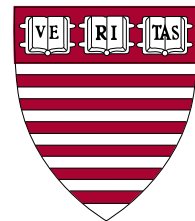


Whither the Civic Journalism Bandwagon?

by
Charlotte Grimes

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INTRODUCTION

American journalism at the end of the twentieth century finds itself in something of a crisis. Even though the population continues to grow, newspaper circulation is flat. The audiences for the nightly news broadcasts have shrunk dramatically, while the burgeoning numbers of all-news television channels seem to be able to have an audience statistically distinguishable from zero only by scandal-mongering and crisis coverage. And while as recently as the 1980s, the public seemed to rate the performance of the news media more positively than most other political institutions, poll after poll show disaffection with journalism and journalistic practice. The place of the news in American life, in short, seems to be more precarious than at any other moment in recent memory.

At the same time, there is much hand-wringing and teeth-gnashing over the condition of American politics itself, with the public voicing increasing distrust and disaffection and participating less and less in even the simplest and easiest of political acts, namely voting. Many political onlookers, most notably Harvard's own Robert Putnam, have depicted stark scenarios of declining social involvement and an increasingly empty public sphere.

Many would find both American journalism and American politics to be badly in need of fixing. It would, of course, be handy to find something that could address all these ills at once. And that is precisely what a new approach to journalism in the 1990s—called variously “public journalism,” “civic journalism,” and “communitarian journalism”—has promised. Civic journalism, in various ways, tries to place the readers and viewers of the news as not simply the final beneficiaries of the information that journalists provide to them, but as crucial participants in the designation and creation of news itself. Most centrally, civic journalism would want newspeople to visualize their readers and viewers not simply as consumers of a product but citizens of a polity. Journalists should then, the argument goes, try to push the news to reflect what the people would need in order to pursue their own concerns and participate effectively.

Although there have been many initiatives grouped under the broad rubric of “civic journalism,” the discussion of these efforts has generated more heat than light. Almost all of what has been written about civic journalism has consisted of justifications in theory by its most noted prac-

tioners (such as Buzz Merritt) and scholars (such as Jay Rosen), or of either uncritical celebrations (Arthur Charity's book, *Doing Public Journalism*, the first on the subject) or intemperate condemnations of how civic journalism deviates from the longstanding norms and practices of reporters (as Michael Gartner and others have provided). To be sure, there is much to be skeptical about with civic journalism. The aggressive use of focus groups and surveys of readers and viewers is not so different from what has happened in many news outlets when the bottom line of huge profits displaced a concern with the quality of information. Whether civic journalism can and should work beyond the relatively modest-sized and homogeneous cities where it first took hold is also an open question, given that it may end up favoring the perspectives of an uninformed majority and undercut the prospects for the unpredictable and accidental news that occasionally allows new voices and concerns to enter into the process. And of course, civic journalism may miss the point: reporters are but one contributor to the seeming shrinkage of American political life. By giving the journalists the authority to decide what the political agenda will be for a campaign or for a community seems in some ways a curious response to a problem that strikes many as one of journalistic presumptuousness if not arrogance.

Yet the status quo of mainstream journalistic practices cannot be easily let off the hook. In particular, most reporters are not much interested, let alone aware, in the needs and concerns of their readers and viewers, compared to the individuals they have to negotiate with for the content of the news, such as their superiors and their sources. In an era where profit margins are increasingly important to news divisions, those needs may become further diminished in the chase for stories that meet news values of immediacy, timeliness, color, drama, good visuals and the like—none of which have very much to do with the demands of good public policy. And the demands of objectivity under deadline make for a “first draft of history” that not only emphasizes official action about which the public should be informed (usually after the fact) but gives few opportunities for citizens to be activated to intervene in ongoing political processes, debates and deliberations.

Fortunately, we are seeing the beginnings of scholarly efforts to examine whether or not civic

journalism does, in fact, live up to its advance billing. And also fortunately for us, Charlotte Grimes, a Fellow at the Shorenstein Center in the Spring of 1998 and a veteran reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, has provided us with this discussion paper. This is the first time, to my knowledge, that a working journalist with a strong record in using the traditional tools of the trade has stepped back and dispassionately examined the evidence, pro and con, about supplementing if not supplanting those tools with the new ones proposed by civic journalism.

Grimes's examination not only gives us a compelling history of the rise of civic journalism that raises many questions about both its aims and its successes. It is indispensable for setting standards by which the civic journalism movement should be judged. She adroitly notes how much of the popularity of the idea of civic

journalism may be precisely due to how ambiguous, sometimes all-inclusive a term it is. When its theories are brought down to earth, she shows, the record of civic journalism in practice is decidedly mixed.

I doubt that Grimes or anyone else believes they have said the last word on the subject. But this is a "discussion paper" in the best sense of the word: that it will further rather than finish discussion. It deserves your close attention.

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Whither the Civic Journalism Bandwagon?

by Charlotte Grimes

“A journalist is the lookout on the bridge of state. He notes the passing sail, the little things of interest that dot the horizon in fine weather. He reports the drifting castaways whom the ship can save. He peers through fog and storm to give warning of dangers ahead. He is not thinking of his wages, or of the profits of his owners. He is there to watch over the safety of the people who trust him.”

—Joseph Pulitzer, 1904

For nearly eight years now, a controversial movement called “civic journalism” has been trying to remake American journalists and their work.

Sometimes it’s known as “public journalism” or “citizen-based journalism.” It is both a philosophy and a set of practices that rest on a fundamental premise: American public life and American journalism are badly broken—and journalists must mend both. Its leading theoretician, New York University professor Jay Rosen, spells out the new journalists’ mandate this way: “Public journalism calls on the press to help revive civic life and improve civic dialogue—and to fashion a coherent response to the deepening troubles in our civic climate, most of which implicates journalists.”¹

Davis “Buzz” Merritt, former editor of the *Wichita Eagle* and its leading advocate inside the profession, says, “It requires a philosophical journey because it is a fundamental change in how we conceive our role in life.”²

For this paper, we will continue with Merritt’s metaphor of a journey, for which journalists from Boston to Miami to Peoria to San Francisco have boarded the movement’s bandwagon for a bumpy ride. We will look at where civic journalism started—and why. We will look at where it has brought us today. And we will look at where it seems to be taking us.

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Our map will include the writings of the movement’s leading philosophers. It will include a survey of major published studies of civic journalism’s effects so far. It will put civic journalism in the larger context of other social, economic and technological forces also reshaping journalism. And it will include some reflections on what this means for an ordinary journalist working in an extraordinary time.

Right about here, I should give a concise, specific definition of civic journalism. I can’t. The movement is intentionally amorphous. Its leading advocates decline to define it, for fear that would limit its evolution. “Public journalism is what you find out when you try to do it,” says Rosen.³

But in general, its advocates hold that journalism should be done in a way that invites citizen participation in shaping news coverage, encourages civic engagement—especially in elections—and supports communities in solving problems.

They envision a journalism that would be less conflict-oriented. In politics, it would concentrate more on issues and minimize the horse-race, particularly from polls. It would focus less on extremes in public policy and political debates, and more on middle or common ground. It would get away from a “winners and losers” framework. It would have more diverse “voices” in the news. In all of that, civic journalism borrows from—but doesn’t acknowledge—many women and minorities who have long agitated for similar changes.

In the last five years, the movement has gained impressive ground. Civic journalism has become a staple of panel discussions and conferences among professors and journalists. It is the fastest growing interest group for the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the professional organization for journalism educators. Public broadcasters—both PBS television and National Public Radio—have embraced civic journalism’s principles. Scores of news organizations have adopted many of its techniques. Through 1998, 62 civic journalism projects,⁴ each involving several news organizations, have been funded by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, which serves

as something of a bank for part of the movement and as what director Jan Schaffer calls a “megaphone” for civic journalists’ work.⁵ Schaffer says she sees “a whole civic gang of reporters” exchanging views on the Internet and hears others bemoan a lost opportunity to pursue civic journalism when they move to traditional newspapers.⁶

But the movement also appalls many in journalism. Editors of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* have blasted civic journalism as a threat to news organizations’ independence and impartiality. Many reporters remain deeply suspicious and resentful of what they see as restraints on their autonomy, more infringements in the newsroom by marketers, and misguided management attempts to replace substance with public relations gimmicks. And many managers even doubt civic journalism’s worth.

In a survey of 554 media executives in 1997, partly sponsored by the Associated Press Managing Editors, civic journalism did not fare well as a helpful tool: Only 7.4 percent of respondents strongly agreed that civic journalism had become “an important way for many news organizations to ‘reconnect’ with their alienated communities” and 34.4 percent strongly disagreed. Only 14.1 percent strongly agreed that better reporting and coverage came from having newspapers sponsor “citizens’ juries” or “citizens’ forums”—trademark civic journalism techniques—for the community to discuss important issues, while 33 percent strongly disagreed. The executives were almost equally divided—34.8 percent strongly agreeing; 33.9 percent strongly disagreeing—on the idea that civic journalists “cross the line between reporting and advocacy—putting journalism’s ebbing credibility in further peril.” And 41 percent strongly agreed—compared to 32.7 percent who strongly disagreed—that “‘public journalism’ is little more than boosterism . . . a gimmick to make publishers feel better about themselves.”⁷

Why has civic journalism resonated so strongly with some? Why are many other journalists so fiercely opposed?

Some key points about its appeal and its controversy: Civic journalism reflects a broader social movement aimed at “civic renewal” throughout American politics and public life. It flowed directly out of what’s been called “consumer-driven” journalism inspired by news executives’ fears about declining news audiences, especially for newspapers. It arrived at a

time of profound dismay among many journalists who see their profession beset by lost credibility, adrift from its core values and battered by ever-changing demands of a volatile industry. It expresses the frustration of many—some journalists, citizens, civic and political leaders, social philosophers—with the public and the political system’s apparent inability to resolve society’s intractable problems.

And at its heart, civic journalism is part of the ancient American argument about the press’ role, mission and purpose in our democracy.

In 1904, Joseph Pulitzer, who helped create journalism schools to professionalize the craft, described what’s become a basic tenet of traditional journalism by calling for “an able, disinterested, public-spirited press.” For many of today’s traditionalists, the tenet underlies the familiar visions of the journalists’ biggest jobs: Watchdog of government and others with power. Witness to significant events. Record-keeper of public life. Gatherer and conveyor of information on which the public could base decisions—from choosing a restaurant to electing a president to going to war. In a recent book called “News Is a Verb,” *New York Post* columnist, editor and novelist Pete Hamill likened the journalist to a tribe’s scouts who “carry the torch to the back of the cave and tell the others what is there in the darkness.”⁸

In the traditionalist view, journalism performs those functions best when it sticks to Pulitzer’s concept of a “disinterested” press. The traditional concepts of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality stem from that ideal. From it too comes the deep concern with conflicts of interest. Judges recuse themselves from cases in which they have a personal stake so that their rulings will not be suspect. Elected officials often put their personal finances in blind trusts so that their public policy decisions are distinct from private gain. And journalists traditionally try to separate their personal relationships from what they cover so their reporting can be more independent.

Traditional journalists often hope their work has some effect, usually on behalf of the public. The submission letters for journalism awards would be incomplete without the obligatory passage that begins, “As a result of our reporting . . .” and continues with a laundry list of achievements. Often we try to assess our effects by looking at government, public policy, politicians, corporations. Were any laws changed? Were any corrupt officials indicted or fired? Did we catch any crooks? Was anybody—

rape victims, the elderly in nursing homes, neighbors of a toxic waste dump—helped?

Sometimes we judge our results by reaction from our audiences. Did we get letters to the editor, phone calls, requests for reprints? Did viewers offer their homes to the abandoned baby featured on the 6 o'clock news? When the work draws no response from institutions or the public, reporters and editors sometimes feel like voices shouting in the wilderness. Is anyone paying attention? Does that matter?

Not necessarily, suggests press scholar Michael Schudson. "The news serves a vital democratic function whether in a given instance anyone out there is listening or not," writes Schudson. "The news constructs a symbolic world that has a kind of priority, a certification of legitimate importance. And that symbolic world, putatively and practically, in its easy availability, in its cheap, quotidian, throw-away material becomes the property of us all. That is a lesson in democracy itself. It makes the news a resource when people are ready to take political action. . . ."⁹

In 1956, in a speech called "A Tradition of Conscience," the third Joseph Pulitzer put the traditional role of the press and its relationship to the public even more simply: "Affected with the public interest and protected by the First Amendment," said Pulitzer, "the press performs a solemn duty when it undertakes to inform a free people."

Wrong, say civic journalists. The traditional view of the public and the press, they say, is outdated and incomplete. Rosen, the theoretician, frames the issue this way: "'The public,' in whose name all journalists ply their trade, is best understood as an achievement of good journalism—its intended outcome rather than its assumed audience."¹⁰

In that shape, the civic journalism philosophy calls on journalists to *form*—rather than merely inform—the public.

For their part in the argument on the press' purpose, civic journalism advocates draw on contemporary scholarship suggesting the public sphere is disappearing and on a widespread sense that our social fabric is badly frayed. Public opinion polls show that Americans distrust government, our neighbors and certainly the press. Membership in many civic organizations is shrinking. Voting—once the privilege of the landed gentry, the great prize of suffragists and civil rights activists—seems less attractive to many citizens than a sale at their favorite department store.¹¹ It appealed to only 49

percent of eligible voters in the 1996 presidential election, the lowest turnout since 1924.

In that grim world view, America is evolving into a nation of couch potatoes, Nintendo nerds, anonymous talk-show callers and self-absorbed individualists who would rather—in Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam's vivid phrase—go "bowling alone."

For civic journalists, editor Merritt paints the picture this way: "Our formal politics, which is only one part of public life, is sodden and largely ineffective. Many Americans view it as being a world apart from their realities, already subjected to a hostile takeover by special interests and professional politicians. The other part of public life—our civic ethic—is largely inward-looking, as Americans isolate themselves in their own narrow concerns and seek safety and solace in insular communities and activities."¹²

To many, including civic journalists, the press gets much of the blame. An often cited statistic from a 1994 *Times Mirror* poll puts 71 percent of Americans agreeing that the news media "stand in the way of society solving its problems." Many scholars, civic journalism advocates, and critics inside and outside the press accuse journalists of nurturing citizens' disengagement, alienation and cynicism by the way we do our jobs. Horse-race coverage of political campaigns, say critics, treats citizens as spectators to sport. For journalists, the median income is about \$31,000 a year.¹³ But increasingly they are seen as arrogant, elitist, and disconnected from other Americans.¹⁴

Civic journalists forge links among those social ills, performance of the press and the long steady decline in newspaper circulation and network viewership. Merritt of the *Wichita Eagle* puts the case bluntly: "It is no coincidence that the decline in journalism and the decline in public life have happened at the same time. In modern society, they are codependent: Public life needs the information and perspective that journalism can provide, and journalism needs a viable public life because without one, there is no need for journalism."¹⁵

Advocates like Merritt and Rosen argue that the purpose of journalism is to "help public life go well."¹⁶ Others put the goal this way: "Civic Journalism is intended to involve citizens in their communities, and to promote in them normative attitudes that are supportive of civic participation," write scholars Steven Chaffee, Michael McDevitt and Esther Thorson. They add, "The idealized citizen that Civic

Journalism hopes to create is a thinking person, actively engaged in community issues, and holding socially functional attitudes that are consistent with participation rather than cynical views of local political processes."¹⁷

That presumes considerable power for the press, charging journalists with the rather mind-boggling responsibility of determining just what makes a "thinking person" and "socially functional attitudes." To achieve the goal, civic journalism sets reporters and editors whole new tasks. It is no longer enough, say civic journalism advocates, to gather, report and explain the news. Now journalists may need to "convene" their communities in public discussions of troublesome issues, perhaps in town-hall meetings or in citizens' views in the news media.

Merritt urges journalists to become "fair-minded participants in public life rather than detached observers."¹⁸ He and Rosen maintain that journalists need not give up their independence, nor become partisans. But they call for a new kind of press activism. "Public journalism proposes a more dramatic change: a new compact between journalists and the publics they serve, in which both parties recognize the duty of the press occasionally to *intervene (sic)* in public life in the interest of strengthening civic culture," says Rosen.¹⁹

For many in journalism, several things now give all of that, as the social scientists say, salience: Fear—panic, even—about the shrinking audience for news. Anxiety about the meltdown in the press' credibility with the public. The 24-hour news cycle that demands something—anything!—to fill it. Fierce competition from the Internet, specialty publications and cable television. The shift in the 1970s toward widespread use of market surveys, polls and focus groups in what's called "customer-driven" or "market-driven" journalism. Media mergers and Wall Street pressure for continuing double-digit profits.

Civic journalists often call their efforts "an experiment." But, in fact, under market-driven journalism, news organizations have been experimenting madly for 20 years. Through the 1980s and into the '90s, we have furiously and often reinvented ourselves with more color, graphics, polished packages of visuals. Following market surveys, we have offered shorter stories, explanatory stories, local stories, "news you can use" and "infotainment." Only a few years ago, managers of corporations that stretched across technologies—print, television and on-line—redefined themselves out of news altogether and into the "information business"

in which editors were "processors" and reporters were "content providers."²⁰

Despite all of that, news executives still face a grim reality: The frenetic changes have failed. The audience for news is as elusive than ever.

Enter the civic journalists.

Staking a Claim to the High Road: Where, When, How and Why the Journey Began

The defining event for civic journalism is usually pinned to the 1988 presidential campaign, with its fixation on horse-race polls and focus on Gary Hart's adultery, George Bush's visits to flag factories and Willie Horton ads, and Michael Dukakis' ride in a tank. The campaign was a triumph of trivia, sleaze and manipulation. And it provoked an outburst of soul-searching by many journalists on their role in it.

David Broder—a Pulitzer Prize winner, dean of political reporters, an admired, thoughtful man—summed up the feelings of many by calling for a change in political reporting away from the "game" it had largely become.

"We have to try to distance ourselves from the people that we write about—the politicians and their political consultants—and move ourselves closer to the people that we write for—the voters and the potential voters," Broder said in a 1991 speech in Riverside, California.

But by 1991, in fact, the groundwork for the civic journalism was largely laid. Its philosophy was taking firm shape. And most of the major figures who would be its driving force—as well as account for much of the controversy—were well into their roles. Among them:

- Rosen, the theoretician, who began presenting his ideas to gatherings of journalists in 1989.²¹
- The Kettering Foundation, which worked with Rosen and nurtured the growing idea of connections among civic renewal, healthier politics and a civic-minded press.
- The late James K. Batten, a respected newsman who became the CEO of the Knight Ridder chain in 1988.

For its first few years, civic journalism remained largely on the periphery of journalism's soul-searching. By and large, it was still the intellectual property of academics and social philosophers who discussed its concepts at seminars. And it lacked a catalyst to spread its message throughout newsrooms. A brief chronology of civic journalism's evolution:

1988: Quite apart from the dismal presidential campaign reporting, Knight Ridder's Batten confronts an increasingly familiar journalism fear:

bleak prospects in circulation and readership. Batten responds by launching an intense campaign for what he called “customer obsession.”²²

Far from both national politics and the Knight Ridder home office, editor Jack Swift of the chain’s paper, the *Ledger-Enquirer*, in Columbus, Georgia, independently undertakes what would become known as civic journalism’s first project.

1989: Batten parses market surveys that show a link between people feeling connected to their communities and their propensity to read newspapers. He begins to talk less about “consumer obsession” and more about “community connectedness.” He is evidently intrigued by the views of New York University professor Rosen, who this year gives his first talk to journalists—at an Associated Press Managing Editors conference—in which he urges editors to take to heart John Dewey’s advice in the 1920s that newspapers needed to be embedded in their communities’ social networks.

1990: The Kettering Foundation begins sponsoring a series of discussions on citizenship, democracy and the press. These would provide a core of the movement’s philosophy. The seminars also brought together Rosen and Merritt, who would become a team in promoting civic journalism’s themes. Batten, pursuing the idea of community connections for newspapers, urges Knight Ridder corporate executives to look for new ways to cover elections based on the emerging tenets of civic journalism. Merritt volunteers the *Wichita Eagle*.

1991–92: A handful of other newspapers—among them the *Wisconsin State Journal* in Madison and the *Charlotte Observer* in North Carolina—begin reshaping their coverage of elections and local issues with the emerging civic journalism techniques.

1993: Civic journalism gets its “Big Mo,” as political reporters describe the burst of momentum when a candidate’s campaign takes off. Batten triggers the interest of the Pew Charitable Trusts, a Philadelphia-based foundation which had been looking for ways to invest in civic renewal.²³ The foundation sets up the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, with \$3.6 million. Through 1999, the Center will have a total of \$7.9 million to operate and to promote civic journalism.

1994: Civic journalism has become a bandwagon, with projects in Charlotte, Madison, San Francisco, Boston, Seattle, to name a few.

The roles of Batten and the Pew Center were crucial for the movement’s growth. Both

brought energy, commitment and focus to the amorphous academic discussion. On a practical level, they also gave the movement two key ingredients: Muscle and money. Both Batten and Pew’s roles also colored some of the controversy around civic journalism.

For his part, Batten opened the Knight Ridder chain as civic journalism laboratories. One analysis of the movement’s projects followed by the Project on Public Life and the Press—a program at New York University headed by Rosen and funded partly by the Knight Foundation—found that of 35 news organizations doing civic journalism projects by the end of 1994, 42 percent of them were at Knight Ridder papers.²⁴

In its role as “megaphone,” as director Schaffer calls it, the Pew Center has run 25 workshops since 1993. It distributes videos on civic journalism philosophy and practice. It has a state-of-the-art web site that makes easily available its formidable collection of publications, examples and how-to guides on civic journalism. It awards the \$25,000 James K. Batten Award for Excellence in Civic Journalism, one of the profession’s richest prizes.

And it funds projects by news organizations. Money from Pew, for example, has paid for polls by news organizations to find out citizens’ concerns, salaries for “community coordinators” who work in newsrooms and with neighborhoods, rent on an apartment for a reporter temporarily living in and reporting on a poor neighborhood, and the logistics for a variety of public forums. For example, the local public radio station, KERA-90, in Arlington, Texas, has \$20,000 from Pew to follow a city planning effort. The station is sponsoring neighborhood forums and doing a survey of residents’ attitudes and civic participation. The station “was trying to bring citizens into their government and the planning process,” said Schaffer in an interview.

She declined in an interview to say how much money the Pew Center has given to news organizations. “A lot of our funding goes to convening of citizens in some civic space,” Schaffer said. She objects to describing the funding as an investment in a style of coverage as making Pew’s involvement sound “sinister.” Said Schaffer, “It suggests or can be construed that Pew is telling people what to cover.” The Center, she said, “won’t pay for a reporter’s time.”

But the funding may shape how a reporter spends her or his time. Reporters frequently are detailed to cover the town hall meetings their news organizations sponsor with Pew money. They develop the stories based on the polls paid

for by Pew. They file the reports to the alliances of news organizations—print and broadcast—that share the projects funded by Pew.

The Pew Center's success is a sharp departure from journalistic traditions. Most reputable news organizations usually refuse to take outside money. Many have policies against accepting even airfare or other support. Exceptions are rare and usually require extraordinary circumstances and lengthy in-house soul-searching over whether the news organization's independence is compromised. Some journalists, pinched by budget cuts and profit margins, see the non-profit Pew Center as an acceptable source of money to pursue worthwhile coverage. Others adamantly object.

"Would newspapers who take Pew money be willing to take money or put in their newsrooms 'coordinators' paid by General Electric, say, or the United States Information Agency?" as Michael Gartner, former president of NBC News and now editor of the Ames, Iowa, *Daily Tribune*, poses the concern. "What's the difference? Why is Pew money somehow not tainted?"²⁵

As it moved into newsrooms, civic journalism sometimes stirred tension between managers and reporters. Many reporters balked at civic journalism's heavy reliance on polls, focus groups and surveys to shape coverage according to citizens' concerns. To many, it smacked of the "consumer-driven" journalism promoted early on by Batten and other executives who had argued that news was no different from any other product and must be tailored to what customers said they wanted. Some reporters fear that civic journalism's commitment to encouraging civic engagement pushes them into uneasy alliances with a community's powerbrokers. Others resent its tendency toward tightly packaged stories that often adopt a formulaic template.

The rank-and-file resistance has drawn sharp retorts from some managers, who dismiss the critical reporters' concerns as mere personal ambition. Some of the management criticism has been ironic. Knight Ridder and other chains, for example, often shift executives among their different papers, moving editors in and out of communities. Merritt, for example, was a corporate transplant to the *Wichita Eagle* in a Knight Ridder career that included stints in North Carolina, Florida and Washington, D.C.

But, in pitching civic journalism as an antidote to newsrooms "disconnected" from their communities, Knight Ridder CEO Batten

lashed out at "journalistic transients." Said Batten, "Their eyes are on the next and bigger town, the next rung up the ladder. . . . There is always the temptation to make their byline files a little more glittering at the expense of people and institutions they will never see again."²⁶

The theme lingers. In a 1997 report on civic journalism projects, Gil Thelen, then-editor of *The State* in Columbia, South Carolina, acknowledged the newsroom resistance and blamed it on ambitious regional journalists aping the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. "What's really hurting this is the way the elite press is smashing around anything that smacks of experimentation," said Thelen. "And a lot of the people in my newsroom want to work for them." He added, "Everybody defers to them. Maybe that's the source of the resistance."²⁷

That's the grand-scale, big-picture view of where the civic journalism journey started. But it also has a more mundane beginning with two editors at Knight Ridder papers wrestling with more parochial concerns and with a familiar frustration.

One was Buzz Merritt, who in 1990 found himself facing the "dreary enough prospect" of guiding the *Wichita Eagle* through covering yet another issueless campaign for the Kansas governor's office. He decided he couldn't do it. In a column for the *Eagle*, he spelled out what has since become a key part of movement's rationale: "I announce," he wrote, "that the *Eagle* has a strong bias. The bias is that we believe the voters are entitled to have the candidates talk about the issues in depth. . . . I am perfectly comfortable defending the notion that you as a voter have the right to know what the candidates intend to do once in office."²⁸

The column harked back to an age-old journalistic tradition that a newspaper is, in effect, acting on *behalf* of citizens. What would set apart the *Eagle* and later civic journalism projects is their method.

The other editor was Jack Swift of the *Ledger-Enquirer* in Columbus, Georgia, who, it turned out, was ahead of his time. In 1988, the year of the turning-point Bush-Dukakis campaign, Swift's paper published the fruits of an exhaustive 13-month reporting effort on an "Agenda for Progress" for Columbus. It was a detailed examination of community concerns—from transportation to race relations—and featured recommendations for a better future. It drew little reaction. Until Jack Swift decided he'd had enough. As he saw it, the issues were too important to sink quietly in evident public

apathy. His response became civic journalism's first project.

In what would become a pattern for much of civic journalism, Swift set about creating a community task force of which he was a member. He hosted backyard barbecues for community leaders and his paper's journalists. He deployed the paper's resources into a campaign of town hall meetings, civic networking and relentless coverage. Reporters wrote about the project for nearly two years.

Swift's activism also echoed a old tradition—the turn-of-the-century newspaper crusades of the press barons when Pulitzer and Hearst happily threw their weight around with abandon and no one cared a tinker's damn about conflicts of interest or abuse of press power. But this is a different era. Swift drew sharp criticism from other journalists, many of whom saw his action as a dangerous foray into politics, an ethical minefield and collusion with local authorities. Staff morale sank. Some of his reporters tried to flee to other newspapers. An in-house Knight Ridder staff survey was scalding about Swift.

For the two pioneers—Merritt and Swift—of civic journalism, the outcomes could not have been more different. Merritt, of course, became the movement's emblematic editor, author of a book about the journey, frequent partner with Rosen the theoretician as accomplished spokesmen for the movement.

For Swift's part, Columbus eventually developed a long-range plan for its future. Some of his colleagues thought the effort had brought new voices—the middle class and women among them—into the newspaper. But many readers had wearied of the drumbeat. Staff morale remained low and the journalistic controversy high. Swift was under many pressures. His friend and colleague, Billy Winn, says the stress from work was not Swift's only problem. But on November 19, 1990, Jack Swift put a bullet through his head.²⁹

From the perspective of the movement's advocates, the two editors had staked a claim on the high road for civic journalism: Merritt by pledging a pursuit of answers from politicians on behalf of citizens, Swift by leading his community into action. "What Jack Swift and his colleagues also did was reconstrue the position of the journalist within politics," Rosen wrote in *Quill* magazine in 1992. "Instead of standing outside the political community, and reporting on its pathologies, they took up residence within its borders. This was a courageous move that made a difference to the citizens of Columbus."

From one of those colleagues, Billy Winn, comes a view that is more ambivalent, one that captures much of where the movement stands today. In "Mixed News," a 1997 book of essays and reflections on the civic journalism debate, Winn, who worked closely with Swift on the project, describes himself as a supporter of much of what civic journalism tries to accomplish—the diversity of voices, public-spirited reporting. He just doesn't see it as very new. "We did a lot more when I first came into journalism in the '60s," he says. He is not wild about the fascination from academics who "have all analyzed it to death." And in what's become a frequent critique among many reporters, he adds: "Public journalism projects have become a crutch for people who don't know their community. It's an excuse to do structured projects that are heavy on planning and teamwork, but short on knowledge, talent and genuine concern for the community. They are corporate buzz words."

"Sometimes," said Winn, "I think public journalism is just an attempt to replace talent."

Taking Steps On the Journey: What Makes a Civic Journalism Project?

Without a definition from its leading figures, civic journalism largely has been identified with a set of practices. Among them:

- Sponsoring and covering town-hall style meetings, public forums, candidate debates and "civic exercises" such as panels of citizens to try their hand at balancing state or local budgets or mock juries to weigh decisions in local economic or development controversies.
- Using "community coordinators," often paid for by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, to organize the events.
- Shaping coverage around what's often called a "citizens' agenda" of concerns derived from polls, surveys and focus groups.
- Featuring real people—dubbed "RPs" by irreverent reporters—and their views throughout the news, from quoting them in stories rather than "experts" to posing their questions to candidates and using them as questioners in political debates.
- Forming "media alliances" of print, television and broadcast to share stories and sometimes even reporters, to promote each organization's contribution and to saturate a market or region with coverage.
- "Convening" community groups, leaders or ordinary citizens to solve problems.

Some newspapers turn over space for citizens to tell their own stories. Some train staff members in conflict resolution techniques and send them out as “facilitators” in resolving community disputes. Some sponsor summits among rival gangs to hammer out truces.

Two vivid examples of civic journalism projects—and some of their controversy—come from Charlotte, North Carolina, and Madison, Wisconsin.

In North Carolina, the *Charlotte Observer’s* “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” project has become Exhibit A for civic journalism success. The city was shocked by the shooting deaths of two police officers in 1993. News editor Jennie Buckner was looking for ways to follow-up on violent crime “that wouldn’t just feed fear” when a Knight Ridder executive called soliciting ideas to put forward to the just-created Pew Center for Civic Journalism. The paper had already adopted civic journalism techniques for elections in its “Your Vote in ’92” coverage. Buckner decided to try the method with crime.³⁰

With financial help from the Pew Center, the *Observer* launched what would become an 18-month long, in-depth look at 10 central city neighborhoods that were home to many African-Americans plagued by crime, slum landlords and poor city services. The paper used computers to pinpoint crime patterns. It built a partnership with local broadcasters, including a commercial television station and two radio stations with large audiences among African-Americans. It hired a community coordinator—herself an African-American—who orchestrated the early meetings between reporters and groups of residents, chivvied along residents to keep them involved, networked with local groups, and remains something of the paper’s “goodwill” ambassador to the neighborhoods.

The paper sponsored meetings in each neighborhood for residents to talk about their problems, meet with experts and agencies. It drew up a “needs” list for each neighborhood. It enlisted the local United Way to help coordinate public response, including the 700 individuals or groups who greeted the series with offers of help. It focused on solutions as well as the problems.

Criticism of “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” has been mild, focused mostly on the propriety of Pew funding and doubt about whether the community coordinator was necessary. The project was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in public service and it is generally seen as a strong example of good enterprise reporting, with or without civic journalism techniques.

But the *Observer* was scorched by critics in and out of the press for its coverage of the 1996 election as part of a state-wide project called “Your Voice, Your Vote.” In classic civic journalism style, the *Observer* joined a media alliance of 14 other news organizations—six newspapers and nine broadcasters altogether—to draw up a “citizens’ agenda” by polling citizens about their concerns, create packages of stories on issues that each partner could edit and supplement, and share in-depth interviews with the major candidates. The election included a rematch between Senator Jesse Helms, a conservative Republican, and Democratic challenger Harvey Gantt, an African-American. Their first contest was notorious for a Helms ad that played to racial and economic fears by featuring a black hand seeming to take a job offer out of a white hand.

The coalition—and the *Observer* in particular—came under heavy attack in stories by the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post* and *New Yorker* magazine.³¹ Gantt’s campaign manager charged that the reporting glossed over racial issues and seldom covered Gantt campaign events. Helms refused to undergo the coalition’s lengthy interviews and beat Gantt easily. The coverage, critics said, stuck so firmly to its chart of pre-planned issues that it ignored the ebb and tide of the campaigns.

For example, the *Washington Post* broke front-page revelations that foreign countries were big donors to a foundation set up to honor Helms, who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Taiwan had pitched in \$225,000; Kuwait gave \$100,000. But the story got short shrift in North Carolina, where the usually competitive *Charlotte Observer* and the *News @ Observer* of Raleigh both chose to run versions of the *Post* story inside rather than immediately assigning their own reporters to pursue it.

Observer editors have defended their election coverage, denying that the lapse with foreign contributions had anything to do with civic journalism. The project “improved our coverage,” Rick Thames, public editor and project coordinator at the *Observer*, told the *Boston Globe*. “We were able to draw candidates out on every issue our polling told us people cared about, and we wrote about it.”³²

In civic journalism efforts in Wisconsin, *The State Journal of Madison* is the print partner in an ongoing enterprise called “We The People/Wisconsin.” Its media alliance also includes a commercial television station, eight

public television stations, 11 public radio stations, and a public relations company that handles logistics and fundraising for “We The People” events. The project gets funding from the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, Miller Brewing Company, Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce, and The Wisconsin Education Association Council.³³

Since 1992, “We The People” has sponsored a series of candidate debates, town-hall-style meetings, and a series of civic exercises such as sessions for citizens to draft their own versions of the state budget and a mock trial of health care reform proposals. Its broadcasts often draw large television audiences and it’s so popular among local leaders that they use the project name as a verb for seeking public exposure, as in “Let’s ‘We-The-People’ this issue.” One of its efforts—a televised town hall meeting on land use—won some credit for an upset victory by land-use control advocates in a county board election.³⁴

By and large, “We The People” is seen as one of civic journalism’s “deliberative” projects, better at generating some community discussion than action. But at *The State Journal*, editor Frank Denton now takes a more activist stance, reminiscent of Jack Swift in Columbus, Georgia.

Denton prefers the phrase “public journalism”—as do movement leaders Merritt and Rosen—because, he says, it “pulls the public into solving problems identified by the reporting.” In two of the paper’s projects—one on city development and another on its schools—the pull worked like this:

The paper’s reporters did their groundwork to put together their stories. “But our journalism did not stop at the reader’s doorstep,” as Denton describes it. “We used our leadership to convene the city’s top leaders and experts.” The reporters and editors showed their unpublished work. Community leaders suggested changes, new approaches, other questions to explore. Denton stresses that the paper kept control of the reporting and that the revamped stories still showed the problems vividly: a growing gap between white and minority students in the schools project, a need for long-range planning for jobs in the city development series. When the reporting was done, he adds, the paper brought the leaders back together “and pushed them to agree, then and there, on steps toward solutions.” The leaders complied.

Many school officials have praised the project. The mayor has expressed discomfort at sitting at the table with journalists who can

weigh in with tons of newsprint. Says Denton, “We got action.”³⁵

As civic journalists have developed their coverage techniques, many of their practices have raised doubt, alarm and dismay. Potential conflicts of interest, which threaten already fragile credibility, seem to blossom in much of civic journalism. Alliances with civic and business groups put news organizations’ independence at risk. Sponsoring—and covering—their town-hall meetings, task forces and community discussion groups easily translate into journalists generating their own news. Traditional journalists remind that management’s pet projects become sacred cows that too often get more, and sweeter, coverage than they deserve.

Civic journalism’s skeptics “see a front page carrying a concertedly cheery account of the town-hall meeting the paper sponsored the night before,” as Geneva Overholser, former ombudswoman for the *Washington Post*, summed up the worry.³⁶

The “citizens’ agenda” of concerns crafted from polls also raises the questions, Which citizens? And which agenda?

Even some friendly observers of civic journalism caution that the poll-driven approach has serious flaws. It presumes that “the majority is right,” says Philip E. Meyer, a Knight Professor of Journalism at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, who says he sympathizes with the movement. He warns that the typical citizens’ agenda techniques overlook subtleties and contradictions in public opinion, ignores minority views and forecloses public debate around emerging concerns. It also fails a basic journalistic obligation to alert the public to things—like looming war with Iraq—that may soon affect it. Attending to only what the public already knows and cares about, says Meyer, is akin to an attitude of “don’t disturb the sleeping beast.”³⁷

The pervasive presence of “media alliances” create a disturbing vision of news monopolies. Supporters say the alliances simply try to maximize each medium’s strengths. They follow communications scholars’ findings that television gets the public’s attention and newspapers give understanding.

But Ben Bagdikian, who has long warned against media monopolies, suggests that the alliances keep news organizations from building in-house expertise and from assuming responsibility for the distinctive interests of their own communities. Shared stories from a collective are by necessity generic and homogenized.

What's important to citizens of Charlotte, for example, may not be at all important in Raleigh. Worse, the alliances eventually could erode public confidence. "When the organizations begin to come together," warns Bagdikian, "it comes very close to what looks like a cartel."³⁸

And in a contradiction to civic journalism's interest in promoting diversity in the news, the alliances mean fewer voices and less competition. Paul McMasters, the First Amendment ombudsman at The Freedom Forum, puts the problem this way: "Is the public interest better served by a diversity of coverage or by former competitors joined together for common coverage? The firmly democratic concept that truth arrives in several pieces from several quarters gets lost in the public journalists' rush to make democracy work rather than to report on its workings."³⁹

Looking for Results: Where Are We Now on the Journey?

So, is civic journalism making democracy work? After nearly eight years and scores of projects and experiments across the country, has it—as its philosophers and advocates urged—revived civic life? Has it—in an implicit promise to boost newspapers' circulation and television viewership—created new "publics" for news?

The short answer: The jury is still out on much of civic journalism's ambitions.

Communication scholars caution that media effects are slow and selective. Cause and effect relationships are especially difficult to untangle. But some researchers see signs that citizens may learn more about issues and candidates, think a little more highly of the news media, and have more of what's called "social capital"—a collection of civic assets ranging from trust in each other to ways to work together—in places where civic journalism has a history. At least one study challenges the movement's conventional wisdom that horse-race polls distract and alienate citizens. Another study paints a portrait of one large-scale project as a stunning failure.

For their part, civic journalism supporters say it's too early to expect concrete results on the decades-long decline of newspaper circulation and newscast viewership or on voter turnout, the most obvious measure of civic engagement. The few clues about newspaper circulation are murky. The *New York Times* reported in 1996, for example, that the *Charlotte Observer*, the *Wisconsin State Journal* and

the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*—three prominent civic journalism newspapers—had seen "modest" circulation increases. But the *Wichita Eagle*, one of the longest-running and home of leading advocate Buzz Merritt, had lost circulation. And voter turnout remains dismal, with fewer than half of Americans going to the polls in 1996 in the poorest showing since 1924.

Among the recent major studies of civic journalism's other effects are published work from these teams of researchers or companies:

- Philip Meyer, Knight Professor of Journalism at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; and Deborah Potter, a faculty member of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. Their 20-county comparisons of 1996 election coverage was funded by the Poynter Institute.
- Esther Thorson, associate dean at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, and Frank Denton, editor of the *Wisconsin State Journal*. Theirs is one of several assessments of the ongoing "We The People/Wisconsin" project that includes *The State Journal*.
- Thorson and Lewis A. Friedland, a professor in the journalism and mass communications school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Both are advocates for civic journalism.
- Frederick Schneiders Research, an independent polling firm in Washington.
- David Blomquist, public affairs editor of *The Record* in Bergen County, New Jersey; and Cliff Zukin, a professor at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

All but Meyer and Potter's study were at least partly funded by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism or the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Among their major findings:

Public response

Like top-notch traditional journalism, some civic journalism projects generate impressive public response. Some examples:

In Charlotte, North Carolina, the *Charlotte Observer's* 1994 series, "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods," on the problems and needs of central-city neighborhoods inspired 700 groups and individuals to volunteer, helped a neighborhood Crime Watch program quadruple its membership, and strengthened a network of local services and community organizations. In a San Francisco-based project, "Voice of the Voter," 40,000 Californians sent in voter registration forms printed in newspapers. In Akron, Ohio,

the *Beacon Journal* won a Pulitzer Prize for a project on race that, among other things, prompted 22,000 people to mail in pledges “to work for” better race relations.

Public awareness

In the common problem for news these days, civic journalists struggle to get public attention. Long-running projects do best, often with their audiences almost equally divided among those who are aware of them and those who are not. But short-term projects—even intensive ones, like election coverage—may barely register on public consciousness.

In Wisconsin, for example, a broad-based coalition—including the *Wisconsin State Journal* in Madison, a public relations firm, and broadcasters—has sponsored 16 projects since 1992 under the logo of “We The People/Wisconsin.” In surveys, between 40 and 53 percent of those polled recognized the name without prompting.

But in North Carolina, after a controversial state-wide election project called “Your Voice, Your Vote” in 1996, only 25 percent in one poll by Schneiders Research said they recognized the project even with cues from the pollsters. Without the prompting, only 13 percent recognized it. But as Meyer of UNC points out, that’s barely above what pollsters call the “noise level,” where 10 percent of North Carolinians polled said they recognized the name of a fictitious political candidate. And in San Francisco, only 19 percent of those surveyed recognized a similar election project without cues from pollsters.

A singular exception in getting public awareness is the *Charlotte Observer’s* “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” project, an 18-month exhaustive look at central city districts. In one survey, 81 percent recognized it by name alone without cues from pollsters.

Knowledge of issues and candidates

In a small bright spot for the movement, civic journalism seems to have a relationship with how much citizens know and learn about issues and candidates. But how and why are a mystery.

In a 20-county study, researchers Philip Meyer and Deborah Potter compared results between those markets where the news organizations intended to do what they call “citizen-based” journalism and those that didn’t. Citizens in places where journalists had a “high intent” to do civic journalism, learned more during the campaign. At its end, 21 percent of

those surveyed in the strongest civic journalism markets gave the right answers to questions about candidates and issues, compared to 11 percent in the others.

But Potter and Meyer say they cannot account for the difference by anything that happened during the campaign. Knowledge and learning, like trusting the news media, were not linked to coverage content but only to the news media’s intent to do civic journalism. This is especially mysterious since both civic and many traditional journalists have increasingly focused their campaign coverage on issues in the election. But the amount of issue coverage had no effect at all on what citizens knew and learned. “The effect is not just insignificant,” say Meyer and Potter, “it is about as close to zero as it is possible to get.”

They suggest the explanation may lie in pre-election efforts by the news media or perhaps some cultural factors in both the communities and their news media. The relationship between the two may have been friendlier even before the news media adopted civic journalism.

In their studies, Thorson, Friedland and Denton also report connections between citizens’ knowledge of issues. In one survey, large majorities of those aware of projects in Madison, Charlotte, San Francisco and Binghamton, New York, agreed when asked about “having a better idea about problems” in their communities. In the study of Dane County around Madison, Thorson and Denton report that “We The People” increased people’s confidence in and their actual knowledge of “We The People.”

Communication scholars caution that phrasing of poll questions can trigger a “politeness” response from respondents who discern what surveyors want to hear. But, in an interview, Thorson said the teams guarded against that by, among other things, testing for actual knowledge of the project’s content.⁴⁰

Civic participation

Here the researchers sharply divide. Meyer and Potter found none. Citizens in places where civic journalism was practiced were no more likely to talk about politics, try to persuade others to vote in a certain way or to vote themselves. “All of the effects found thus far have been inside the citizens’ heads,” they conclude. “Citizen-based journalism has moved their attitudes but not their feet.”

The teams of Thorson, Friedland and Denton often found what they see as strong

signs of enhanced civic participation. Survey respondents often said the projects made them feel “encouraged” to vote, to work on neighborhood problems, and had them “thinking more about politics.”

Other findings, though, make clear how hard it is to turn the feelings into action. “We The People,” for example, often draws large television audiences and some town hall or other meetings have had crowds of up to 400. But another assessment—a joint report from the Pew Center and the Poynter Institute called “Civic Journalism: Six Case Studies”—described turnout for the Wisconsin events as “often low.” After four years and 12 projects, the report calculated that more than 2,000 Wisconsin citizens had participated in “We The People” events. The project’s partners, says the joint report “have had to learn to judge success not by the numbers, but by the quality of the discussion.”

Social capital

Researchers define this social science phrase differently. For Meyer and Potter, the measure was “trust” in others. And they found what they describe as a “tenuous” but hopeful connection where the news media did civic journalism. Again, they can’t link it to campaign coverage but they call for more study.

In their studies, the other teams of Thorson, Friedland and Denton report some of the projects—especially Binghamton’s effort to get a community economic plan—generated “some acrimony.” In Binghamton, the project suffered from deep divisions in the community after severe corporate downsizing devastated the economy. Thorson and Friedland warn that civic journalists need to take care when they address such overwhelming community problems. Their projects, they suggest, often raise community expectations. “We also fear that if the problems it (a project) tackles turns out to be too great to resolve before citizen patience wears thin, if the institutional framework to solve those problems is too weak, and if there is inadequate follow-through on the part of the project partners,” they write, “public cynicism could increase.”

Still, they maintain that in other projects—especially in Charlotte’s “Taking Back Our Neighborhoods” effort—the civic journalism approach energized what they call an “active civic core” of people most aware of the projects and most likely to take action. “What remains unknown,” say Thorson and Friedland, “is whether civic journalism *causes* community

action or being active leads people to pay attention to civic journalism.”

The researchers continue to look at the cause-and-effect relationship and Thorson said they see signs that civic journalism is a cause of social capital.

Political cynicism

Here the verdict seems unanimous: No help. In their published work, Thorson, Friedland and Denton do not look directly at whether civic journalism lessens cynicism. Instead, they report that citizens aware of civic journalism projects “feel more strongly that they should vote in every election.”

Meyer and Potter found what they call a “trace” of lower cynicism in the month of the election, but they attribute it to the study itself. By asking about cynicism, researchers evidently triggered citizens to think more about it and that “re-interview effect” accounted for the hint of a decline in cynicism in November.

And cynicism remains high among Americans. In Meyer and Potter’s study, for example, even after the election 66 percent of their respondents said the government is “run by a few big interests looking out for themselves” and 72 percent said Washington “can never or rarely be trusted to do the right thing.” Whether citizens are on the winning or losing side in an election seems to have a relationship to cynicism. After the election, say Meyer and Potter, the most cynical voters—non-whites, older citizens and the less educated—had been joined by those who considered themselves strong Republicans.

Trust in the news media

Researchers also report some good news for civic journalism in how they’re viewed by the public. Often, according to Thorson, Denton and Friedland, those aware of the projects liked them.

But the strongest evidence comes from Meyer and Potter, who found a correlation between citizen distrust and the news media’s intent to do civic journalism. They rated media intent to do citizen-based journalism on a 0- to 2-point scale. They found that media distrust declined “by a tenth of a point on the 2-point scale for each 1-point increase” in the media’s intent to do civic journalism. They conclude: “Media bashing declines as citizen-based journalism increases, even after the effects of party, age, race, and education have been filtered out.”

But, again, the link seems unrelated to what actually shows up in the newspaper. Instead, they suggest that the effect is indirect

with civic journalists “doing other things that relate to trust” rather than the details of their actual coverage.

Still, the message is mixed. In the study by Schneiders Research, the few who were aware of the North Carolina campaign coverage were more likely to consider it biased. Of those who thought the coverage favored one side in the campaign, 38 percent were among those aware of the coverage, compared to 30 percent of those unaware of the coverage.

Two other pieces of research also are striking for what they show about some of the limits of civic journalism approaches to election coverage. Take horse-race polls. They have come in for widespread criticism since the preoccupation with them in the 1988 presidential campaign. Many scholars and journalists maintain that they distract citizens from issues and turn them into “spectators” of a game for insiders—politicians and the press. Civic journalism’s conventional wisdom strongly disapproves of horse-race polls and the papers practicing it are sharply curtailing the use of horse-race polls.

That’s a mistake, according to Meyer and Potter’s research. In looking at whether knowing about polls meant knowing less about issues, they found the opposite: “The more people know about polls, the more they know about substantive issues,” they say. They calculate the relationship this way: For every one-point increase in poll knowledge in August, when the campaign began, they found a 0.175-point gain in issue knowledge at the end of the campaign in November. The numbers don’t seem huge, the researchers admit, but they are statistically significant. They conclude that, rather than being a distraction, polls may be a catalyst.

“Poll results do serve a purpose,” say Meyer and Potter. “They arouse and maintain interest in the campaign, and encourage, albeit in a small way, citizens to learn more about candidates’ positions on the issues.” Rather than a ban on horse-race polls, they argue for using them more judiciously.

At the *Bergen Record*, the research highlights the problems journalists confront in trying to get citizens engaged in politics. From what’s known about media effects as slow and selective, the *Record*’s project may have been doomed to failure. It was a one-shot effort—a “hypodermic” that communications scholars say has long been discounted. Still, the failures were so dramatic that they left *Record* journalists stunned by readers’ views of politics and political coverage.

“Any presumption that the media can fill a void created by disengaged and non-heroic politicians has disappeared,” wrote *Record* editor Glenn Ritt.

The *Record*’s project focused on the New Jersey Senate election in 1996 to fill the seat of retiring incumbent Bill Bradley. It was a hotly contested race between Democrat Robert Torricelli and Republican Dick Zimmer that gained national notoriety for its \$17 million price tag and its intensely negative television ad campaign.

In a project called “Campaign Central,” *Record* journalists devoted 54 pages of exhaustive coverage over the campaign’s nine weeks. They followed almost every civic journalism prescription: a focus on issues, detailed examination of the candidates’ stands, many citizens’ “voices” in the reporting. Their package was brightly designed, with many graphics—including a summary chart called “Voters’ Guide”—and heavily promoted.

But by almost every measure, Campaign Central had no effect. Researchers found that, compared to readers of other newspapers, *Record* readers were no more knowledgeable, no more interested, and no more likely to vote. Few *Record* readers even noticed the project or any difference from earlier *Record* campaign coverage. Worse, from the journalists’ and researchers’ perspective, focus groups gave little practical insight into why—or what the newspaper could do about it.

Readers stubbornly maintained their conviction that people are “giving up” on news because the news media are “elitist” and biased—but could give no examples. And in one startling revelation with which journalists don’t know how to cope, they overwhelmingly found the “Voters’ Guide” chart—with its snippets of information—more helpful and more believable than stories. “It is one thing to ask journalists to shift the focus of political stories from horse races to issues,” as the researchers put the dilemma, “and quite something else to ask they give up sentences and paragraphs.”

While its showing in Bergen was dismal, the researchers stopped short of rejecting the civic journalism approach, suggesting the project’s failures could have been influenced by the political campaign’s negativity and the project’s shortness. Still, they cautioned, “It may be that the public is not sufficiently interested in politics for public journalism to be of service.” They add: “If citizens wanted better—or at least different—information, it was there for them to find,

yet few availed themselves of the opportunity to do so.”

Looking Ahead: Where Do We Go From Here?

Like generations of newspeople before me, like so many other journalists—whether they call themselves “civic” or plain old reporters and editors and photographers—working or retired today, I care passionately about journalism and what it means to a free people. And like so many others, I am deeply worried for my profession.

At the end of the twentieth century, newspapers, where I have spent most of my career, are an endangered species. Not everyone is convinced they will survive into the next century. And across all the news-delivery technologies—print, broadcast and cable television, radio, Internet—journalism and journalists wrestle with the depressingly familiar list of woes:

Our audiences are fragmented, elusive and shrinking. Our credibility is in tatters. Media mergers and Wall Street put pressure on news organizations to pursue short-term profits at the expense of long-term quality in coverage and conscientious public service. The 24-hour news cycle and frantic competition generate a seemingly endless stream of trivia, breathless sensationalism, speculation and chatter. Old demands for accuracy, verification, context, and fact are increasingly seen as expendable, afterthoughts or merely quaint.

In the face of all that, what are civic journalism’s successes and failures? What lessons can we learn from its attempts to mend both American journalism and American civic life?

To its credit, the movement has helped to keep alive the soul-searching sparked by the poor coverage in the 1988 presidential campaign. Even news organizations who reject civic journalism’s mandate to “convene” communities and “form publics” now attend more carefully to explaining how politics and public policy relate to citizens’ lives. In that sense, civic journalism has helped revive discussion about journalism’s core values at a time when those values are under assault from the industry’s profit motives.

It has helped to validate the views of many women and minority journalists who’ve long advocated a broader range of voices in the news, different perspectives on stories and issues, a less relentless focus on conflict and more innovative approaches to explaining complex issues. Long before civic journalists called for “fram-

ing” stories from ordinary people’s points of view, creative writers and editors worked at illuminating the news from distinctive angles, and sometimes made it possible for their audiences to see old concerns in a new light.

Throughout the 1970s, for example, women reporters found ways to develop stories on the emerging women’s movement without the traditional news peg of events. And as early as 1989, when civic journalism was still a gleam in its creators’ eyes, the Journalism and Women Symposium—known as JAWS—was already urging in its newsletter a different frame for much news: “The media must stop, for example, covering the black community only when there are gang slayings or drug busts,” as JAWS put it. “Write about solutions as well as problems.”⁴¹

Civic journalism has brought many managers—most of whom are white and male—to embrace that suggestion. Those managers, and the movement, will earn credibility by acknowledging that others also have worked long and hard to widen the lens through which we define the news. And one thing to watch is whether the civic journalism movement makes it easier for women and minority journalists to enrich coverage and break through glass ceilings for promotions and top assignments.

Advocates say the movement is—in a phrase that doubles as the title of a video produced by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism—“a work in progress.” And there are signs that it is changing some directions. The Pew Center, said its director, Jan Schaffer, has been shifting away from funding projects by news organizations “as we spend more on workshops.”⁴²

And some news organizations are rethinking how far they experiment with civic journalism principles or techniques. In North Carolina, for example, the *News & Observer* of Raleigh is scaling down its participation in the controversial media alliance. Her paper, said Managing Editor Melanie Sill, “was not really on board with civic journalism” and had been part of the alliance in 1996 as a way of trying new ideas and getting broadcasters more interested in election coverage. The paper is still sharing costs of polling with other news organizations, but not the packaged stories. “We felt it would be better to write a story especially for our readers,” said Sill.⁴³

Some other conclusions, observations and suggestions:

- *Civic journalists must re-examine some of the movement’s basic assumptions.*

Civic journalism, for example, takes for granted that horse-race polls distract citizens from learning about issues, that nonvoters are alienated from politics, and that civic life is disappearing. Yet none of those premises are proven. In fact, they are much in dispute among researchers and scholars.

Horse-race polls, as Meyer and Potter found, deserve more respect as a potential catalyst for voters' interest in campaigns and issues. Rather than abandoning them, journalists might do better to use them judiciously and in a broader context of reporting on issues.

Alienation may be a smaller obstacle to voting than other factors. The simple truth is that we don't really know why many nonvoters decide not to go to the polls. And a survey for the League of Women Voters concludes that nonvoters are no more alienated than voters. Instead, nonvoters tend to see voting as a cumbersome process. They have less understanding of how elections affect their interests and less faith that their vote counts. And they are less likely to have been targets of mobilization efforts by candidates or political parties.⁴⁴

And several studies of Americans' civic engagement suggest that it may be merely evolving rather than evaporating.⁴⁵ Now, Americans donate money if not their time to political activities. They volunteer at high rates for such social needs as answering hotlines, working in hospices and domestic abuse shelters. Universities and traditional civic groups, like the League of Women Voters, offer a rich array of political and civics education programs, serve as facilitators in community disputes and sponsor opportunities for citizens to get involved in solving local problems. In undertaking similar roles, news organizations may be duplicating activities in which other groups have more expertise or merely trying to step into a vacuum that doesn't exist.

- *Civic journalists need to attend more carefully to the potential for conflicts of interest in the new roles they undertake.*

In dismissing the traditional separations between journalists and what they cover, civic journalism theoretician Rosen urges journalists to worry more about "getting the connections right" between journalists and their communities. But it's equally important to make the right connections—with people, not power structures. Too often, civic journalism projects seem to ally themselves with a community's power players—politicians, civic and business leaders—whom

journalists also must cover. Ultimately, that offers a serious threat to news organizations' credibility if their motives become suspect.

News organizations can strengthen their connections to their communities in many ways that offer considerably less potential for conflicts of interest. They can make it easier, as civic journalists and others suggest, for ordinary citizens to contact reporters and editors by publishing phone numbers and e-mail addresses. They can hire more ombudsmen to bring citizens' complaints, interests and concerns into the newsroom. They can encourage "shoe-leather" reporting that allows reporters out into communities—its coffee shops, bars, churches, schools—rather than setting up artificial gatherings, sometimes called "listening posts," in which civic journalists strain to sort sensible story ideas from forced or rambling discussions among strangers. They can make reporters and editors available—for free and during work hours—as speakers on journalism and the workings of the press to civic groups, schools, churches. They can sponsor journalism-related activities. They could, for example, offer their own summer programs where students could learn journalism from the news organizations' editors and reporters. Journalists quite simply can do much more to explain what their community can expect from them—and what the community cannot expect.

- *Civic journalists and traditionalists alike must begin to confront the larger trends—the demands of the 24-hour news cycle, the pressure for double-digit profits, the feeding frenzies triggered by brutish competition—that deeply erode journalism's credibility, quality and place in a democratic society.*

The *business* practices of the news industry increasingly undermine journalism, civic or otherwise. Take, for example, the alarm over newspapers' anemic circulation and readership that triggered the "consumer-driven" journalism out of which civic journalism has grown. Knight Ridder CEO Batten proposed "customer obsession" and "community connectedness" to promote circulation. Editor Merritt and theoretician Rosen draw the circle of newspapers encouraging civic engagement, which encourages citizens' needs for news, which encourages circulation.

But despite the alarm, some circulation decline is self-inflicted. At many news organizations, executives deliberately cut back on circulation to lower distribution costs and boost short-term profits.⁴⁶ And in their own version of

“redlining,” news organizations often ignore poorer or inner city neighborhoods to target residents of affluent suburbs who are more attractive to advertisers.

“They want the *right* circulation, for whom advertisers will pay a premium,” says Bill Kovach, curator of the Nieman Foundation, a former reporter and editor of the *New York Times* who as editor led the *Atlanta Journal & Constitution* to a Pulitzer Prize for coverage of redlining against African-Americans by home-mortgage lenders.

But perhaps the overarching lesson from and for civic journalism should be this: Humility. The movement tends to overestimate the power of the press to remake civic life and politics. And sometimes it carries a whiff of condescension toward the public, which some civic journalism advocates seem to see as so helpless and atomized that journalists, like magicians, must conjure it into existence.

“It will not do to blame the victim, the underinformed citizen, for the failures of American democracy,” says press scholar Michael Schudson. “Nor will it suffice to blame the messenger, the media burdened with greater expectations than they could ever meet. The structure of our polity and our parties is implicated. The fabric of our everyday lives at home, work, church, and school, on the freeway and at the supermarket, at the Little League game or on the street, is involved.”⁴⁷

Doing the work of journalism is itself an act of citizenship. And civic journalists can make the movement more valuable to the profession if it scales back its ambitions, if it recognizes the limits of the craft, if it expects from reporters and editors that they have the skills and talents to deliver, and if it looks for common ground and common language with traditionalists.

Like generations of newspeople before me, I learned much of what I know, value, and expect of journalism from an editor who cared enough to teach me. In my case, the editor was the late James C. Millstone and for this paper’s critique, concerns and suggestions about civic journalism I have drawn much on the lessons he taught. When he was a much-respected reporter covering the Supreme Court in the 1960s, he was—in Joseph Pulitzer’s phrase—a trusted lookout on the bridge of state. When he covered the civil rights movement in the South, he—as Pete Hamill described it—carried the torch into the back of the cave to tell the others what was there in the dark. Haynes Johnson, in a memorial speech for Millstone, once said that Jim should

have shared his Pulitzer Prize for civil rights coverage in Selma. The Walker Commission cited Millstone’s reporting in its investigation into the Chicago police’s behavior at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. At the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, he was nearly God to many of the reporters who worked for him.

At its heart, civic journalism renews the ancient question of what should be the press’ role in a democratic society. To my mind, Millstone had the best response. He saw being a journalist as a privilege and an awesome responsibility. Once, when I was writing a grimly depressing investigative series on the poor care in boarding homes for the elderly, he demanded, “Doesn’t anybody do this *right*? People need to see that this can be done right.” And off I went to find someone doing it right. Millstone had great respect for the people for whom he worked—and they weren’t corporate executives who signed his paycheck but the readers who depended on his newspaper. He thought they were owed journalism that was accurate, fair, honest, enlightening, engaging, that held accountable those with power and offered hope and help to those without. In what were effectively his standing orders to his reporters, Jim Millstone conveyed all of that—and answered the philosophical question, resolved the debate about our role, mission and purpose—in three simple words:

“Do good stories.”

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