

MANUAL ON CIVIC JOURNALISM

Published on: **Feb 9, 2016 @ 08:23**

Building Better Communities Through Civic Journalism

Reference Materials for the Seminar-Workshop Series

Sponsored by:

The Coca-Cola Export Corporation

In partnership with the

Philippine Press Institute

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Civic journalism

By Vergel O. Santos

In the beginning there was only journalism.

Then, as the need has arisen to suit it to the changing times, journalism has had to be redefined and categorized into sub-disciplines or specialties. That's why today no journalist, lest he be thought outdated, will be caught doing plain journalism; it has to be interpretive, explanatory, contextualized, investigative, in-depth, perspective, or other journalism on some such order.

Indeed, as life modernizes and becomes increasingly complex, people demand more from the journalist. Basically, they now want him to not merely recount yesterday's events, but help them understand what those events mean to them, how they affect them, not only as individual citizens but also as a community.

It's all perfectly fair, and I suppose that, in trying to meet his customers' demands, the journalist himself feels helped by a sharper, if sometimes superfluous, redefinition of his job. So I won't quarrel with that. What I find unsettling, really, is this business of overstretching the scope of the journalist's job - this business of enlisting the journalist for some cause or other and investing his job with more virtue than it is meant to carry, as seems to me the case with "advocacy journalism".

That phrase at first struck me as contradictory - an oxymoron. For how can the journalist be both observer and advocate, both detached and involved? At any rate, being an all-too-human columnist and having myself lingered at one time or another, I'm sure, between journalism and advocacy; between detachment and involvement, I have decided to leave advocacy journalism alone.

Still, for all the fine, even noble, purposes for which journalism is being redefined, I can't help but feel a sense of alarm at the prospect of it being taken too far. I'm not being old-fashioned; in fact, I have myself experimented with journalism with some boldness (I think). I may even have been thought flirting with advocacy journalism myself when, early in the life of this column, I criticized the media's suspicious, and sometimes condescending, attitude toward non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or, as they are collectively known, civil society. I wrote:

The emergence of NGOs ...happens to be one of the more heartening events that represent precisely the change that characterizes these times. . . . Apparently these non profit NGOs have gained wide trust as a kind of modern-day missionaries of social equity. . . .Their value as news sources lies in their closeness to the realities of poverty and in their apparent lack of selfish motives. Why the media prefer to stick with the regular run of high government and corporate news sources, who are preoccupied with politicking and profit taking, is a matter that reveals much more than the media's comfortable imprisonment in its orthodoxies. . .

I went on to propose a partnership between the media and the NGOs, but made it clear that what I had in mind was a partnership that did not in any way compromise the basic principles on which journalism is founded - accuracy, objectivity, independence, and fairness. In fact, So long as those principles are observed, I don't think anyone should mind what journalism you and I practice. I doubt, though, that advocacy journalism qualifies, which is a pity because there seems something about it that is especially suitable in these times and in these parts.

As it happens, there has emerged lately a kind of journalism that tries to strike that precise balance. By an advocate's description: "It employs all the tools of good journalism, but it's not afraid to get more involved with the community - in listening, in being a catalyst for activity, in helping community build its own capacity. And it's not afraid to say: if the old journalism is not working, let's re-invent it."

It is called “civic journalism”, and it sounds promising.

* * *

Whatever promise this thing called civic journalism holds toward improving life in present-day societies, it is bound to cause some worry to the practitioner who takes his journalism in its pure form, more or less. And more so since government, the precise adversary to which the press exists as a counter-force, will naturally like it better than the irreverent, fault-finding, free-wheeling journalism that is practiced today.

Indeed, press-freedom extremists argue that there’s enough in law and tradition and in the self-correcting mechanisms of democracy to keep the practice useful and in check. Still, seeing where our own press has got us, I wonder whether the idea should be dumped altogether. I have not, as I have said, looked into it closely enough; after all, it is a very recent arrival and only being tried by the very people who brought us our journalism and are now themselves amazed, and probably scandalized, at the extent to which we have taken it.

I have not found it too difficult to keep an open mind about civic journalism because I can easily identify with the basic reasons given for it and have always thought the press and civil society natural partners. Of course, new as it is, civic journalism remains promising in theory largely. But then where else could it have begun?

Its chief advocate, Jan Schaffner, executive director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, in fact proceeds from an incontrovertible premise: “It’s no longer enough for journalists to think they are doing a good job. For journalism to continue to receive constitutional protection. . . readers and viewers have to agree that journalism plays an essential role in our democratic society.”

“Recently, though,” he observes, “there have been disturbing data that this is not the case. National surveys document a reservoir of resentment toward the American press and its practices. Arrogant, insensitive, biased, inaccurate and sensational are the words the public use to characterize the media.”

The Philippine media are thought the same - add worse - and, as in the American case, serious doubts have been raised whether they deserve all the freedom they have and whether they are not hurting more than helping democracy.

“This is troubling news if you’re a journalist,” says Schaffer. “I would also like to think that it is troubling news if you are a member of the public.”

But he asks: “Can there be journalism that not only gives the people news and information but also helps them do their jobs as citizens? That doesn’t just deliver the civic freak show of the day, but actually challenges people to get involved, get engaged, and take ownership of problems? That doesn’t position themselves spectators, but as participants?”

“This is where civic journalism has fostered numerous experiments,” he says, but quickly, adds that it “does not advocate abandoning the watchdog role, but rather adding further responsibilities to it.”

He explains: “Most journalists define news as conflict: incumbent vs. challenger, winner vs. lose, pro vs. con. Civic journalism seeks to expand [not change] that definition. It seeks to go beyond covering event, a meeting, or a controversy. It tries to convey knowledge, not just news developments. It’s about covering consensus as well as conflict, success stories as well as failures -stories that may help other communities deal with difficult issues. . . . Civic journalists seek to examine where community players agree on something as well as where they disagree.”

For illustration, he cites a story about what they call “motel children” in a California country - as he describes them, “achingly poor kids living in residential motels literally, across the street from the Disneyland theme park.” The story, he says, was told “in dialogue, using the children’s own words.”

“The response,” he observes, “ was overwhelming. It included \$200,000 in donations, 50 tons of food, 8,000 toys, and thousands of volunteer hours devoted to helping motel children. The county directed \$1 million for a housing program to get families out of motels. A nonprofit agency launched a \$5 million campaign to treat drug abuse among motel families.”

It amazed the reporter herself, Schaffer says, that “everyone was working together I toward a solution.” He quotes her: “A similar story, told in a conventional way, would! have put government agencies on the defensive. But because of the writing approach, no one felt like they were being blamed. So instead of wasting energy defending themselves, they’ve hit the street.”

The aim, Schaffer says, is to improve “a community’s capacity for dealing with problems.”

Will it - or something like it - work here? If the old way is not working, why can’t something else, so long as nothing is morally or ethically objectionable about it, be tried?

CONNECTING WITH CITIZENS

Public Journalism or Simply a Deeper Commitment to Craft and Community?

By Red Batario

There is no denying that when Leonilo “Toots” Escalada, a radio station manager in General Santos City in Mindanao, talks about the reshaping of local communities he sounds more like a development worker, or a politician, rather than a journalist.

It is - the barangays (villages) of General Santos where Escalada actually facilitates discussions of current issues.

“It’s both encouraging and fulfilling when I see and hear ordinary people becoming part of the process of shaping the news of the day -especially in remote barangays where access to information and grievance is not readily available and where people cannot relate with government,” says Escalada.

“It means they are thinking more critically and slowly looking within themselves for solutions to some of the issues or problems facing their community,” he adds.

By all indications, the disconnection between citizens and democratic structures noted by Escalada in the barangays of General Santos is seeping into the socio-political fabric of other local communities in the country. Journalists in the provinces like Escalada are realizing that people are not taking advantage of the opportunities for popular participation offered by the Local Government Code as a decentralizing and democratizing mode.

One probable reason is that critical information does not get to the communities or is to some extent flawed, resulting in a skewed understanding of local governance and the decentralization environment.

Many journalists admit to being partly responsible for such a situation because of their own limitations and constraints such as their incomplete understanding of local governance and autonomy issues which are at the heart of decentralization and the empowerment of citizens.

Argues one print journalist based in Cebu: “What we’re seeing are communities and people somewhat disdaining public life; they are not actively participating in democratic processes like volunteering and voting. Or when they participate in the latter, it is with the prodding of some materialistic stirrings. We’ve often asked ourselves why.” it

This question was also raised by both non-government organizations and the media Kalibo, Aklan a few years back when the influx of tourists grew tremendously. While there was increasing concern about incidents of pedophilia and child sexual abuse, nobody seems to know, or want to do, anything about it.

It took the Uswag Development Foundation of Aklan to convene other civil society groups and entice the media and the provincial local government unit to join a series of roundtable discussions about this concern. This led to the formation of the Citizens

Council on Social Concerns, a multi-sectoral action group wherein the media played a very critical role in dispersing correct and accurate information.

Says Didi Quimpo, Uswag executive director: “It was difficult at first to engage the media because of their perception of what they ought to be. But eventually they felt that they don’t participate in the project and look at events only from the periphery, they won’t have the same kind of impact on the communities.

“We were actually looking for a reconnection with the communities. Our feeling was that merely reporting the news was not enough. We needed to know more, we needed to understand the issues better not only to make us better journalists but also in some ways help communities look at their own problems and begin solving them,” explains Jay Tejada, program manager of GMA Super Radyo in Aklan.

Today, members of the Citizens Council on Social Concerns believe that they would not have been able to successfully implement their campaign against child sexual abuse without the media which catalyzed a number of citizen actions and facilitated dialogues between authorities and communities.

The Council has since expanded its thrust to cover other equally pressing concerns in the province. With the governor as chair, the Council is also working on it being institutionalized through local legislation.

Provincial journalists also feel that the disconnection with the communities affects media in many ways. When citizens disdain public life, they will have less use for the news media. But being able to see the broad picture from the outside has also given journalists a vantage point from which to reexamine their own roles and shortcomings as against those of the community’s.

As the socio-political landscape changed, and quite rapidly at that, journalists found themselves at the cusp of transformation. It also posed a dilemma for many practitioners of the craft: to sit back, observe, and report or to actively participate and provide the mechanisms for the articulation of community concerns.

“Besides, we feel we should be doing something more than just reporting the news,” says Agnes Lira-Jundos of ABS-CBN Bacolod. “That is one of the reasons why some of us here in Negros Occidental formed the Negros Green Corps to specifically address environmental issues beyond the scope of what we ordinarily do as journalists. We don’t want our communities to merely be sources of news; we want them to become resources as well.”

What is actually emerging in the local areas is a redefinition of journalism as journalists perceive it: that better journalism and connected communities will result to better or enhanced public life converging in a concept called public journalism.

In a week-long seminar workshop in Boracay, Aklan, journalists from Iloilo, Negros Occidental and Capiz studied the Aklan media experience and ‘discussed what they can do to engage citizens and communities not only to reinvigorate their role but also to enhance public life.

The concept of public journalism in the Philippines has parallels in the United States where journalists at the beginning of 1990 began to reexamine their relationship with local communities which they perceive to have become apathetic and less participative especially in such democratic exercises as registering and voting.

Several cases of successful public, or civic, journalism as it is sometimes called in the US, have been documented by the Pew Center for Public Journalism and the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. These cases reflect initiatives by journalists and media organizations to reconnect with their communities and engage citizens in the newsmaking process, as Jay Tejada in Aklan, Toots Escalada in General Santos City and Agnes Lira Jundos in Bacolod are doing.

These are not mere happenstances proclaiming a new fad among a different breed of journalists out there. Rather, it is a consciousness that is brought about by a desire to put power in the hands of citizens by providing catalytic avenues for expression and action.

Melinda de Jesus, Executive Director of the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility and resource speaker at the Boracay workshop put it rather more aptly.

Said she: “Public journalism, while totally new in the Philippine context, demands of the journalist a commitment, it demands of him a decision to step over the line between traditional journalism and public journalism or not.”

It may be too early to say that public journalism, given the rambunctious nature of the industry in the Philippines, could easily take root only to be repudiated as another aspect of the “developmental journalism” espoused during the Marcos regime. Observable trends, however, indicate an increasing awareness among journalists, at least in the provinces, of the need for media to not only engage citizens and communities directly to help them find solutions to their own problems but also for them to become part of the democratization process.

This may not sit well with purists who believe that the role of journalists is to merely report the news as factually and objectively as possible. Others tend to view the concept as co-opting the media into the mainstream of governance itself which media are posited to view from an adversarial standpoint.

But as Melinda de Jesus said in one of the small group discussions in Boracay, while there is much debate about public journalism, journalists themselves are saying that they see from their roles expanding beyond the usual norms.

The concept may have also triggered some introspection among veteran, Manila-based journalists.

“I don’t know if I can label it public journalism or not, but after I did a story for Probe about the plight of farmers in a small Quezon town, I felt I had to do something more...so I put the people in touch with the concerned authorities,” narrates Howie Severino of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism and The Probe Team. Severino was discussing investigative reporting during the Boracay workshop.

What is really clear at this point is that public journalism could provide the mechanism for journalists to find that reconnection with their communities in helping them solve their problems and at the same time open windows of opportunities for improving and invigorating their craft.

A journalist-participant in the workshop perhaps provides fitting context to what public journalism is all about: “It is both a work ethic and principle of engagement and participation that redefines the role of media in the change process. It really boils down to helping communities articulate their views more effectively.”

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This article was first published in the Philippine Journalism Review.

Giving the Public a Voice Doesn't Mean

You Lose Yours

By Isolde Amante

Sun.Star Cebu

Most reporters' lives are simple.

You know the drill: show up at the government offices which constitute your beat, talk to the boss or some other bureaucrat, check the secretaries or clerks for story tips, have coffee, then leave to write two or three stories for the day. Easy.

After doing that for two years (and rehashing stories that went nowhere and changed nothing), I am close to hanging up my Girl Reporter gear and heading for a more interesting (read: more lucrative) field like corporate communication or advertising. (After all, how many Cebu City Charter Day stories can you do before you get bored?)

It took a demanding old editor to snap me back to my senses.

“Inday,” he said, forget your daily quota for this week, and go after a story you’re interested in...”

Perfect timing. I had been wondering about an organization of health workers who made the rounds of media outfits in Cebu, explaining how devolution had affected public health institutions card services.

They were a pesky group inviting reporters to travel to the ends of Cebu to see hospitals with leaky ceilings, no sphygmomanometers, no food, and no bandages.

(“No action,” my photographer complained;), But that was, precisely the story.

I missed my deadline, but for the, first time, being a reporter made sense.

This isn’t a Crusading-Journalist-Shakes-The-System story. Far from it.

The report (a special assignment that took, three months to research and write, and took up seven full pages, plus. photos) did not get anyone fired. It wasn’t meant to.

It was a report that pointed out how sorry the conditions were in district hospitals in Cebu and how that was NOT what decentralization was supposed to accomplish.

It carried the suggestions, of some health workers to let cooperatives or other private sector entities manage the hospitals, because it was clear the Capitol could not do so. At least, not competently.

(Incidentally, while toying with the idea of doing that story I got invited to a seminar on media and decentralization by, you guessed it, the Evelio B. Javier Foundation. And the rest is comedy.)

Three years after that report (yes, THREE years) the governor finally agreed to trust hospital administrators enough to let them decide what to do with their sub-allotted funds.

And the story's not over yet. There is much to learn.

Late last year, a synchronized barangay consultative assembly was called. It was what one of our reporters in Cebu said a flop. (No one important showed up, she said, just a few barangay officials.)

Here she was, not even six months out of Journ School, and she was as jaded, as knee-jerk cynical about government as any grizzled editor.

Clearly, something is wrong about this picture.

“Somehow, the news business has drifted from the important role we journalists play as, public servants. We've tended to align ourselves with the power brokers, government insiders and political prognosticators, instead of viewers and citizens,” Rick Thames wrote in his article *Covering Politics, Civic Journalism Style*.

“Some go so far as dismissing average citizens as a na_ve bunch who need to be saved from themselves.”

I'm sure you don't believe that.

At this seminar you will kick around the ideas of public journalism. (It goes by many names: civic journalism, solutions-oriented reporting, non-elite sourcing, or just plain GOOD JOURNALISM.)

* That there's a way of reporting and framing stories so that they are not detached accounts of conflict but carry solutions and the voices of everyday people.

* That citizens' input needs to be valued along with the so-called OFFICIAL story.

* That in writing about who, what, where, why and when, we can also try to explain readers/viewers why they should care.

* That solutions are possible in most problems and those READERS may have a role play.

Go over your recent news feeds and newspaper issues. Chances are these may be chored on sources from official institutions and politics.

If you've paid attention, and given space, to quasi-official sources (organizations, advocacy groups), then good for you.

And if you've stayed in touch with all the other centers of civic life (churches, barber shops, child care centers, community socials, schools, sidewalks), then you're probably coming up with stories that are more accurate than they would have been if you had just stayed indoors at City Hall, waiting from the press con and the free coffee.

SIX IDEAS

Staying in touch your community can make your journalism more compelling (and may even help you revive waning links with your readers, viewers, or listeners).

Considering yourself part of the community, instead of a detached observer, will help you:

1) Get it first.

You will hear about events, trends, and people's concerns long before these reach the official world of politics and institutions. So, don't just hang out at the watering holes of politicians and fellow media workers - check out other community spaces as well.

2) Expand sources and voices.

You will find an expanded group of sources and civic groups/spaces to understand events better.

The usual way to cover a tax increase story is to attend the local council discussion, interview the proponents of the tax increase, and attend the public hearing.

Imagine how richer your story would be if, aside from these steps, you:

* Step back and let accountants/auditors help you go over the previous budget to see if the funds were well-spent and if the increase is necessary. (In Cebu, accountants whom we consulted agreed with the Commission on Audit's findings that City Hall was spending more to run itself than on services like health and sanitation, incentives for the police and infrastructure.)

* Seek suggestions from readers on how City Hall can cut costs. (You never know what j they can come up with.)

3) Ask better questions.

Communities can help journalists gain insights to frame tougher and more probing interviews.

“Having a deeper understanding and sense of content of people’s problems (like youth violence) can prompt a journalist to ask a school or police official probing questions about how certain proposals reflect people’s worries; and if not, how the proposal relates to the concerns,” recommends a workbook of The Pew Center for Civic Journalism.

4) Write harder-hitting stories.

It pays to understand what and how your community thinks.

In Cebu, reporters with sources in academe and interest groups came up with a flurry stories when a public official insisted it was a blessing Cebu had lost its forest cover “because rebels wouldn’t have a place to hide.”

Instead of just criticizing the public official for the statement, sources in academe and interest groups were able to point out just how serious Cebu’s water crisis is and how this goes back to mismanagement of resources (the issuance of titles for what was supposed to a protected watershed, for example).

5. Bridge civic layers.

Any parent who is worried about education in his or her community can go to the local school board and find out what's being done - but how many of your readers and listeners know there's such a thing as a local school board? (And if there's none yet, that's a story too.)

6. Discover journalists' preconceived views or biases.

By listening to more people of all sorts of beliefs, journalists can begin to uncover and understand their own preconceived views and, while not abandoning them, perhaps be more aware of them in their reporting.

We've probably hear reporters who refused to talk to people they didn't like - we are not just losing stories but are doing readers and listeners a disservice by keeping media time or space an "elite" enclave.

Applied to decentralization (or the Local Government Code, for starters), non-elite sourcing means:

1) Coming up with successful examples to motivate others.

Punta Princesa, a small barangay in Cebu City, was adjudged the country's best barangay last year by the Department of Interior and Local Government.

Reporters in Cebu are still in the process of finding out why. But many of us were pleased to learn the barangay not only has one of the lowest crime rates in the regions, but operates its own public market, has busy health clinic, runs a computer-equipped library, offers day care services, and yes, like many barangays, sponsors its share of sports meets.

All that from a barangay.

2) Pointing out what needs to be done.

When that barangay assembly I mentioned earlier was held, someone in the newsroom pointed out: “Aren’t barangay assemblies supposed to be done every six months? Wasn’t the Local Government Code passed in 1992? Why is this only the first?”

All that from just one provision in the Local Government Code, which mandates barangay assemblies. Think of all the other provisions that could lead you to good stories.

“In essence, journalists need to think of themselves as being part of society, sharing responsibility for the long-term health of culture and democracy, rather than being strictly detached observers whose duty is only to point out that things are going wrong,” advises James Fallows of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

CIVIC JOURNALISM IS ABOUT...

Looking through different lenses

When I went into sportswriting, I had an interesting revelation. I’d sit on the bench cover a game and ask the coach, “Why’d you do this? What’s your strategy here?”

Then I went just to watch. I’d sit in the stands and people would start talking to me about what the game meant to them, how they felt watching it. I found out it was a major part of people’s lives. I found they needed a different kind of coverage than I was providing. So started writing columns from their perspective. It’s just amazing the things you can come up with just by listening.

I wound up winning an Associated Press award and the guy who gave it to me said, “You really have a different view on things, don’t you?”

Civic journalism, to me, is a way to see things from that different view. It lets us get know the people of our community and - perhaps better than any other method we use - it lets us deal with people’s ambiguity over issues and processes.

I can apply those principles even better online. Now I have the ability to do more than listen. I can put a soapbox out there and let people respond, supplement and give the opinion on stories. I can give more people a voice.

- Rick Scheuerman, Editor, *Tampa Bay Online*

Connecting with the reader

For years, we wrote about the right topics but in the wrong way - in ways that didn't connect to the daily lives of our readers. So we didn't give them the information that they needed, that they could use. Our definition of civic journalism is that it connects the reader and the community more directly to the journalistic process of formulating stories and asking questions.

We use different approaches. One is the "Front Porch Forum." We've asked people have a conversation with their neighbors about issues such as growth and the future of the Puget Sound region - and then tell us what they said. We found that people in this community understand issues with a level of sophistication that's beyond what we might have guessed. They contribute.

Our staff is energized by this. At first, they were apprehensive. They asked good, honest questions, like: "Will we be setting aside our journalistic independence or journalistic oversight if we invite the community in?" The thing that is energizing is that when you bring readers into the conversation, there is this sense they really do care about the things journalists want them to care about and they value the opportunity to join the dialogue.

Journalists worry that paying attention to what readers want really means moving to the lowest common denominator, or making journalistic judgments by polling or marketing. When they realize that, in fact, readers value the role of the newspaper in their community, it never fails to be an uplifting experience.

-Mike Fancher, VP and Executive Editor, *The Seattle Times*

Making ordinary concerns compelling

A lawyer friend of mine recently told me why he doesn't read newspapers anymore. He said journalists always focus on conflict and seek out people who have extreme points of view. He thinks we leave out the people in the middle because "they're boring."

Experience tells me he's right. Journalists do shy away from people who aren't clear in their convictions, who don't deliver powerful quotes.

Yet most people find themselves somewhere in the middle on issues. Before making up their minds, they like to hear what thoughtful, diverse people have to say - people the newspaper can introduce them to.

For me, civic journalism is about enlarging the range of voices on stories, bringing to the surface the values behind peoples' opinions, helping citizens see possible common ground and giving information on how, if they choose, they can play a role in shaping solutions.

Our challenge is to do so in engaging, compelling ways. Like The Enquirer's "Dear Mr. President" package. When Clinton came to Cincinnati four days after Ken Starr released his report on the president's relationship with Monica Lewinsky, we invited readers to send us the questions they would ask Clinton if they had the chance. Surprisingly, many of the 1,500 readers who responded didn't mention sex. They talked about China, unemployment and the environment.

Then again, a lot of them talked about sex and their thoughts on the presidency and what should happen next.

Boring? Ha!

- Rosemary Goudreau, Managing Editor, *Cincinnati Enquirer*

People taking action

There was a neighborhood near the Myrtle Beach Sun News called Racepath, where drug dealers would shoot out the street lights and people were afraid to go outside. When I was the editor there, we wrote a series of stories about Racepath. But we also took the extra step of devoting a full page to a list of things the people in Racepath needed to create a cleaner, safer neighborhood.

They needed volunteers, bullet-proof streetlights, heavy equipment to remove abandoned mobile homes, building materials, playground equipment. The university in town agreed to take phone calls from people offering help and we prominently displayed that phone number. So instead of reading the stories and saying, "That's awful, but it has nothing to do with me," people could see that there were some specific things they

could do to help. And they called that number. And in less than two years, Racepath achieved its goals. We went over when they were turning on the new streetlights, and the streets were clean and children were outside playing and everybody was happy.

To me, civic journalism takes good reporting a little bit further and helps people figure out what they can do to solve the problems we write about.

-Sue Deans, Asst. Managing Editor, *Denver Rocky Mountain News*

Rebuilding our credibility

In 1960, I received the Pulitzer Prize for my coverage of the Milledgeville (Georgia) State Hospital. At the time, it was the nation's largest mental institution, with 12,500 patients and just 48 doctors. Conditions were deplorable. It was a snakepit, a warehouse for humans.

My Milledgeville reporting taught me an important journalism lesson: You should always follow up reports exposing bad conditions with additional reports on proposals to reform or correct the conditions. After the Atlanta Constitution published the Milledgeville series, an editor assigned me to go to Kansas and write a series about its outstanding mental health reform program. I wasn't enthusiastic but my editor was right. The Kansas series demonstrated that the newspaper cared as much about reform as it did about an expose. And it served as a blueprint for reforming Georgia's mental health program.

Too often today much of the news media seems obsessed with reporting problems almost to the extent of ignoring or excluding solutions.

Civic journalism is an attempt to bring the average citizen into the process of journalism to solve problems. It brings in people who would not normally be involved in governmental solutions and engages people who are normally left out of the process.

- Jack Nelson, Former Washington Bureau Chief, Los Angeles Times

Reinvigorating Coverage

It was the 1993 mayoral election in Rochester that changed the way I approach journalism and has, frankly, kept me in this business. That election showed me that the news media can be essential to our civic lives and, if any may sound so bold, essential to our democracy.

That year, the five-term mayor of Rochester decided to retire. There were five candidates to replace him. I approached the local newspaper about collaborating on a series of live, two-hour, prime-time debates. I suggested a format in which citizens would get to ask the candidates some of the questions.

The citizens' questions were direct and intelligent and far different from reporter's questions. They didn't talk about how much development money would go downtown. They asked about graffiti and noise ordinances and what could be done about stray dogs. And the candidate who was trailing the pack, with no money for TV ads, went from last place to first and eventually won the race. Rochester elected its first African-American mayor. He credited the debates with his election.

It was the first time in my career that I saw my work have impact. I discovered what was, for me, a new formula for journalism: meaningful coverage on issues meaningful to people and involving the citizens in your community. It is a way to better journalism. It is the kind of journalism I want to practice.

- Gary Walker, Vice Pres., News & Public Affairs, WXXXI-TV, *Rochester, NY*

Avoiding the extremes

In my mind, civic journalism and public service journalism and public service journalism ought to be synonymous.

When I was publisher of The Gazette in Colorado Springs, we wrote about a bond issue in the area's largest school district. Voters had not been able to pass a bond issue for 20 years and when it came up on the ballot again, we decided to look at it through the eyes of different constituents - students, parents opponents, educators. It was a very different take on an election story.

We could have gotten the people who stake out extreme positions - the teachers union and the anti-tax forces - but we included people 'who had mixed feelings. That got us away from this notion of living at the extremes.

Historically, newspapers are not very good at reporting on ambivalence. But struggling with an issue is far more common than having everything figured out.

I wouldn't want to take the credit or the blame for the fact that the bond issue passed. But I will say that series caused people to think differently about the schools in our community - not simply, "Should we pay more taxes or not?"

And that's one of the most important parts of civic journalism. It brings more than the "usual suspects" into our coverage. It broadens our coverage and causes us to look differently at people and their involvement in the community.

-N. Christian Anderson III, Publisher & CEO, *The Orange County Register*

About spotlighting critical issues

In my mind, civic journalism and public service journalism ought to be synonymous.

To me, that means a news organization takes its big spotlight and shines it on a very important public issue that requires attention. And by shining a spotlight on that issue, it compels public officials to do the right thing.

An example is what The Sun did after we discovered that two-thirds of our region's third graders were not reading at grade level. We dissected that issue. We interviewed students, parents, teachers and college professors who taught prospective teachers how to teach reading. The Baltimore Sun, as a company, started giving employees - from the publisher, Mike Waller, to the advertising department - an hour a week, on company time, to tutor children in reading.

We put our spotlight on the issue and made public officials realize that something had to be done. Now the state Board of Education has quadrupled the number of reading courses teacher candidates have to take; it is committed to putting a lot more teachers in classrooms to reduce class size.

And that is what good journalism can do: By shining the spotlight, it prods, nudges and cajoles public officials to act.

-Bill Marimow, Managing Editor, *The Sun, Baltimore*

Being part of the community

As civic journalists, we think about the places we live in and what journalism can do for those places.

An example is the Akron Beacon Journal's reporting on school funding. Now, when you say "school funding," people's eyes blur because nobody understands it. But our reporters and editors said, "We are going to own this issue." And they did an outstanding job of explaining how Ohio funds its schools.

The legislature needed to reverse its school funding formula after the Ohio Supreme Court ruled that relying on property taxes had created too much inequality. It was important to illuminate the problems and also seek solutions. The paper was very specific about what the solutions could be: How education funding could be changed and what the results of various plans would be.

The reporters showed that a proposal to reduce dependence on property taxes was a sham that would actually increase, not decrease, school funding disparities. It was a difficult but important story for the community. In the end, that's what civic journalism is: It's all about the community.

- Jan Leach, Vice President and Editor, Akron Beacon Journal

Getting people involved

When I think of civic journalism, I think of ideas that help citizens get involved. It sounds corny but it's a pretty high calling. If you can figure out a way to help people get involved in changing their communities, help them - and you help your newspaper.

Some of the best civic journalism grows out of traditional journalism. For example, we did a series on how lobbyists greatly influence our state legislature, a pretty traditional

story. But then a non-profit group picked up where we left off and taught people how to get involved if they wanted to change the way the legislature conducted business.

We followed their progress and had a couple of public hearings: It was controversial. We may have gone a step further than some journalists found comfortable: But the series shed light on something people didn't know was happening, and the follow-up activities taught them how to improve things if they wanted to

- Jerry Ceppos, Former Executive Editor, The Mercury News, San Jose, CA

The Public Journalism Effort

Some news organizations have decided that more must be done. They are trying to change the basic journalism culture, converting cynicism into civic exploration. The Wichita Eagle and Charlotte Observer have been on the cutting edge of this more systematic change, drawing diverse citizens into public discussions about community life. This new approach, called "public" or "civic" journalism, covers the news from the citizen up, not from the expert down. It takes ordinary people seriously, addressing some of the issues they think are important instead of relying solely on experts and insiders to set the agenda. Because it permits diverse viewpoints to be heard and respected, regardless of their dramatic value, it seems to go a long way toward breaking down the strategy, negativity, and insider barriers that now distance audiences from the news.

At the Charlotte Observer in 1993, for example, editors learned of police concerns that a race riot was brewing. White families who lived around the downtown Freedom Park were unhappy because minority youths were drag racing and cruising in and out of the park at night, creating disturbances. When the park was closed because of the tension, black citizens were outraged, claiming that the park belonged to everyone and minority youths had nowhere else to go.

Many local news organizations would see this as a great story, full of controversy and drama. However, instead of inflaming the situation by deliberately seeking the most incendiary quotes from polarized sides, the newspaper tried something different. It had experimented with public journalism during the 1992 election, convening town hall meetings and roaming throughout the community to obtain citizens' views. Using the same approach, Observer reporters sought thoughtful suggestions from all sides, including people in area neighborhoods, the youths whose behavior was under question, and the white families. A range of suggestions was published on the op-ed page, where

these diverse views were presented with respect and authority. Citizens formed a commission to develop solutions for all sides: a small entry fee that would cut down on the cruising and an alternative site for drag racing. Although the situation hasn't been completely resolved yet, a racial standoff was averted through civic discourse. The Charlotte Observer helped the community begin to work through its problems, instead of aggravating them with sensationalized coverage.

Many public journalism projects involve partnerships among news organizations that normally compete with each other. For example, in summer 1994, the Charlotte Observer teamed up with competitors WSOC-TV, the local ABC affiliate, and two local radio stations, WPEG and WBAV, on the project "Taking Back our Neighborhoods/ Carolina Crime Solutions." After using crime statistics to identify five neighborhoods that had been especially hard-hit, the news organizations held joint town hall meetings and produced special supplements and broadcasts, featuring residents' proposed solutions and reporting "success stories" about citizen fighting crime.

The effort prompted a burst of civic activity: about 500 people volunteered to help out in targeted neighborhood, 18 law firms offered to file pro bono public nuisance suits to close down crack houses, and a local bank donated \$50,000 to build a recreation center, according to Ed Fouhy, a former network news executive who now heads a center devoted to promoting civic journalism.

Editors and reporters from the Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk, Virginia, at a recent seminar described how they have become "public journalists" by changing the culture of journalism in their newsroom:

*Articles described the values people bring to an issue, including the gray areas and complexities, rather than simply describing the conflict.

* Citizens' knowledge is valued along with experts' knowledge.

* In writing about who, what, why, when, and where, they also try to explain to citizens why they should care.

* Reporters try to explore how people resolve issues, suggesting that solutions are possible and that readers may have a role to play.

Public journalists believe that the news is more than a spectator sport. "There's a difference between what the audience wants and what the public wants," observes New York University Professor Jay Rosen, who has been working with news organizations to develop a form of public journalism that focuses on serious public issues raised by

citizens in their local communities. Treating people as an audiences makes them passive voyeurs, random visitors seeking entertainment. Rosen further explains, “ Treating people as citizens is asking them about the problems in their lives, the things that concern them for the future, and trying to structure your coverage around that. Inevitably there are going to be conflicts between the entertainment function of the media and the news function, but public journalism is about trying to get the news function right so it can compete better against entertainment and pleasure.” What news organizations don’t do - if they’re practicing good public journalism - is endorse specific solutions in their reporting. This would invalidate journalists ability to monitor the community’s public life.

Nevertheless, public journalism is controversial among news professionals because some feel it weakens their hard-fought independence and objectivity. Ed Turner of CNN, Len Downie of The Washington Post, Max King of the Philadelphia Inquirer, and editor the New York Times are among the most skeptical

Ed Turner of CNN reacted negatively to a discussion about public journalism during the Program’s conference CHANGING THE NEWS: “I am not a historian. I am not a playwright. I am not a poet. I am not psychiatrist. I can just barely manage to fill newscasts that we have. And I am proud of that,” he said. “We are chroniclers of events. It is our responsibility, first and above all, to try to explain to our viewers what happened today, why it happened, and what maybe it will mean for tomorrow.”

Properly practiced, public journalism is simply good journalism without bad habits. “Have these [public] news outlets lost their objectivity? Is their agreement to try the techniques of civic journalism a thinly disguised form of community boosterism? No.... Their willingness to bring citizens into the proces rather than keep them out is simply smart business as well as good journalism. They are finding that some of the ‘ancient’ and ‘sacred’ practices of journalism are simply habits best done without. Their core values - accuracy, seriousness, context, independence - remain. Giving the public a voice, they found does not mean they lose theirs,” says Ed Fouhy.

- Pew Center for Civic Journalism

Framing a Story: What’s It Really About?

Reporters are often drawn to the loudest voices and the conflict that results when people are viewed as combatants and positioned on opposite sides of an issue.

While the ensuing fireworks can generate a lot of heat, and copy, the journalism it produces often spotlights the most extreme views at the expense of the vast middle ground occupied by the majority of ordinary people.

Journalists who live the extremes and visit the middle often produce stories framed in conflict. If they lived in the middle and visited the extremes, their stories might better reflect the thinking of their communities.

Journalists who report two sides of a story behave and believe it's fair and balanced maybe short changing themselves and their readers. That's because balance is the middle, where people are struggling with internal feelings and working through their thoughts.

Richard Harwood, President, Harwood Institute: Every story has a frame on it already so we're not talking about anything new.

A lot of stories have the frame of conflict. Or of a villain or a victor. Or of a winner and a loser. Or that people are concerned about money, power and politics. Those are all frames in a sense.

It so, happens that lots of stories actually don't play out within those frames. And so it's not about creating a new frames because we want to get away from the old ones. It's not about creating new frames because we want to get away from the old ones. It's about understanding the essence of a story so that we can begin to understand what is the appropriate frame for the story that we're doing.

People don't want schools talked about in the mode of Jerry Springer. Or the National Inquirer, not that any respectful newspaper does that. But there is a notion in our minds, in journalists' minds, that the master narrative of conflicts sells.

In the newsroom culture, when you go to a budget meeting or scheduling meeting or story meeting or whatever a different newspaper might call it, there's often a premium on: ok, what's the hot story? What kind of conflict do you have there? You've got to boil it down into a sentence, which is fine, but the sentence has got to be about what's really going on in this story here. That conditions people to come to the table with conflict.

I would offer an alternative. The master narrative of tension sells.

If you read a good fiction book, watch a good movie, you're waiting to turn the page, you're waiting for the next 10 minutes in the movie, there's an unknown there. There's a tension that needs to be resolved.

Well, in most public issues there's a tension.

[FIND THE TENSION].

There's a tension in schools between excellence and opportunity every day. There's a tension in communities around growth between further developing the growth of the community to increase the tax base and protecting the quality of life in that community. Not that they're mutually exclusive. But there's a tension there.

And we often pitch it as one or the other but most people want to reach some balance.

Fannie Flono, Associate Editor, The Charlotte Observer: It's not like people actually live their lives where everybody is on one side or the other side.

Occasionally, occasionally you will find maybe a more clearly delineated two-side controversy.

But that is so rare and so out of context with reality that when you initially come that you should question it. I mean, you should ask yourself the question: where are the other views in this? Where are the intersecting views in this?

[FIND OTHER VIEWS]

And you should try to find those people who might have those views and present the public.

Kimberly Kimby, Reporter, The Orange County Register: If I go someplace here's something that's controversial, I don't find the people who are the most radical and colorful who are against it and for it. I may find those people but then I step back and I ask myself, well, what's really happening in the community that's the real story?

Downtown Orange is, has this historic district And they have these nice cottages that they kept so nice and neat.

And I cover Chapman University, which is down the street from there.

And they're erecting these huge, four-story buildings that are just towering over these little cottages. And I thought, I could write a story about how the community's really upset about these big buildings but that may not be the truth.

So instead of going to the activists, who I know hate those buildings, and then maybe talking to the Chapman officials who really need the buildings, and writing a story about that, I just walked the streets and knocked on the doors of everybody in the downtown area.

And what I found was sort of this rich texture of things where people were - like their community's changing and they have mixed feelings about it and really rich feelings about it that's fascinating.

And they want to they want to protect it. But they also understand that it's better to have those four-story university buildings down the street than there is to have an industrial building.

I ended up writing this story about the character of a community and of a little college changing and growing up. And about those growing pains rather than just this story about conflict.

Jennie Buckner, Editor, The Charlotte Observer: You need to have all kinds of voices... and you have to go out and seek them because those aren't the folks that necessarily call you up. Contentious issues can be framed more accurately if journalists ask themselves a few questions before they start reporting.

I think it's important to us to say, "Wait a minute, life isn't just about the black and white in here and, yes, there's conflict at this end but what about all the shades of gray in here and how would you trade some of these things off and asking smart questions about those trade offs and letting people see more than just extreme, loud voices on each end of the spectrum.

[SEEK SHADES OF GRAY - LIST TRADEOFFS].

There was a very strong, vocal group on the one side, a very conservative group that was saying they represented the community on this and this play should not be shown and shut it down. And they'd gone to the district attorney and they were going to shut it down.

And then there were the people trying to put the play on and they were saying, "By God, freedom of speech, the show will, indeed, go on" and, "Ok, you're going to shut it down and (we'll have a fight here in the courts about all of this."

And we said, "I wonder what average people think about all this? And we did a couple of things. We went out and got lots of different people to write about this for our op-ed page in short bursts and we found, gee, there, were plenty of religious, conservative, people that weren't saying shut it down. They were simply saying: make a smart choice about whether or not you really want to go to this.

We did a quick poll and found, low and behold, most Charlotteans, the vast majority, were very moderate, the liberal, the seeming split, they were: "I'm not sure I personally approve of everything that's in that show but I absolutely believe that they have the right to put that show on and that government shouldn't be deciding that for me."

It changed the course of the discussion. When we went out and sought the middle-ground voices, it suddenly became more: “Well, how do we want to work this out kind of conversation?”

Nowhere is the use of conflict framing more widespread than in the coverage of politics, where discussions of public issues often generate more heat than light.

We do look at what the top issues are for people living in our state.

We try to synthesize the candidates stands around those issues and make it really easy for people to compare and contrast with issue grids. And then we take questions from readers and go back to the candidates all the time.

We apply that to many other things too. Right now we’ve got some big changes going in our schools here following a desegregation case and almost every day in the paper we’re saying,

“What are your questions?” And we’ll take them and we’ll get your questions answered from the schools. So we have an “Ask Eric Smith,” who’s our superintendent of schools.

Use any technique you have but make sure you’re doing as much as you can to listen people and ask them, “What’s your stake in this? What do you want to tell the news directors? What do you want to tell the politicians? What do you want to tell the editor of newspaper?”

Dennis Hartig, Managing Editor, The Virginian Pilot: If we had this conversation six or seven years ago and we talked about the role of a political journalist, fundamentally I think the story they would tell you that they’re telling the community is really a story about contest.

I think we know what kind of story that is. That’s a story that’s always framed in terms of conflict. And it’s useful in some ways.

But often times it hypes, it hypes and obscures what really needs to happen in a community.

I think in the last 10 years, particularly in the last five years, you’ve seen a remarkable shift in this paper. Where, we have a phrase that I like to use, we sort of start where citizens are.

It’s a totally different place.

Rather than starting where institutions or officials or journalists are, you’ve got to be able to see the world through the eyes of individual people.

For us it begins now with a whole series of conversations with small groups of people, ten or twelve, over a period of five or six nights, two to three hour

conversations, in which we really try to explore with people what's really bothering them in their gut.

[TALK TO PEOPLE].

When we go out and talk to people, they always talk about it in the same way. There is an ideological talk in the beginning but it very shortly, this is the way Americans are, well, "what are we going to do about it?"

So a lot of our effort here has been to say, "Ok, what would a more practical, problem solving approach to journalism look like?"

[POLITICS AS PROBLEM SOLVING].

How can we reframe our stories to serve what we hear from the community constantly, which is: "give us information we need to solve, our problems." What does that look like?

So that's really the kind of journalism that we've been working on and trying develop and really sort of invent because you won't find that in any textbooks.

We've developed a concept called visual story telling. And double editing, where we try to take this reporting that we're doing, that has some depth to it and extract the value, the true essence of the story and display it either visually or enlarge it with big words so that you can get the value whether you have a few minutes or whether you have an hour.

[PULL OUT THE ESSENCE].

We're doing a better job for just average, ordinary people out there. We're doing a better job for our community. We're helping our community come to grips with real choices with real consequences. There's a lot more light and lot less heat, I think, in the paper. So my sense is it's a lot better. Can I prove that?

No. Would I go back the other way? No. No.

POINTERS

1. **FIND THE TENSION**
2. **FIND OTHER VIEWS**
3. **SEEKS SHADES OF: GRAY- LIST TRADE-OFF**
4. **TALK TO PEOPLE**
5. **POLITICS AS PROBLEM SOLVING**
6. **PULL OUT THE ESSENCE**

Interviewing: New Questions, Better Stories

REPORTER: Mr. Mayor, when you were briefed as you were today on yet another shooting, do you believe that this has just become something fundamental in Philippine way of life, or is there something that can be done to alter the dynamic?

Asking a question like that may work in Malacanang Palace or City Hall where government officials or experts have quick and ready answers for reporters.

MAYOR: Well, I think there are a lot of things that can be done. You have to put more community police on the street, you have to...

More often, however, journalists interview ordinary people who have little or no experience with the news media. These people don't think in terms of policy initiatives and don't speak in sound bites.

PARENT: I'm concerned for them having the same opportunities I had when I was growing up to have a safe, quiet, neighborhood.

Because interviewing a parent is different than interviewing a public official, the questions a reporter asks a parent should be different, too. People in a community have a certain knowledge of issues and events. But they usually won't express it in a sound bite the politicians might.

For journalists, understanding this can mean the difference between getting a good or getting a good story.

There are certain kinds of questions reporters can ask to better grasp the reasoning behind the quotes they write down. That's important because people don't always say what they think or, more likely, are not used to putting their thoughts into quotes.

Knowing the thinking behind a quote enables reporters to write with more accuracy.

Stories "ring truer" because issues and events are explained in the same terms readers and viewers use.

Asking better questions...

Listening for patterns of thought instead of just quotes...

Asking more questions to increase the chances of finding the real story...

And using the question: "What do you make of that?" to improve almost every interview.

The first question a journalists asks, of course, can be the most important because of the tone and boundaries it sets. Consider the following example:

REPORTER (QUESTION): I have just one simple question. As a parent, as a resident, citizen, what would you do about school violence?

What's the answer?

PARENT (ANSWER): Boy... that's a big question...ummmm...

(The question, by its' very definition, puts the subject on the defensive. Why? Because you're asking people to give you an answer right now that encapsulates everything he thinks and, more importantly, everything he believes.

Reporters need to be more patient in interviews to give people time to "try on" different answers before asking which one "fits." They need to allow people to talk at their own speed instead of forcing them into rapid-fire responses that journalists so often demand.

Reporters must learn to distinguish between questions which "close down" a conversation and those which "open it up."

"Close down samples:

Do you think society just too lenient on kids?

Do you mean this?

Why do we have this problem?

"Open it up" samples:

What do you make of what's going on with crime in this area?

What do you make of what's going on with violence in schools. What do you think is happening? What do you make of all that?

You know, you hear a lot of different things about why people think all this stuff is happening. What do you make of what you think some of the causes might be?

You know, you hear a lot of different things about why people think all this

stuff is happening. What do you make of what you think some of the causes might be?
“What do you mean?”

“Tell me more about that”

In most cases the interviewer becomes much more like a talk show, host. It’s very civil, very polite. There’s no tension in the interview: In the end, there’s not much to write about. To really open it up, the reporter should develop the opportunity to create lots of tension.

Example: Squaring contradictions.

“Why do you believe that? I’ve heard other people say this...How’ do you respond that?”

“I was just down the street and saw X, Y and Z. What do you make of that? How does that square with what you’re saying? What does that mean about what you’re saying?”

“Why do you think so many other people are saying something the opposite of you?”

All the elicited information or sentiments give the reporter much more knowledge, not just information, but knowledge that he can use to turn a story. And if he does that a few times he’ll start to see patterns. And as he sees the pattern, he knows he has a story to write.

What journalists tend to do is to look for the anecdote and then build a story around the anecdote. What I would argue is that we’ve got to look for patterns and then find the anecdote that helps explain the pattern. But you’re really building a story around the pattern. That’s a very different kind of work. And it takes different kinds of sensibilities and fundamentally different kinds of listening.

TIPS

1. One of the things reporters do and do poorly is they talk too much -TALK LESS. LISTEN MORE.
2. When one is set to interview a luncheon speaker, let him say what he came there to say first. Get that out of the way. Get the speechmaking out of the way. And then keep talking to them a little longer. And hear what’s behind the speech somebody else told them to KEEP THEM TALKING.
3. Whether walking a picket line or walking down their street, average people recognize the differences in how journalists conduct interviews and appreciate a more conversational approach.

(Above are excerpts from articles published in Civic Catalyst Newsletter)