaddressed and citizens were growing ever more frustrated and angry until a newspaper broke tradition to advocate intelligent discourse and democratic process. Editors in such situations often come to see their new way of doing journalism not as an ethical minefield at all, but as far more natural and self-justifying than the old.(One executive editor now says,“I’d rather increase voter turnout than win a Pulitzer.”) Which form of journalism is really more flawed and dangerous in a free

71

Ibid., 20

72

Ibid.

73

Ibid., 22

74

Davis Merritt, “The Misconception About Public Journalism,” Editor & Publisher, July 1, 1995, 80

society: the one that sits passively by while people grow divided, or the one that finds ways of bringing them together?⁷⁵

The views of various editors regarding the pros and cons of this movement is the focus of this study. Chapter three presents an analysis of the data gathered through the survey.

⁷⁵

Arthur Charity, "Doing Public Journalism," 147

CHAPTER 3

DATA ANALYSIS

The questionnaire consists mainly of Likert scale questions requiring responses in the form of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. The questions relate to four main areas:

Definitions of public journalism

Need for public journalism

Role of the newspaper in the community

Criticism of public journalism

Four questions were included which provided scope for the respondents to comment.

Percentages have been rounded off to whole numbers for convenience and this might result in some very minor rounding-off errors which will not affect the validity of the study.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Table 1 Circulation category of newspapers participating in survey

Circulation	Frequency	Percentage
Small	20	26
Medium	31	40
Large	27	34
Total	78	100

Most of the respondents represent papers in the circulation category medium (circulation between 26,000 and 89,000), followed by respondents from the category large circulation (circulation greater than 90,000). The least number of respondents is from the circulation category small (circulation less than 25,000).

Table 2 Sex of respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	59	76
Female	15	19
Not available	4	5
Total	78	100

It can be seen that a great majority of the respondents (about three-fourth) are men. A mere 19 percent are women. 5 percent of the respondents did not provide information.

Table 3 Years of journalistic experience of respondents

Years of experience	Frequency	Percentage
5 - 10	3	4
11 -15	8	11
16-20	11	14
21-25	16	21
>25	19	24
Not available	21	26
Total	78	100

The experience level of the majority of the respondents is more than 25 years. 24 percent of the respondents fall into this category. 21 percent of the respondents have 21 to 25 years of experience. A mere 4 percent of the respondents have only 5 to 10 years of experience.

Table 4 Level of education of respondents

Education	Frequency	Percentage
College	42	54
Graduate	27	35
Not available	9	11
Total	78	100

More than half of the respondents have had a college level education and a large number of them have gone on to graduate school.

Table 5 Age of the respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
26 - 30	2	3
31 - 35	5	6
36 - 40	10	13
41 - 45	15	19
46 - 50	18	23
51 - 60	14	18
>60	8	10
Not available	6	8
Total	78	100

Twenty-three percent of the respondents are in the age group 46 - 50. The age group 41 - 45 is next and includes 19 percent of the respondents. The next largest category is the age group 51 - 60 (18 percent). It can thus be seen that 60 percent of the respondents fall in the age group 41- 60. A mere 3 percent of the respondents are age 26 - 30.

DEFINITIONS OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM

Table 6 Public journalism means caring about the outcome of reporting and not just reporting as a detached bystander

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	23	29
Agree	29	37
Neutral	13	17
Disagree	8	10
Strongly disagree	5	7
Total	78	100

Thirty-seven percent of the respondents agree with the above definition and 29 percent strongly agree . Ten percent do not agree and 7 percent strongly disagree.

Table 7 Public journalism is involvement in projects aimed at addressing specific issues and major problems in the community

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	26	33
Agree	36	46
Neutral	5	7
Disagree	3	4
Strongly disagree	8	10
Total	78	100

Forty-six percent of the respondents agree with this definition and 33 percent strongly agree. Seven percent are neutral, a mere 4 percent disagree and 10 percent strongly disagree.

Table 8 Public journalism means finding out from readers what they are interested in and reporting on those issues

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	24	31
Agree	26	33
Neutral	12	15
Disagree	10	13
Strongly disagree	6	8
Total	78	100

About one third of the respondents agree with this definition and another third strongly agree. Fifteen percent are neutral while 13 percent disagree and 8 percent strongly disagree.

Table 9 Public journalism is an effort to broaden the professional model and take into account the need to sustain democracy by going beyond just publishing the news

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	23	29
Agree	25	32
Neutral	8	10
Disagree	13	17
Strongly disagree	9	12
Total	78	100

Thirty-two percent of the respondents agree with this definition and 29 percent strongly agree. Seventeen percent disagree while 12 percent strongly disagree and 10

percent are neutral.

NEED FOR PUBLIC JOURNALISM

Table 10 Reporting has to be made more insightful so that readers can make meaningful decisions as citizens and voters and make their communities better places to live in

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	33	42
Agree	31	40
Neutral	4	5
Disagree	4	5
Strongly disagree	6	8
Total	78	100

Forty-two percent of the responses indicate strong agreement with this sentiment and 40 percent indicate agreement. Eight percent of the respondents strongly disagree and another 5 percent disagree. Five percent prefer to remain neutral.

Table 11 Expanding beyond the reporting role to the active role of a concerned citizen enriches the job experience of a journalist

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	8	10
Agree	20	26
Neutral	19	24
Disagree	16	21
Strongly disagree	15	19
Total	78	100

Twenty-six percent of the respondents agree with this statement and 24 percent are

neutral. Twenty-one percent disagree, 19 percent strongly disagree and 10 percent strongly agree.

Table 12 Newspapers can serve their readers better by finding out from them the issues they should address

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	28	36
Agree	34	43
Neutral	11	14
Disagree	3	4
Strongly disagree	2	3
Total	78	100

Most of the respondents, 43 percent, agree with this statement and 36 percent strongly agree. Fourteen percent are neutral while 4 percent disagree and a mere 3 percent strongly disagree.

Table 13 Journalists need to focus more on providing information which leads to deliberation about issues and less on conflict

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	21	27
Agree	31	40
Neutral	17	22
Disagree	8	10
Strongly disagree	1	1
Total	78	100

Forty percent of the respondents agree with this statement and 27 percent strongly

agree. Twenty-two percent are neutral, 10 percent disagree and a meager 1 percent strongly disagree.

Table 14 Editorial pages ought to be a forum for the community and not just the voice of a newspaper

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	40	51
Agree	27	35
Neutral	6	8
Disagree	4	5
Strongly disagree	1	1
Total	78	100

About half of the respondents strongly agree and 35 percent agree. Eight percent are neutral, 5 percent disagree and a mere 1 percent strongly disagree.

Table 15 Newspapers, communities and democracy will die unless journalists and the public team up in search of solutions to community woes

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	8	10
Agree	8	10
Neutral	20	26
Disagree	29	37
Strongly disagree	13	17
Total	78	100

Most of the respondents, 37 percent, disagree with this statement. Twenty-six percent are neutral, 17 percent strongly disagree and 10 percent each agree and strongly agree.

Table 16 Newspapers ought to allow the voices of readers to be heard as well as that of experts

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	46	59
Agree	27	35
Neutral	—	—
Disagree	—	—
Strongly disagree	5	6
Total	78	100

The majority of the respondents, 59 percent, strongly agree and 35 percent agree.

Nobody is neutral on this idea and 6 percent strongly disagree

Table 17 The more people are involved in their community, the more likely it is that they will become newspaper readers interested in knowing what is happening around them

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	35	45
Agree	33	42
Neutral	5	7
Disagree	1	1
Strongly disagree	4	5
Total	78	100

Most of the respondents agree with this statement. Forty-five percent strongly agree and 42 percent agree. Seven percent are neutral, 1 percent disagree and 5 percent strongly disagree.

Table 18 Impetus to news coverage should be seeking solutions to political and community problems

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	11	14
Agree	27	35
Neutral	22	28
Disagree	14	18
Strongly disagree	4	5
Total	78	100

Thirty-five percent of the respondents agree and 28 percent are neutral. Eighteen percent disagree, 14 percent strongly agree and 5 percent strongly disagree.

ROLE OF THE NEWSPAPER IN THE COMMUNITY

Table 19 A newspaper should be disinterested about the outcome of its reporting

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	6	8
Agree	5	6
Neutral	7	9
Disagree	40	51
Strongly disagree	18	23
Not available	2	3
Total	78	100

Half of the respondents disagree with this view. Twenty-three percent strongly disagree, 9 percent are neutral, 8 percent strongly agree and 6 percent agree. 3 percent of the respondents declined to answer this question.

Table 20 I approve of reporters joining organizations in the community

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	6	8
Agree	23	29
Neutral	21	27
Disagree	16	21
Strongly disagree	12	15
Total	78	100

Twenty-nine percent of the respondents approve of reporters joining community organizations and 27 percent are neutral. Twenty-one percent do not approve, 15 percent strongly disagree with this statement and 8 percent strongly agree. Four percent of the respondents mentioned they approved of reporters joining community organizations with the proviso that they should not report on the same organizations.

Table 21 Publishers should join community organizations

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	16	21
Agree	34	43
Neutral	16	21
Disagree	7	9
Strongly disagree	5	6
Total	78	100

Forty-three percent of the respondents are in favor of publishers' joining community organizations. Twenty-one percent strongly agree with this idea, 21 percent are neutral, 9

percent disagree and 6 percent strongly disagree.

Table 22 It is all right for a paper to cover news in which it is involved

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	10	13
Agree	45	58
Neutral	8	10
Disagree	5	6
Strongly disagree	10	13
Total	78	100

Fifty-eight percent of the respondents agree with this statement and 13 percent are in strong agreement. Thirteen percent strongly disagree, 10 percent are neutral and 6 percent disagree.

Table 23 Journalists should be more than observers and become active players in the community

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	2	3
Agree	22	28
Neutral	12	15
Disagree	22	28
Strongly disagree	20	26
Total	78	100

An equal number of people, 28 percent, agree with and disagree with this idea. Twenty- six percent of the respondents strongly disagree, 15 percent are neutral and 3 percent strongly agree.

Table 24 Newspapers should lobby for and act as a catalyst for change

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	17	22
Agree	35	44
Neutral	13	17
Disagree	6	8
Strongly disagree	7	9
Total	78	100

Forty-four percent of the respondents agree, 22 percent strongly agree, 17 percent are neutral, 9 percent strongly disagree and 8 percent disagree. Nine percent of the respondents mentioned that this is all right for editorial pages to lobby but not for news pages

Table 25 Civic life and journalism are inextricably bound together

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	15	19
Agree	36	46
Neutral	15	19
Disagree	7	9
Strongly disagree	5	7
Total	78	100

Forty-six percent of the respondents agree with this idea. Nineteen percent strongly agree and another 19 percent are neutral. 9 percent disagree and 7 percent strongly disagree.

Table 26 Detachment from issues is a strength of a newspaper

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	7	9
Agree	22	28
Neutral	21	27
Disagree	20	26
Strongly disagree	5	6
Not available	3	4
Total	78	100

Twenty-eight percent of the respondents agree with this statement. Twenty-seven percent are neutral and 26 percent disagree. Nine percent are in strong agreement and 4 percent did not respond.

Table 27 Journalists should not tell the community what to think but reflect what the community is thinking

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	10	13
Agree	21	27
Neutral	12	15
Disagree	25	32
Strongly disagree	7	9
Not available	3	4
Total	78	100

Thirty-two percent of the respondents disagree with this idea and 27 percent agree. Fifteen percent are neutral, 13 percent strongly agree and 9 percent strongly disagree.

Table 28 Facilitating public dialogue on community issues is an essential role of a newspaper

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	40	51
Agree	30	38
Neutral	2	3
Disagree	4	5
Strongly disagree	2	3
Total	78	100

About half the respondents strongly agree with this statement and 38 percent agree.

Five percent disagree and 3 percent each are neutral and strongly disagree.

CRITICISM

Table 29 Newspapers lose their objectivity when they become involved in public journalism

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	2	3
Agree	17	22
Neutral	12	15
Disagree	32	41
Strongly disagree	15	19
Total	78	100

Forty-one percent of the respondents disagree with this statement and 22 percent agree. Nineteen percent strongly disagree, 15 percent are neutral and 3 percent strongly agree.

Table 30 A newspaper should not attempt to lead the parade and influence decision-making in the community

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	6	8
Agree	14	18
Neutral	7	9
Disagree	38	48
Strongly disagree	11	14
Not available	2	3
Total	78	100

Forty-eight percent of the respondents disagree and 18 percent agree with this statement. Fourteen percent strongly disagree, 9 percent are neutral and 8 percent strongly agree. Three percent declined to respond.

Table 31 Newspapers should set their own agendas and not let outsiders decide what they should cover

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	9	12
Agree	15	19
Neutral	14	18
Disagree	24	30
Strongly disagree	14	18
Not available	2	3
Total	78	100

Thirty percent of the respondents disagree and 19 percent agree with the above idea.

Eighteen percent strongly disagree and another 18 percent are neutral. Twelve percent strongly agree.

Table 32 Newspapers are in danger of losing their credibility when they engage in public journalism

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	7	9
Agree	17	22
Neutral	10	13
Disagree	30	38
Strongly disagree	14	18
Total	78	100

Thirty-eight percent disagree and 22 percent disagree with this idea. Eighteen percent strongly disagree, 13 percent are neutral and 9 percent strongly agree.

Table 33 A newspaper's job is to report; specific action to solve problems should be left to others

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	6	8
Agree	17	22
Neutral	9	11
Disagree	34	43
Strongly disagree	10	13
Not available	2	3
Total	78	100

Forty-three percent disagree and 22 percent agree, 13 percent strongly disagree, 11

percent are neutral, 8 percent strongly agree and 3 percent did not respond .

Table 34 Public journalism is nothing new and it is just putting old wine in new bottles

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	10	13
Agree	27	35
Neutral	19	24
Disagree	15	19
Strongly disagree	5	6
Not available	2	3
Total	78	100

The majority of the respondents,35 percent, agree with this response and 24 percent are neutral. Nineteen percent disagree, 13 percent strongly agree, 6 percent strongly disagree and 3 percent did not respond.

Table 35 Public journalism means feeding people what they want not what they need

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	–	–
Agree	7	9
Neutral	17	22
Disagree	33	42
Strongly disagree	19	24
Not available	2	3
Total	78	100

Forty-two percent of the respondents disagree and 24 percent, in fact, strongly

disagree. Twenty-two percent are neutral, 9 percent agree and 3 percent did not respond.

Table 36 Editorial pages should remain the domain of editors who have a responsibility to speak with authority to the community and not be turned over to readers

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	3	4
Agree	10	13
Neutral	13	17
Disagree	36	46
Strongly disagree	15	19
Not available	1	1
Total	78	100

About half the respondents, 46 percent, disagree with this view and 19 percent strongly disagree. Seventeen percent are neutral, 13 percent agree, 4 percent strongly agree and 1 percent did not respond.

Table 37 Civic journalism is what editorial page editors have been doing all along and what editorial pages are all about

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	13	17
Agree	28	36
Neutral	14	18
Disagree	15	19
Strongly disagree	8	10
Total	78	100

Thirty-six percent of the respondents agree and 19 percent disagree. Eighteen percent

are neutral, 17 percent strongly agree and 10 percent strongly disagree.

Table 38 Public journalism is motivated more by economics and circulation than community service

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	2	3
Agree	14	18
Neutral	17	22
Disagree	26	33
Strongly disagree	19	24
Total	78	100

Thirty-three percent of the respondents disagree and 24 percent strongly disagree.

Twenty-two percent are neutral, 18 percent agree and 3 percent strongly agree.

Table 39 Less publicized, unpopular issues will be neglected if news is generated by the agenda of readers

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	6	8
Agree	24	31
Neutral	7	9
Disagree	33	42
Strongly disagree	8	10
Total	78	100

Forty-two percent of the respondents disagree with this criticism and 31 percent agree.

Ten percent strongly disagree, 9 percent are neutral and 8 percent strongly agree.

Table 40 Editors focused on what readers think about community issues will be reluctant to take unpopular editorial stands

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	1	1
Agree	20	26
Neutral	7	9
Disagree	34	44
Strongly disagree	16	20
Total	78	100

Forty-four percent of the respondents disagree with this idea and 26 percent agree.

Twenty percent strongly disagree, 9 percent are neutral and a miniscule 1 percent strongly agree.

Table 41 If newspapers relinquish their institutional voice to the community, the result will be the dumbing down of editorial pages

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	5	6
Agree	13	17
Neutral	14	18
Disagree	31	39
Strongly disagree	13	17
Not available	2	3
Total	78	100

Thirty-nine percent of the respondents disagree with this idea and 18 percent are neutral. Seventeen percent strongly disagree and another 17 percent agree, 6 percent

strongly agree and 3 percent did not respond.

Table 42 Public journalism results in newspapers and readers setting and reinforcing each other's agendas

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	7	9
Agree	25	32
Neutral	30	38
Disagree	12	15
Strongly disagree	2	3
Not available	2	3
Total	78	100

The majority of the respondents(38 percent) prefer to remain neutral on this issue.

Thirty-two percent agree, 15 percent disagree, 9 percent strongly agree, 3 percent strongly disagree and another 3 percent did not respond.

Table 43 Supporting causes threatens a newspaper's independence

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	5	6
Agree	12	15
Neutral	11	14
Disagree	36	46
Strongly disagree	12	16
Not available	2	3
Total	78	100

The majority of the respondents(46 percent) agree with this statement while 16

percent strongly disagree. Fifteen percent agree, 14 percent are neutral, 6 percent strongly agree and 3 percent declined to respond.

Table 44 Newspapers' engaging in public journalism brings to mind Hearst's using his papers to promote pet causes and candidates

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	4	5
Agree	9	12
Neutral	17	22
Disagree	33	42
Strongly disagree	13	17
Not available	2	2
Total	78	100

Forty-two percent of the respondents disagree with this view and 22 percent are neutral. Seventeen percent strongly disagree, 12 percent agree, 5 percent strongly agree and 2 declined to respond.

COMMENTARY

Table 45 Public journalism is only a passing fad

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	11	14
No	57	73
Don't know	1	1
Not available	9	12
Total	78	100

The vast majority of the respondents, 73 percent, do not think that public journalism is

a passing fad. 14 percent think so and 12 percent did not comment. One percent did not know whether it was a passing fad.

Many respondents commented that public journalism is not a passing fad but only a new name for something that has always been around:

Everything is a passing fad

Facilitating debate is what newspapers have always been about

It is one of many concepts newspapers have used over time with more or less influence on the result at different times.

A new name for what most papers have long been seeking - public involvement.

It is nothing more than a name. Good journalism will remain good journalism
It is just a renaming of community journalism. In a decade it will be called something else.

As a title "yes"- but most journalists have engaged in "public journalism" all of their careers and not recognized it. They will continue to do so.

The pressures on the press to be boosterish and write predominantly "good" news are always present. The response of the press to those pressures waxes and wanes.

Though the term "public journalism" and some of the techniques associated with it may not last, the basic ideas behind it are part of a much broader intellectual movement away from the extremes of classical liberalism and toward the recognition that we are only fully human when we are members of a society.

Others commented that public journalism is not just a passing fad and might well be necessary for a newspaper's survival:

Involving readers in helping address key community issues may well become central to newspapers' survival.

Public journalism is a trend resulting from competition that will not go away

Public journalism is part of our survival.

Greater involvement in helping solve community problems is essential to communities and newspapers.

Some other respondents who thought that public journalism is not a passing fad said:

It is the realization that the public is made up of people who are informed and have valid opinions and interest and should have a means to voice them.

Public journalism - well done - can restore newspapers' relevancy and traditional leadership role in their communities

Public journalism is a return to core values in journalism that will not pass

Public journalism is the heartbeat of our profession.

It is here to stay. Community newspapers will not survive without working hand in hand with community problems and needs.

Those who felt that public journalism was only a passing fad said:

So was Advocacy Journalism, Activist Journalism, New Journalism, Literary Journalism, Yellow Journalism, etc.,etc.

It is part of the politically correct fixation and it will pass.

Table 46 Public journalism is a a departure from the traditional role of the press

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	19	24
No	50	64
Not available	9	12
Total	78	100

Sixty-four percent of the respondents do not think that public journalism is a departure from the traditional role of the press and 24 percent think it is a departure. 12 percent did not respond.

Some of the observations made by those who do not think that public journalism is a departure from the traditional role of the press:

There is no such thing as “traditional role” - it has varied regularly for centuries

In American journalism, so-called “objective reporting” is a relatively recent phenomenon

It has always been there, whether it’s called public journalism or something else.

I consider it in the very best tradition of journalism to ask questions nobody is asking. I firmly believe one of the shortcomings of our industry is that we have not asked the obvious questions simply because officialdom has not asked those questions. If the city council is trying to decide where to put a new landfill without thinking of whether an incinerator could do the job, should we not ask for them?

Papers have always had their campaigns. Right now, they may be becoming more open and honest about them.

It is in the best tradition of a free press that is willing to take leadership positions on important issues.

Some of our best public journalism has been traditional investigative reporting. All we have been doing is expand on that role further. All the traditional reporters have some interest in affecting outcomes otherwise they wouldn’t write stories - what is “informing the public” than public journalism?

The role of journalism in a democratic society has always remained the same, only the interpretation changes to meet the needs of the times.

If we fail to engage the readers in meaningful dialogue and agenda setting, we fail them, the community and ourselves.

In many ways, it furthers the press’ long-established crusading tradition. Only now, instead of basing the crusade on a publisher’s whim, we reach out to residents to find out what’s important to them.

Reflecting the community and informing readers is still the goal.

I think newspapers can still be community-minded while maintaining objectivity on their news pages. Good newspapers have always been community-minded.

Not entirely. The interests of the community and the press have always had common ground and have explored that ground together one way or another.

It is what community newspapers have done for decades; good reporting about the community and its needs.

Those who think that public journalism is a departure from the press' traditional role

commented:

We are no longer the paternalistic dictator. Readers want help in shaping their opinions, but they don't want to be led by the nose.

If by public journalism you mean leading the charge through biased, promotional reporting - then public journalism is a departure for the post-world war II U.S. press

Only in that it moves the editorial page function into the news pages.

As the Pulitzer Prize reads:"disinterested public service."

Setting up forums and similar problem -solving events goes beyond thundering editorial pages and crusading investigative reporting

When the newspaper pushes causes outside of its editorializing it loses objectivity and thus the ability to retain credibility

In some forms. Listening to readers is nothing new, but some other kinds of public journalism are

If it is conducted on the news pages, that is new.

Table 47 I think that public journalism is a good idea

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	55	70
No	10	13
Don't know	3	4
Not available	10	13
Total	78	100

The vast majority of the respondents, 70 percent, think that public journalism is a good idea while a mere 13 percent do not think so. Four percent said that it had its good points and its bad points and they did not know whether it was a good idea or not. Thirteen percent declined to comment.

According to the people who think public journalism is a good idea:

It stimulates democracy.

If it serves readers. We can't continue to stand on the sidelines and critique nor can we stand idle while our communities fragment.

It is mandatory for our survival.

It is editorially ok

A way to reconnect with our readers and our communities.

We are all part of the community. Let us make it a better place to live

We need to be more in tune with readers and public journalism accomplishes this.

Anything that calls attention to societal problems and gets people thinking about remedies and acting on them is good.

It invites more people to the table

Anything that forges stronger ties between the newspaper and the community it serves is a good idea. We hope it is to good purpose but freedom of the press does not require it

I see nothing wrong with engaging in a dialogue with our readers. Decades of arrogance has left our communities hostile and numb when we do produce significant stories of which our readers should be deeply concerned.

It recognizes that politics is ultimately about policy, which has real consequences in people's lives, and that motivation, strategy behind the policy decisions and the other aspects of the "game" of politics are of only secondary importance.

Journalists have claimed for years that their job is to answer basic questions. Who?What? When?Where?Why?How? In reality, we have not done a very good job on the last two questions. Because of that, we have been nothing other than an information industry; glorified executive secretaries taking the minutes at the meeting and turning those minutes into executive summaries we claim are news stories. Now the public is demanding more. Raw information is easy to find. Help in understanding that information(How?Why?) is not nearly so common. Our readers are demanding that we be relevant. They are telling us loud and clear that newspapers are like loaves of bread. If people need us, they will buy us. If they don't, they won't. If you believe Shakespeare's line that all the world is a stage, we must stop simply writing about the exits and entrances of players. We must explain the stage. It means little when the stage is dark and a character lighted by our spotlight says "I am thirsty." Those three words develop one meaning if the stage is set to look like a desert and quite another if the stage is the set of "Cheers."

The more we reach out, the stronger we - and democracy - will be

In the sense of encouraging public involvement and reader input, yes. As to lobbying, no.

It's a good thing, so long as reporters and editors don't get pressured to "kill" stories or give other stories more play than they deserve. We must maintain our integrity and objectivity.

Everyone needs a forum in which to have a voice. Open pages allow the voices of the people to be heard.

I've worked with community groups, special committees invited to act as sounding boards for the newspaper - public journalism works.

Commented those who do not think that public journalism is such a good idea:

Our credibility is our most valuable asset. Public journalism risks it, in my opinion.

We describe, don't prescribe

It sounds like a good idea, which is not the same thing, but is good enough for many.

Table 48 We practice public journalism here

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	53	68
No	12	15
Don't know	3	4
Not available	10	13
Total	78	100

Sixty-eight percent of the respondents said that they practiced public journalism and 15 percent said that they did not practice it. Thirteen percent declined to comment and 4 percent said that they did not know if what they did could be called public journalism.

Table 49 Public journalism techniques engaged in by respondents' newspapers

Practice	Frequency
Listening to readers	17
Community projects	14
Giving readers newspaper space	9
Supporting causes in editorials	5
Sponsoring local events	4
Serving on local committees	2
Studying needs of community	1

Most of the papers that engage in public journalism mainly listen to their readers. The next most popular form of public journalism is undertaking a local community project - such as "We the People." Papers also give readers newspaper space to share their ideas. Supporting causes in editorials and sponsoring local events are some other initiatives.

CHAPTER 1V

FINDINGS

Definition

The most widely accepted definition of public journalism is that it is involvement in projects aimed at addressing specific issues and major problems in the community.

Seventy-nine percent of the respondents agreed with this definition.

Need for Public Journalism

The need for public journalism is largely seen as rising from the need to be more user-friendly and allow the voices of readers to be heard as well as that of experts. Ninety-four percent of the respondents agree with this view. The necessity to get more people involved in their communities so that they will become more interested in what is going on around them and make better newspaper readers is also high on the list. Eighty-seven percent of the respondents agree that this is a rationale for public journalism .

Editorial pages are widely viewed as a community forum rather than just the newspaper's voice. Eighty-six percent of respondents strongly agree and 35 percent agree that this is so. The rationale for public journalism is also seen as arising from the need to make reporting more insightful so as to help people make better decisions as citizens. Eighty-two percent of the respondents think so. The need to make newspapers more

relevant to readers by finding out from them the issues that newspapers should address also emerges high on the rationale for public journalism; Seventy-nine percent of respondents agree. Respondents also agree (67 percent) that journalists need to focus more on providing information which leads to deliberation about issues and less on conflict.

The respondents were divided about whether seeking solutions to political and community problems should serve as impetus to news coverage. Forty-nine percent agreed with this view. Enrichment of the job experience of a journalist is not so widely seen as a pressing reason for engaging in public journalism. Only 36 percent of the respondents agreed. The idea that newspapers, communities and democracy will die unless journalists and the public team up in search of solutions to community woes also did not emerge as a rationale for public journalism. Some respondents felt that “die” was too strong a word. Only 20 percent of the respondents agree with this view.

Role of the Newspaper in the Community

A major role of the newspaper is facilitating public dialogue on community issues. Eighty-nine percent of the respondents agree that this should be a newspaper’s role. Most respondents think (71 percent) that it is all right for a newspaper to cover news in which it is involved. The idea that a newspaper should lobby for and act as a catalyst for change found favor with 66 percent of the respondents. Sixty-six percent of the respondents also think that civic life and journalism are inextricably bound together. Most respondents (64 percent) think that it is allright for a publisher to join community organizations. A good 21 percent of the respondents prefer to remain neutral on this

issue, however.

The respondents were divided about whether a newspaper should tell the community what to think or merely reflect what the community thinks. Forty-one percent said that the newspaper should only reflect what the community is thinking, and 40 percent disagreed. There was no strong consensus about whether detachment from issues is a strength of a paper. Respondents were divided on this question: 37 percent agreed and 32 percent disagreed. The respondents were also divided about whether reporters should join community organizations. 37 percent approved of this practice and 36 percent disapproved.

The majority of the respondents did not like the idea that journalists should become active players in the community. Fifty-four percent were against and 31 percent were for this idea. Respondents clearly disagreed (74 percent) with the idea that a newspaper should be disinterested about the outcome of its reporting and only 14 percent agreed with this idea.

Criticism

The majority of the respondents (60 percent) do not think that newspapers lose their objectivity when they become involved in public journalism. Only 25 percent of the respondents agreed with this criticism. Sixty-two percent of the respondents did not think that it is wrong for a newspaper to lead the parade and influence decision-making in the community. Only 26 percent of those surveyed thought that this was not all right. Forty-eight percent of the respondents think that a paper should let outsiders in on deciding what to cover. Thirty-one percent of the respondents think that this is not a good idea.

More than half the respondents don't think that engaging in public journalism causes a newspaper to lose its credibility. About a third of the respondents think that engaging in public journalism does cause loss of credibility.

Fifty-six percent of the respondents disagree that a newspaper should merely report and leave follow-up to others. Thirty percent of them agreed. About half the respondents think that public journalism is nothing new, but 25 percent do not think so. The consensus (66 percent) is that public journalism does not mean merely feeding people what they want rather than what they need. Only 9 percent of the respondents agreed with this criticism.

Most respondents (65 percent) do not think that editorial pages should remain the domain of editors and not be turned over to readers. Only 17 percent tended to this view. Slightly more than half the respondents agreed that civic journalism is what editorial page editors have been doing all along and is nothing new. Only 29 percent disagreed. Fifty-seven percent of the respondents did not think that public journalism was motivated more by economics than by community service. Twenty-one percent thought so. Fifty-two percent of the respondents disagreed that news generated by readers' agendas would cause less publicized, unpopular issues to be neglected while 39 percent agreed with this view.

Respondents disagreed (64 percent) that editors who focused on what readers think would be reluctant to take unpopular editorial stands; twenty-seven percent agreed. Respondents (56 percent) don't think that editorial pages will be dumbed down if they are turned over to the community. Less than a fourth think that this could happen. Forty-one

percent of the respondents think that public journalism results in papers and readers reinforcing each other's agendas. Only 18 percent do not think so.

Supporting causes does not threaten a paper's independence say 62 percent of the respondents while 21 percent say that it does. More than half the respondents (59 percent) do not connect public journalism with Hearst's using his papers to promote his own agenda. Only 17 percent of the respondents make this connection.

Public journalism is not considered a passing fad by seventy-three percent of the respondents. A mere 14 percent think that it is a passing fad. This movement is not seen as a departure from the traditional role of the press by 64 percent of the respondents. Twenty-four percent of the respondents, however, see it as a departure. Seventy percent of the respondents think that public journalism is a good idea, and a mere 13 percent think that it is not a good idea. Sixty-eight percent of the papers surveyed say they engage in public journalism and 15 percent say they do not.

Conclusion

It appears that public journalism is here to stay. The level of interest in this movement can be seen from the fact that the American Council for Education in Journalism (ACEJ) has recently set up a civic journalism interest group and started a newsletter for this group. The need for public journalism arises from the idea of taking readers' needs more into consideration and providing relevant information for them to make informed decisions as citizens. The role of the newspaper in the community is also seen as that of facilitating discourse on community issues, and this leads to public journalism. A paper's editorial pages are widely seen as a community forum which furthers public discourse. It

appears that some form of such discourse has always been engaged in, whatever it has been called, so public journalism is not a major departure from the traditional role of the press.

The criticisms of public journalism are largely unsupported by these respondents. The only criticism which they validated is that engaging in public journalism could cause readers and newspapers to reinforce each others' agendas. While it is viewed as acceptable for publishers to join community organizations, the editors are not too comfortable with the idea of reporters' joining organizations and becoming active players in the community.

However, the sample size is not very big and so the findings may not be universally applicable but only pertain to this sample. Moreover, the responses may be skewed in favor of those who support public journalism as the people who do not support it may not have responded to the survey in large numbers. A future study might be more universally applicable if more responses are obtained. Television stations have also engaged in public journalism projects and they could also be included. Further, some respondents found that some of the questions tied together two ideas and this could be avoided in future studies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Anderson, Rob, Dardenne, Robert, and Killenberg, George M., The Conversation of Public Journalism . Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1994.
- Bird, George L., and Merwin, Frederic E., eds., The Newspaper and Society . New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1942.
- Charity, Arthur, Doing Public Journalism . New York: Guilford Press, 1995.
- Kurtz, Howard, Media Circus - The Trouble with America's Newspapers . New York: Times Books, 1993.
- MacDougall, Kent, The Press: A critical look from the inside . New Jersey: Dow Jones Books, 1972.
- Merritt, Davis, Public Journalism & Public Life . Hillsdale: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, 1995.
- Miraldi, Robert, Muckraking and Objectivity: Journalism's Colliding Traditions . Westport: Greenwood Press, 1990.
- Siebert, Fred S., Peterson, Theodore, and Schramm Wilbur, Four Theories of the Press . Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956.

Articles

- Andrews, Peter. "The Press." American Heritage . (October 1994) : 37-65
- Albers, Rebecca Ross. "Going Public - A new role?." Presstime . (September 1994) : 28-30.
- Bare, John. "Case Study-Wichita and Charlotte: The Leap of a Passive Press to Activism." Media Studies Journal . (Fall 1992) : 149-160.
- Case, Tony. "Public Journalism Denounced." Editor & Publisher . (Nov. 12, 1994) : 14-15.
- Fanning, Katherine. "Connect With Community or Perish." Nieman Reports . (Spring 1994) : 60-62.
- Fitzgerald, Mark. "Decrying Public Journalism." Editor & Publisher . (Nov. 11, 1995) : 20.
- Glaberson, William. "A New Press Role : Solving Problems." New York Times . (Oct. 3, 1994) : D6.
- Marks, Alexandra. "Public journalism aims to revitalize public life." Christian Science Monitor . (Jul. 24, 1995) : 12.
- Merritt, Davis. "The Misconception About Public Journalism." Editor & Publisher . (Jul. 1, 1995) : 80, 11.
- Peterson, Iver. "Civic-Minded Pursuits Gain Ground at Newspapers." New York Times . (Mar. 3, 1994) :
- Shepard, Alicia. "The Gospel of Public Journalism." American Journalism Review . (Sep. 1994) : 29-36.
- Sheppard, Judith. "Climbing Down From The Ivory Tower." American Journalism Review . (May 1995) : 18-25.
- Winn, Billy. "Public Journalism - An Early Attempt." Nieman Reports . (Winter 1993) : 54-56.
- Winship, Thomas. "The Joys of an Activist Editor." Nieman Reports . (Spring 1994) : 63-65.

Other

Gannett Newspapers Advertorial. "We Believe in Public Journalism." Editor & Publisher .
(Mar. 11, 1995)

Denton, Frank, and Thorson, Esther. "Civic Journalism, Does It Work." Special report for Pew Center for Civic Journalism

Merritt, Davis, and Rosen, Jay. Imagining Public Journalism: An Editor and Scholar Reflect on the Birth of an Idea. Fifth Roy W. Howard Lecture. April 13, 1995. Indiana University, Bloomington

APPENDIX A
SAMPLE COVER LETTER

Poonkulali Thangavelu
P.O.Box 2797
University, MS 38677

Dear Editor:

I am a graduate journalism student at the University of Mississippi and I am undertaking a survey on "public journalism" as part of a thesis to meet the requirements for graduation.

The topical "public journalism" movement has attracted a lot of attention in the last couple of years. It certainly seems to be a controversial movement and has its supporters and its detractors. My survey is aimed at finding out how papers across the country feel about this movement.

Your input is certainly very important and I would very much appreciate it if you would complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it to me by February 20 in the self-addressed, stamped envelope provided. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Poonkulali

APPENDIX B
SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for taking time to complete this questionnaire. Please send the completed form in the envelope provided. I am working against a deadline and a quick reply would be very much appreciated. My address is P.O.Box 2797, University, MS 38677. Phone no (601)234-6675. Queries could be directed to my e-mail address jnpt@sunset.backbone.olemiss.edu.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: Name -----

Position ----- Paper -----

Phone no ----- Circulation -----

Sex Male() Female() Years of journalistic experience----

<u>Age:</u>	20-25	26-30	<u>Education:</u>	High school
	31-35	36-40		College
	41-45	46-50		Graduate
	50-60	61-70		Other

Please circle the appropriate answer

- 1) Strongly agree
- 2) Agree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Disagree
- 5) Strongly disagree

I. DEFINITIONS OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM

1. Public journalism means caring about the outcome of reporting and not just reporting as a detached bystander

1 2 3 4 5

2. Public journalism is involvement in projects aimed at addressing specific issues and major problems in the community

1 2 3 4 5

3. Public journalism means finding out from readers what they are interested in and reporting on those issues

1 2 3 4 5

4. Public journalism is an effort to broaden the professional model and take into account the need to sustain democracy by going beyond just publishing the news

1 2 3 4 5

II NEED FOR PUBLIC JOURNALISM

5. Reporting has to be made more insightful so that readers can make meaningful decisions as citizens and voters and make their communities better places to live in.

1 2 3 4 5

6. Expanding beyond the reporting role to the active role of a concerned citizen enriches the job experience of a journalist

1 2 3 4 5

- 1) Strongly agree
- 2) Agree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Disagree
- 5) Strongly disagree

7. Newspapers can serve their readers better by finding out from them the issues they should address 1 2 3 4 5
8. Journalists need to focus more on providing information which leads to deliberation about issues and less on conflict 1 2 3 4 5
9. Editorial pages ought to be a forum for the community and not just the voice of a newspaper 1 2 3 4 5
10. Newspapers, communities and democracy will die unless journalists and the public team up in search of solutions to community woes 1 2 3 4 5
11. Newspapers ought to allow the voices of readers to be heard as well as that of experts 1 2 3 4 5
12. The more people are involved in their community, the more likely it is that they will become newspaper readers interested in knowing what is happening around them 1 2 3 4 5
13. Impetus to news coverage should be seeking solutions to political and community problems 1 2 3 4 5
- III ROLE OF THE NEWSPAPER IN THE COMMUNITY
14. A newspaper should be disinterested about the outcome of its reporting 1 2 3 4 5
15. I approve of reporters joining organizations in the community 1 2 3 4 5
16. Publishers should join community organizations 1 2 3 4 5
17. It is alright for a paper to cover news in which it is involved 1 2 3 4 5
18. Journalists should be more than observers and become active players in the community. 1 2 3 4 5
19. Newspapers should lobby for and act as a catalyst for change 1 2 3 4 5
20. Civic life and journalism are inextricably bound together 1 2 3 4 5
21. Detachment from issues is a strength of a newspaper 1 2 3 4 5

- 1) Strongly agree
- 2) Agree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Disagree
- 5) Strongly disagree

22. Journalists should not tell the community what to think but reflect what the community is thinking 1 2 3 4 5

23. Facilitating public dialogue on community issues is an essential role of a newspaper. 1 2 3 4 5

IV. CRITICISM

24. Newspapers lose their objectivity when they become involved in public journalism 1 2 3 4 5

25. A newspaper should not attempt to lead the parade and influence decision-making in the community 1 2 3 4 5

26. Newspapers should set their own agendas and not let outsiders decide what they should cover 1 2 3 4 5

27. Newspapers are in danger of losing their credibility when they engage in public journalism 1 2 3 4 5

28. A newspaper's job is to report; specific action to solve problems should be left to others 1 2 3 4 5

29. Public journalism is nothing new and it is just putting old wine in new bottles 1 2 3 4 5

30. Public journalism means feeding people what they want not what they need 1 2 3 4 5

31. Editorial pages should remain the domain of editors who have a responsibility to speak with authority to the community and not be turned over to readers 1 2 3 4 5

32. Civic journalism is what editorial page editors have been doing all along and what editorial pages are all about 1 2 3 4 5

33. Public journalism is motivated more by economics and circulation than community service 1 2 3 4 5

34. Less publicized, unpopular issues will be neglected if news is generated by the agenda of readers 1 2 3 4 5

35. Editors focused on what readers think about community issues will be reluctant to take unpopular editorial stands 1 2 3 4 5

- 1) Strongly agree
- 2) Agree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Disagree
- 5) Strongly disagree

36. If newspapers relinquish their institutional voice to the community, the result will be the dumbing down of editorial pages 1 2 3 4 5

37. Public journalism results in newspapers and readers setting and reinforcing each other's agendas 1 2 3 4 5

38. Supporting causes threatens a newspaper's independence 1 2 3 4 5

39. Newspapers' engaging in public journalism brings to mind Hearst's using his papers to promote pet causes and candidates 1 2 3 4 5

V OTHER : Please comment on the following (use space on back if necessary)

40. Public journalism is only a passing fad Yes () No ()
Please explain

41. Public journalism is a departure from the traditional role of the press Yes () No ()
Please explain

42. I think that public journalism is a good idea Yes () No ()
Please explain

43. We practice public journalism here Yes () No ()
If yes, what do you do?

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

Poonkulali Thangavelu was born in Pollachi in the South Indian state of Tamilnadu and has lived in the South of India most of her life. She also lived in Africa for some time and had most of her primary education there. She enjoys traveling and has visited various Western European countries, Singapore and parts of the United States.

Poonkulali is interested in finance and has an undergraduate degree in Economics from PSG College of Arts and Science, India and an MBA from Bharathidasan Institute of Management (BIM), India. She is an avid reader and likes to write as well. She plans to combine these two interests and make a career in the field of financial and business writing and thinks that her graduate degree in journalism from the University of Mississippi has helped her get focused on the writing end of things. She has some work experience in this field, having worked as Analyst with the Dalal Street Journal, an Indian investment magazine, for about two years.

Poonkulali has also worked as a summer trainee with Ogilvy & Mather Advertising, Madras, India and done an internship with the Texarkana Gazette in Texas. Her permanent address is :

Shenbagam, 7 Muthuvel Naicken Street, Madras 600 024, India.