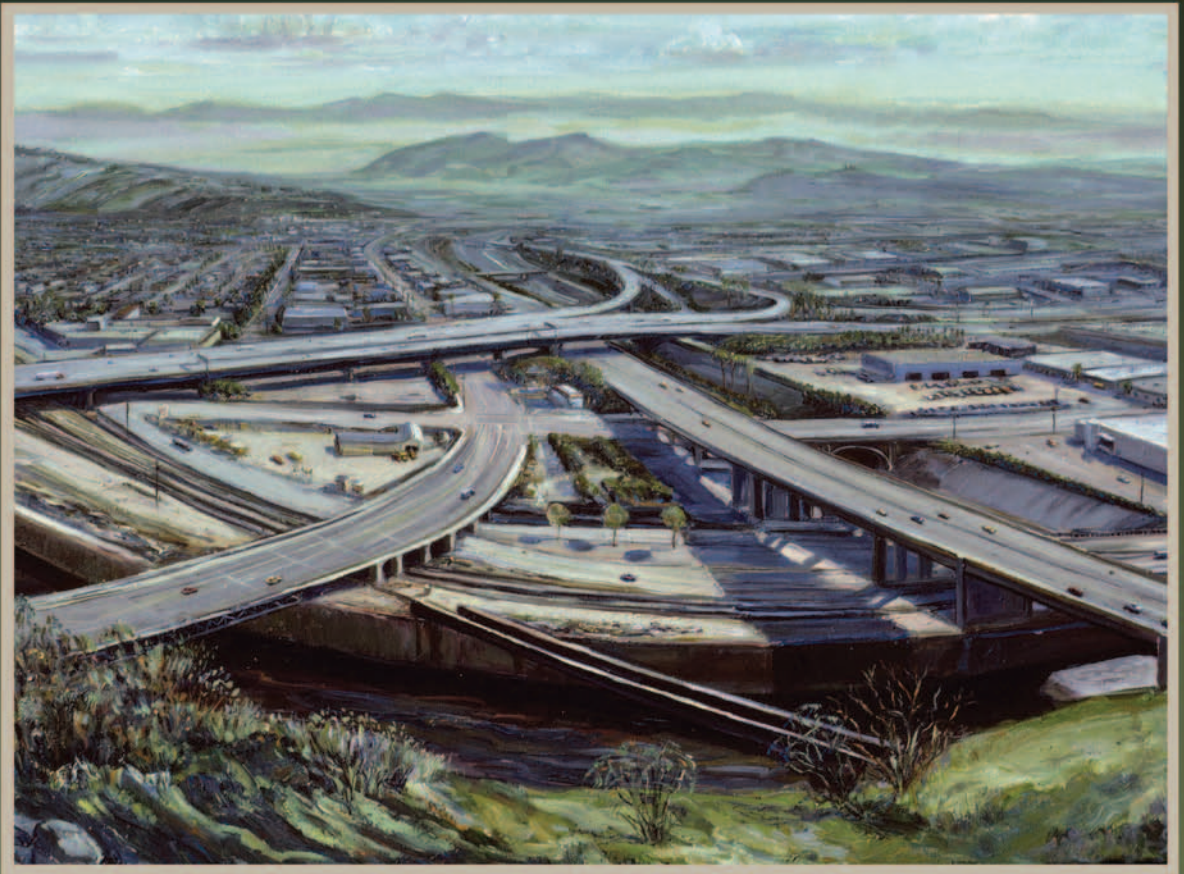


# KETTERING REVIEW

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A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving  
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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<b>Editor</b>	Robert J. Kingston
<b>Associate Editor</b>	Noëlle McAfee
<b>Art Director/Production</b>	Long's Graphic Design, Inc.
<b>Assistant to the Editor</b>	Sarah Dahm
<b>Copy Editor</b>	Lisa Boone-Berry
<b>Formatting</b>	Long's Graphic Design, Inc.
<b>Illustrations</b>	Carol Vollet

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KETTERING  
**REVIEW**

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## Editor's Letter

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Sixteen years ago, in its Winter issue of 1992, this *Review* presented a series of essays upon what was quickly tagged, “public journalism.” A small group of committed professionals—led by Davis Merritt Jr., editor of the *Wichita Eagle*, Jay Rosen of the journalism department at New York University, and the late Cole Campbell, then editor of the *Virginian-Pilot* and soon to occupy the editor's desk at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, then the deanship of journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno—had determined that the newspaper, by and large, was not adequately fulfilling its responsibilities to the public in a contemporary democracy. Nineties journalists were, admittedly, not really much like the bumbling characters of 1930s movies, with press card in the cap, cigarette between the lips, and camera always at the ready; but they did tend to be purveyors of a top-down product. “All the news that's fit to print” (to borrow the *New York Times's* phrase) tended to be stories of sport, crime, politics, and society (not necessarily in that order of priority), framed to capture attention readily—and perhaps to lose it just as quickly; or to stir palpable excitement but stimulate relatively modest thought. The reader, one supposes, got what he paid for; and so, of course, did the advertisers, who paid for the newspaper's operating costs.

The public journalism people were apostles of a cause. Their concept was a medium that did not merely report “stories” from what Walter Conkrite used to describe as “the day that was,” each evening on television (whence more and more people in those days were getting their sense of “the news”); rather it would seek to raise questions from what was reported; questions about what should be done, what trade-offs might be advisable or could be guarded against. For them the challenge was not merely to tell what *had* happened but to open the way to what *could* happen—and the role that the public, their readers, might play if they assumed their responsibility as citizens of our democracy.

Civic journalism was modest and relatively short-lived as a movement, per se: a victim perhaps of economic change, the decline in newspaper readership and therefore advertising, and, above all, the development of new electronic communications. Yet, as some of the writers in this *Review* will evidence, the concept itself is still very much alive.

So much has changed in the way we communicate with each other that the early '90s seem more than a couple of decades away. There were cell phones then, of course, but not in everyone's pocket; the blackberry was just a fruit; *text* was merely a noun, not an adjective or verb; and the word *blogging* might have sounded something like a cockney sport! Yet today, these are the means by which

we speak, or seek to speak, with each other; newspapers are folding—or read, electronically, as often or not, on our computer screens; and we expect to talk, listen to, or look at one another virtually on demand. In this issue of the *Review*, six writers explore how these still changing phenomena of communication may facilitate, or challenge, a more effective public engagement in democratic self-government.

None of these writers, we think, would be at odds with the expressed principles of public journalism; and none, we think, has a low estimate of the need for some pervasive and broadly recognized reporting skills like those the news media used to claim. The effective and efficient democratic community depends upon its ability confidently to share and expand a public knowledge. Yet each of them, too, is sensitive to the exclusionary tendencies that are evidenced when means of communication are in our *individual* control. We not only pick friends among kindred spirits but we are even sometimes reluctant either to talk or to listen to strangers. Fewer newspapers and more blogs may or may not mean that we access more opinions. Or wiser ones! And opinions will not lead to actions in the public interest until their implications have been weighed for good and ill, their cost, and inevitable trade-offs, have been estimated collectively.

Our own associate editor, Noëlle McAfee (who is a professor of philosophy, incidentally, not a journalist) lays out the problem for us, with great circumspection, in her opening essay. McAfee argues that, in a democracy, “all who are affected by common matters have a voice in shaping those matters”; but she leaves us with the question, “can people use new media to create spaces that are more inclusive, or are they destined to repeat their polarization in cyberspace?” David Holwerk, who claims 30-odd years as a professional journalist, responds that, in civic life “citizens cannot act to solve mutual problems,” it is likely because no one reports on them. Spoken like an old public journalist, indeed! “Deciding what the story is really about,” he says, “and how to tell it effectively,” is the critical part of the journalist’s work; yet few journalists know it. To “know” what the story is, Michael Hamill Remaley explains, is to understand the public “take” on an issue; and for the benefit of would-be public journalists, he carefully explains 15 aspects of public engagement with what are recognizably “political” issues. These are serious and sophisticated methods of connecting citizens to issues, he writes, “and journalists can play a crucial role.”

Michael Skoler, of Minnesota Public Radio (and a 25-year journalist), fears that “today’s journalism ... is more about experts than about people. The voices

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of direct experience and the questions that matter most to the audience are often sidelined.” Accordingly, for him a new journalism is long overdue; and he finds it in the vast array of experiments in citizen journalism—which are the substance of Pat Aufderheide’s and Jessica Clark’s essay on the future of public media. Directors of the Future of Public Media project, funded by the Ford Foundation at American University, their essay provides, in itself and with considerable enthusiasm, an admirable entrée to the maze of new technologies that enable citizens to serve as their own journalists and professionals: to know citizens as their subjects and their sources instead of merely their audience. What remains challenging, however, is an answer to the question this *Review* set out to address. Let us call it the McAfee dilemma: “how new media will create and proliferate opportunities for cultivating new meanings, new connections, and relationships.” The chapter from Albert Dzur’s book, with which we conclude, brings us back full circle again, to ask, what is, then, the role of the professional among a democratic people?

One popular philosopher, a few decades ago, when television was at its peak, observed that “the medium is the message.” Well, perhaps, yes! Certainly, through the centuries when the wise and learned wrote letters by candlelight, to be delivered, over time, by some kind of mail, such correspondents shared, most generously, their own personalities; radio, later, became the one-way medium for news, and music, and jokes; then television turned everything into “show business.” And now we rush to e-mail or cell, as though only the present commands our attention, in a life lived one message at a time.

The open highways of the American West may seem to make an odd cover for such a collection of thoughts, particularly granted the present dilemma of the U.S. automobile industry and our energy problems! But the much travelled contemporary artist, Neill Slaughter, has always demonstrated an uncanny ability to suggest echoes beyond the different landscapes that he faithfully captures in his work. Something about the space, the promise—the opportunity and the desolating uncertainty—of those man-made landscapes struck us as pertinent to our subject ... “new meanings, new connections, and relationships!”

**Robert J. Kingston**

# Beyond Manipulation: Democracy and Media

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by Noëlle McAfee

*“Can people use  
media to help create  
a more inclusive  
public world?”*

**A**mong intellectuals and political activists, there is a general sense that the media can be, in fact often are, tools for manipulation, in the sense that those in power are able to harness the media to manipulate public opinion and that only the sentimental and the naïve would think otherwise. This is a view one can find on both the right and the left, with the right decrying the liberal media and the left outraged by corporate media that is increasingly consolidated. In this paper I argue that this sensibility stems from an impoverished view of both democracy and media, namely by thinking of democratic governance as a form of manufacturing public will and by thinking of media as a monolithic entity that is largely used for such instrumental ends. I argue that democracy is a way of being in which all who are affected by common matters have a voice in shaping those matters and that a plurality of forms of media can be used to help give people voice and allow them to shape their world together.

Is democracy self-rule, rule by the people or rule by the rabble? Plato thought of it in the latter terms, as a degraded form of government brought about by licentious, desire-driven, and basically incontinent masses. The best form of government would be rule by the best: by experts who had the public good at heart. The problem with democracy, as Plato saw it, is fundamentally that most people don't know what their own good is. The masses of people are ruled by their passions, so they could hardly be rulers of themselves. Democracy is thus

practically a conceptual impossibility. Instead there arises rule by “exiled desires” and “pretentious fallacies and opinions,” which occupy “the vacant citadel of a young man’s mind.” Democratic man throws off any moderation,

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## Ideals of democracy couldn’t stand up to the complexity of life.

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in favor of insolence, license, and extravagance. As Plato’s Socrates puts it, democratic man lives from day to day, indulging the pleasure of the moment. One day it’s wine, women and song, the next water to drink and a strict diet; one day it’s hard physical training, the next indolence and careless ease, and then a period of philosophic study. Often he takes to politics and keeps jumping to his feet and saying or doing whatever comes into his head. Sometimes all his ambitions and efforts are military, sometimes they are all directed to success in business. There’s no order or restraint in his life, and he reckons his way of living is pleasant, free and happy, and sticks to it through thick and thin.

But ephemeral desires lead to excess and whim rather than reason. This kind of climate breeds lawlessness and anarchy, creating fertile ground for a strong leader who often becomes a tyrant.

Political thinkers of the 20th century found much the same to be true. As Michael Schudson notes in *The Good Citizen*, by the 1920s “the theories of Sigmund Freud, behaviorists, crowd psychologists, and others who examined the irrationality of the human psyche offered scientific grounds to wonder

whether the ideal of democracy had ever made any sense in the first place.” The main culprit was desire.

Human beings are conflicted creatures driven by desire, Freud was now teaching; and they are social creatures, the sedimentary collecting points for the deposits of social forces, as the new social psychology instructed. They were anything but rational, autonomous individuals.

In early 20th century America, the dominant Progressive Era view was that the public was not in good shape to run its own affairs. As Walter Lippmann, the eminent journalist of the 20th century, put it in 1925, “The accepted theory of popular government ... rests upon the belief that there is a public which directs the course of events. I hold that this public is a mere phantom.”

Lippmann sincerely worried that leaving public matters to the public was ill advised. Despite the democratic credo that the public was the proper authority on matters of public concern, he saw ample evidence that, when consulted, people tended to act or vote out of self-interest, not out of any larger sense of commonweal. Moreover, most people were far



too busy tending to their own lives to be fully aware of public policy issues. Their time was limited and their attention short: “The public will arrive in the middle of the third act and will leave before the last curtain, having stayed

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## Activities became the province of professionally run organizations.

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just long enough perhaps to decide who is the hero and who the villain.”

In an era that prided itself for rationality, technocracy, and electoral and governmental reform, thinkers of the early 20th century came up against a cold reality: citizens did not seem to understand very well complex political matters; they didn’t know what was politically for their own good. As Walter Lippmann put it, “The ideal of the omnicompetent, sovereign citizen is, in my opinion, ... a false ideal. It is unattainable. The pursuit of it is misleading. The failure to achieve it has produced the current disenchantment.” Like Plato before him, Lippmann worried that people were easily manipulated and could not fully grasp what was in their own interest. Besides, public issues were increasingly complex.

No one individual could possibly master all the details and intricacies of issues facing the body politic.

The 18th-century, romantic ideals of citizenship and democracy couldn’t stand up to the complexity of 20th-century life, or as Woodrow Wilson said, “If Jefferson were living in our day, he would see what we see: that the individual is caught in a great confused nexus of all sorts of complicated circumstances, and that to let him alone is to leave him helpless as against the obstacles with which he has to contend.”

**S**tymied by desire and complexity, the citizen of the 20th century could hardly be an agent of democracy. Good government Progressives of the first part of the 20th century sought for leadership not terribly unlike Plato’s guardians: experts schooled in the affairs of state; people not tempted by money and corruption; leaders who could sift through the complexities of issues and glean what policies were best; institutions and organizational structures that could take over the functions that a hapless citizenry seemed unable to carry out. Where before many nongovernmental activities, such as philanthropy, were carried out by volunteers, soon these activities became the province of professionally run organizations, effectively relieving citizens of any duty beyond staying informed enough to cast a modicum of an intelligent vote.

It is almost amusing to look back now, a century later, at what unraveled the ideal of democracy: psychoanalysis and technocracy, the



complexity of the psychic and the public worlds. Freud and Heidegger nailed it: Freud in discerning that all is not as it seems; Heidegger in seeing what is lost of the human in an age of technocracy. No one really disagreed with their diagnoses: not the pollsters, nor the government bureaucrats, not presidents or philanthropists. In the 20th century, just when universal suffrage was nearly complete, the very notion of democratic citizenship was quietly revoked. American democracies continued to mouth niceties about democracy, but in reality the ideals of citizenship and deep democracy were little more than jokes: our democracy morphed into good government, run by officials elected by people who couldn't fathom the issues.

Gone was any philosophical hope that a democratic citizenry might generate public will on matters of common concern and that such will could soundly guide the ship of state. If the public wills anything, it is because it has

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## Democracy morphed into good government.

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been manipulated. Whether this public will, or public opinion, is manufactured for better or for worse is where political ideology comes into play. Liberals like Walter Lippmann would hope that good people would run government and help shape public opinion. A Marxist or a Gramscian would see the ways in which cultural hegemony is created, usually as a tool to uphold the status quo and the powers that be. A progressive social activist today might hope that hegemony can change hands, that social justice can be had by helping to raise, or really shape, public consciousness on the importance of this or that cause or issue. Today public opinion

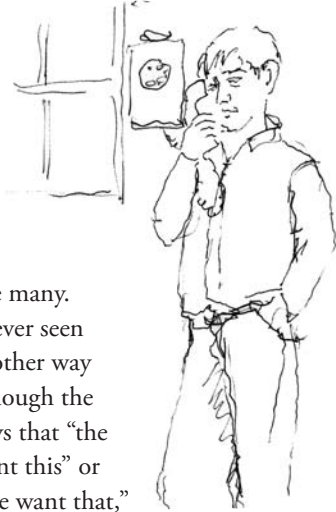
is seen as something that is manufactured by a select few and then sold to the many.

It's rarely ever seen to be the other way around, though the lie is always that "the people want this" or "the people want that," providing cover for politicians to do what they wanted to do in the first place.

Not everyone thought the answer to the problem of the befuddled citizen was good government, however. Lippmann's contemporary and friend, John Dewey, famously retorted that rather than focus on the machinery of government we should focus on helping the public find itself. Dewey agreed with Lippmann that the public often seemed apathetic and unwilling to tackle the problems that plagued it. But Dewey did not think that apathy was really the problem. He thought it was something closer to bewilderment.

What seems to be apathy, Dewey argued, is best understood as "testimony to the fact that the public is so bewildered that it cannot find itself. People feel and suffer consequences but don't know why they come about."

Dewey thought a public came into being when people came to recognize themselves as jointly affected by problems. For instance, people in Lake Charles who work at and live near a PVC plant come to see that the plant's dioxin emissions are harming their own families' and their neighbors' health, and that they



together must address the health problems themselves or force government to do so. At that moment they aren't just individual citizens (or noncitizens), or workers, or sick people. They are members of a public, who

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## Public opinion is seen as manufactured by a select few.

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see other members of that public as similar to them because they share a common problem.

Dewey did not think better guardians would fix the problem. He focused on reconstituting the public. He defined the public simply as all “those indirectly and seriously affected for good or evil” by the “human collective action” of some particular group of people. Whenever any group's actions have consequences for a community as a whole, this community is a political *public*.

But it is not always easy for a public to “find itself” as a group of people jointly affected by the consequences of actions. Even in his own day, Dewey recognized that modern, technological difficulties often obscure the source and the extent of public problems. So perceiving indirect consequences—understanding the relationships that create the problems—is key to turning a public from inchoate to self-aware.

Here is what John Dewey proposed:

- To find itself, the public needs to be able to fully fathom the consequences of human actions and the origins of actions.
- The public needs to be able to know “what to make of” the relationships they come to understand. They need to know what they can do and what the implications of their own actions will be.

- People need to have more and better opportunities to find each other, in actual places where they can meet face to face. If the knowledge stays locked up inside themselves, it can't help feed the public as a public.

But for any of this to happen, Dewey realized, a far-flung people needed means of communication by which they could talk together. In his day, Dewey must have been thinking of radio. Today, the media universe, and its possibilities, has expanded exponentially.

This brings me to the second part of this story. It seems that hand-in-hand when talking about democracy—especially any larger than the 10,000-people threshold of Athens or even the 30,000-people limit of a New England town, which is rigorously differentiated from a city (because while towns can be run by town meeting, cities really cannot), we have to talk about the media. But now things get really complicated, with the two narratives of democracy—the cynical one of a Plato, Lippmann, and Schumpeter bumping up against the hopeful one of an Aristotle, Dewey, or today a Ben Barber, Jane Mansbridge, or Harry Boyte. In the former, media manipulate. In the latter, media are assumed to provide ways for people to communicate, to make their inner worlds part of a public and human world, to help shape and direct the public world. Of course, both pictures are right, all at the same time: there are media that purposely set out to manipulate; and there are regular people using media all over the place today in a more humane way.

And these two modes interfere with each other.

The culture industry that Horkheimer and Adorno first noted in the 1930s and 1940s is still at work today, structuring desire and truncating meaningfulness, promising escape from the drudgery of work while simultaneously

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## Media are assumed to provide ways for people to communicate.

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upholding capitalism. So even when the consumer can use new media to become a producer of a wiki or a podcast or a blog, he or she has already been shaped by the culture industry. They never really have a fresh start. And the once-marginalized and powerless denizen of mass society can start a blog that the corporate media has to reckon with. Big media and little media don't operate on separate planes; they constantly interact; neither is immune from the other.

But within "big media" and "little media," or whatever term one wants to use, there are many, many kinds. Both on the right and on the left, there is a tendency to think of the media as a monolith, as if The Media is an entity with a monolithic agenda. The left of course thinks it is usually a tool of the right, and the right thinks it is a tool of the left. (And people in the media often point to this contradiction and say, see, if both sides disagree with us we must be really squarely in the middle.)

During the past decade, I've spent quite a bit of time with people who work in the media: mainly journalists, but also documentary filmmakers, producers, distributors, station managers, and educators. What I've found is that the media are hardly a monolith. The media, as the noun indicates, are a plurality. There are many arenas, including publicly

funded media; more conventional for-profit media; start-up new media; media harnessed by citizen groups bent on survival, not profit. There are cable access media; radio, print, broadcast, and Internet media. There are social networks, wikis, podcasts, blogs, vlogs, and low-powered unlicensed radio stations. There are journalists who abide by the conventions of disinterest and objectivity; journalists who think their work calls for civic engagement; and there are advocates who use media for social change. Even within an individual media entity, such as a newspaper, there are divisions that work in print and others that operate online. What we are talking about is not one thing but many.

So I propose that it is largely a mistake to talk about "the media," since there really is no such thing, at least as a thing with a single-minded purpose. The media comprise a large field. Generalizations can be made. We philosophers can generalize about, for example, what new avenues the media might lead us to; but we can do this only in a vague way. It is a mistake to point at the media in order to make any kind of blanket statement.

There are media that objectify women's bodies and create an impossible ideal of female





beauty. But there are also documentary filmmakers who use media to try to counter these tendencies. Blame shouldn't be laid at the feet of the media, it should be laid at the particular kind of corporate and cultural structures that use media in a way that creates these impossible ideals.

Realizing that the media are plural and not monolithic is a good first step in thinking productively about the role of media in a democracy, especially in the kind of ersatz democracy we have become. Dewey's vision didn't come true, at least not yet. Lippmann's vision did. Up until 10 years ago it's safe to say that media were largely a tool of a few to persuade the many, to manufacture consent, as Noam Chomsky aptly put it.

This was largely a technological happenstance: media were primarily one-way means of communication. Because the public technically owned the airwaves, a limited number of broadcast licenses were awarded and small low-powered radio stations were discouraged or outlawed. Anyone could own a printing press, but the economics of the newspaper business increasingly consolidated

print media. Newspapers, which had once been avowedly partisan, in the United States, through the economy of the penny press, became vehicles for advertising, not impassioned advocates. To back up their lack of advocacy, the field created ideals of disinterestedness, objectivity, and fairness. Journalists saw themselves as watchdogs and arms of the public, but not invested in public life. Newspapers drew lines between the business side of the organization and the editorial side, yet anyone on the outside could generally detect the political leanings of a given newspaper.

**T**hrough most of the 20th century, the media transmitted one-way, originating from owners of media and aiming at the reading, listening, or viewing public. People in the media generally referred to their consumers as their audience, not their public. Within the media, journalism differentiated itself from the entertainment industry by seeing itself as serving a political function: informing the public so that it could vote intelligently and hold institutions accountable. But still, even newspapers primarily saw their readers as *spectators* of a political process, not *participants* in it. Media became the actor and the public the audience. This in itself was inherently undemocratic, for the people were always subject to what the owners of media articulated. The people couldn't articulate itself for itself, not in public, not in any way that was audible beyond the occasional gathering or demonstration.

So for the most part through the 20th century, the media were mostly oblivious to Dewey's imperative that they could be tools to help the public form itself. Most of the media were in the entertainment business. Journalism was in the information business. No one was in the public-formation business, at least

not directly. Horkheimer and Adorno's claims remained eerily prescient that the culture industry, throughout the 20th century, shaped what people wanted, hence truncating their political lives and expectations.

Industry is interested in people merely as customers and employees, and has in fact reduced mankind as a whole and each of its elements to this all-embracing formula. According to the ruling aspect at the time, ideology emphasizes plan or chance, technology or life, civilization or nature. As employees, men are reminded of the rational organization and urged to fit in like sensible people. As customers, the freedom of choice, the charm of novelty is demonstrated to them on the screen or in the press by means of the human and personal anecdote. In either case they remain objects.

The less the culture industry has to promise, the less it can offer a meaningful explanation of life.

By late 20th century, many advocates on the left stopped complaining about the dehumanizing and depoliticizing aspects of mass media and started embracing it for their own purposes. In the mid-'80s, I worked for an organization called the Advocacy Institute, where part of our goal was to train progressive advocates on how to use the media for progressive ends. A year later, I was working for Public Citizen's Congress as a "community organizer," when really my job was to manufacture the illusion of public outrage over pesticides or the Price-Anderson Act or some other nefarious thing in order to win the good fight on Capitol Hill. During the first Persian Gulf War, I used my new skills in media work to help mount an antiwar movement in Austin, Texas. These ends were all good, but the means were all

ones with which I became increasingly uncomfortable. They were methods for trying to manipulate public opinion, not methods to cultivate public opinion.

What's the difference? Manufacturing public opinion starts with a solution that a

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## A person needs to think and choose in the company of others.

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select group has decided upon, then tries to sell it to the larger public. Cultivating public opinion is a matter of helping to convene a public and then allowing that public to decide for itself what the problem is, how it affects them, what the ramifications are, what ought to be done, and how any goal ought to be effected. Cultivating public opinion puts real faith and power in the people. For many elite liberal types—like many of us—this can be very scary, for "the people" have historically made some really terrible decisions. Think of



ballot initiatives from California to Massachusetts that have limited property taxes to the point of destroying public education or those that have banned bilingual education or gay marriage. The offense in these kinds of “public will” formations is, I offer, that cultivating public opinion happens in deliberative and not knee-jerk settings. People need opportunities to think through issues together; to hear stories from people with different histories, cultures, and contexts; and to really weigh the costs and consequences as they work through the possible choices. This kind of deliberation calls for a kind of choice work informed by Freudian theory. It is in fact true that we are not autonomous, transparent, rational subjects free of desire. But this need not doom democracy and citizenship; this becomes, rather, a starting point for political deliberation and the cultivation of public will. The myth of the autonomous subject was that the subject could decide alone. The fact of the desiring and befuddled subject is that a person needs to think through things and choose *in the company of others*.



But the company of others is hard to find in a global and complex world. And this brings us to the third and final part of this story. I have outlined two narratives of democracy and two concomitant narratives of media. One story is that democratic governance occurs through using the media to manufacture public will; the other I perhaps haven't articulated as clearly, but it is that democracy might stand a chance through using media to help cultivate and articulate public will.

Let me try to explain what this might mean. Part of this story I laid out in my recent book, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*. The usual account of human development is that infants move from helplessness to independence; a better explanation is that infants move from speechlessness to participation. Just watch a child develop and you will see that urge to be part of a larger world. This is not to say that one is subsumed by it, but that one strives to be part of it by individuating oneself, making plain and meaningful one's own desires and aspirations. It seems that the general impetus is that to be human is to be part of something larger than oneself. In small face-to-face communities this can be achieved by having a role in society that allows one to be heeded and heard. In larger more anonymous societies, this kind of participation becomes more difficult. During the 20th century, as society became more complex and media increasingly one-way, alienation was on the rise, with sociologists of the 1950s worrying about “mass man,” alienation, group think, anonymity, and the new empty order.

Something shifted by the close of the century. In the media it began with a few journalists at small-town papers who started questioning the journalistic norms of disinterestedness, impartiality, and objectivity. As

their small towns began to stumble and falter, they wondered, if there were to be no town, there'd be no town paper—so shouldn't the paper concern itself with the fate of the town? Within a few years, a movement known as

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## We've gone from the few-to-many model to the many-to-many reality.

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“public” or “civic” journalism took off, with thinkers—from NYU's Jay Rosen to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch's* editor Cole Campbell—advocating a more engaged form of journalism that saw itself committed to the fate of its communities and interested in helping to form publics, in the Deweyan sense, and not merely inform them in the old journalistic sense. The leading thinkers of this movement were very clear about where they stood philosophically: against Lippmann and with Dewey. That movement was powerful; but the powers that be had their way with it, discredited it as journalism that pandered to the public, that let the public and not the professionals decide what news would be above the fold. By the late 1990s, that movement was pretty much beaten down, though journalists around the world, especially in Africa and in small-town-U.S. papers continue to practice its principles.

But as public journalism fell out of favor, a new term came into consciousness: *citizen media*. The big shift was the rise of digital media in the 1990s, which really came into its own in this past decade. During the analog age, media content was at its most pure when it was produced. Copies of analog media were never as perfect or pristine as the original. Think of the cassette recordings we made back in

those days. A copy of a copy of a copy was scratchy and barely audible. The original producer had the original product—and the power that came with that.

In the digital era, a copy is as perfect as the original. There is no degradation from original to copy. The producer no longer has sole power, for anyone with a copy has, in effect, the original. And as production technologies become more affordable, most anyone can become a producer. Artists no longer rely in the same way on record labels, on the culture industry, to produce their goods; they can do it themselves. And with the Internet, they don't have to rely on middlemen to distribute their



goods; they can do *that* themselves. In a very short decade, we've gone from the few-to-many model to the many-to-many reality. The broadcast era has been supplanted by the digital one.

It's easy to get gleeful, especially if one is a bit of a technological determinist. The old broadcast technology seemed to spell doom for democracy, since the people were only subject to, never really authors of, public

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culture. That anyone can be an artist and a producer, though, doesn't necessarily mean that all is rosy and well, that democracy has arrived. There's still that old problem of the culture industry or more generally of how old ideologies and hegemonic structures determine our self-understanding and desires. How many blogs today are devoted to covering pop culture, fashion, celebrity, and trivia? To what extent have people harnessed these new media for democratic ends?

What would that look like?

I think these are live questions, and they're questions I'm trying to explore in my work and in the work that I have the opportunity to help shape. Now that media are more interactive than ever, what kind of interactivity is of democratic value? I'd like to look more at how old public TV and radio stations are responding positively to the new media and political environments, especially as they themselves move away from being satellite dishes and move toward being new public squares.

And what then is the place for the old role of journalism as informer? I think there's a value, but it's one that gets crossed up with problems of expertise and professionalism that run counter to democratic aspirations. How can people themselves use media to help create a more inclusive public world? What

difference does it make when media run many to many? In an increasingly polarized political climate, can people use new media to create spaces that are more inclusive or are they destined to repeat their polarizations in cyberspace?

As a theorist interested in psychoanalysis and hermeneutics, I'm especially interested in these two processes: how media can be used for successful sublimation and how media can be used to create meaning. On the latter I'm especially thinking about Dewey's observations that there aren't just brute facts waiting to be articulated. In our communication, we decide how things are meaningful. Meaning is made in our articulations. I'm already bogged, here at the dawn of this new era, by how new media will create and proliferate opportunities for cultivating new meanings, new connections, and relationships. I barely have the words to describe this, but I can assure you, dear reader, public, listener, that there's more going on here than we have yet to imagine even on the level of semiotics, and even more so at the level of the political.

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*Noëlle McAfee is an associate research professor at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University and associate editor of the Kettering Review. Her most recent book, Democracy and the Political Unconscious, was published this past spring by Columbia University Press.*

# Journalism and Civic Life: Whose Story Is It, Anyway?

David Holwerk

*“Something is askew  
at the juncture of  
journalism and  
democracy.”*

**T**he connection between good journalism and a healthy American democracy is so widely accepted that it is rarely given much thought, either by journalists or by politicians. The idea behind that connection is simple and easily expressed: better journalism yields a better democracy. It is as old as Thomas Jefferson’s 1787 adage about whether to choose newspapers without government or government without newspapers; and it is as contemporary as the dissection of political coverage in the letters section of any American daily newspaper or on innumerable blogs and Web sites.

When the connection is examined, the focus is usually on journalism as it is practiced at the highest levels of the nation’s democracy: coverage of and commentary about elections, especially presidential elections, is a perennial topic for press critics, journalism professors, citizen critics, and political partisans. As anyone who has been reading the journalism trade press this year knows, this activity typically involves activities like analyzing hours of broadcasts and pages of newsprint to see whether Barack Obama or John McCain got more positive references; lamenting the press’s failure to cry “foul!” over evidence of overt sexism against Hillary Clinton or Sarah Palin; grading how well the press did in sniffing out McCain’s vice-presidential choice; subjecting the rhetoric of news and opinion to various arcane analytical techniques; hand-wringing about the meaning, nature, and possibility of fairness; and endless bullyragging by the army of partisan operatives and public relations professionals hired to keep journalists off guard and at a very long arm’s length.

These exercises are frequently entertaining (especially to the participants) and occasionally even revealing. They have led journalists to learn some new tricks over the past couple of decades: ad analyses, truth squads, and a level

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## You're seeing the result of dysfunctional civic processes.

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of self-scrutiny bordering on auto-flagellation are now commonplaces of life in election-year newsrooms. But at the end of the campaign season, it's never clear that either journalism or democracy is better off for the effort.

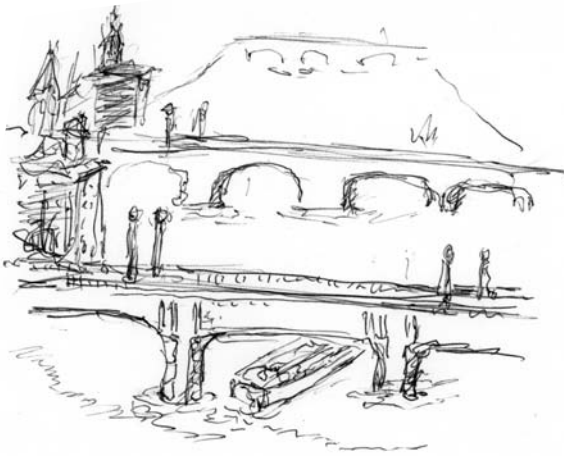
Why is that? After 30-odd years as a newspaper writer and editor, I've concluded that it is the result of journalism focusing on the wrong end of the political process. (I realize that I am about to commit the journalistic sin of stepping off the cliff of commentary into the perilously thin air of political theory, but there's nothing to be done about that.) If you watch politics as a journalist, you quickly learn that all elections, even presidential elections,



are the culmination of an array of economic, social, political, demographic, and cultural activities that I'll call civic processes. You learn this because paying attention to those processes is how you learn what's going on in politics.

Say you're a young reporter in your first job and working for a newspaper in a town you know almost nothing about. Your boss assigns you to cover what is described to you as a heated race for City Council District 4. You find yourself wondering why the race is so heated, anyway. You know next to nothing about District 4, but another reporter tells you that the Gardenview neighborhood is an important part of the district, so you go to a meeting of the Gardenview Neighborhood Association. An association board member tells you that the challenger, who lives in Gardenview, was irked when the incumbent was rude during a meeting with the board. Later, you call the head of the Gardenview Boulevard Business Improvement Association and he tells you that the incumbent has done a good job of getting new streetlights installed. The president of the Gardenview Elementary PTA tells you that the organization's membership is split, with the split reflecting whether a family lives north or south of Gardenview Boulevard. After a while, you realize that in some large measure, the city council election is an expression of what is going on in these civic structures that exist inside and independent of District 4. Naturally, you realize other forces are also at work, of course: raw ambition is one of the most common. A sort of contemporary tribalism is another.

When the campaign in District 4 turns ugly, you realize that the nastiness reflects conflicts between the affluent neighborhoods north of Gardenview Boulevard and the poorer ones to



the south. When racial politics rears its head, you realize that the district's minority residents are mostly in a public housing project that is so tucked out of sight in the southern part of the district that you've never even noticed it. Gradually, it dawns on you that what you're seeing and writing about is the inevitable result of dysfunctional civic processes in District 4. You see that dysfunction everywhere you go and hear it talked about at every meeting you attend. But your paper doesn't cover stuff like the meetings of PTAs, neighborhood associations, and business improvement groups. You cover big stuff—like elections. You're ambitious, and you want to do a good job, so you don't argue the point. Still a question keeps nagging at you. How can you do a good job of covering elections if you don't cover the little stuff?

The same question applies to most criticism of political journalism. The problem isn't that journalists are doing an inadequate job of covering presidential races. I think that by almost any measure, the coverage of national politics is more thorough and penetrating now than it has been at any time since I went to

work as a journalist. Nor is the problem that the coverage of national politics has missed the phenomena that are frequently decried as examples of dysfunction, such as wedge-issue politics and the politics of affinity and identity. These political realities, which are in many cases the result of carefully crafted campaign strategies, have been thoroughly and effectively dissected in the national political press.

Yet it is true that a problem exists. Something is askew at the juncture of journalism and democracy. But that disjuncture doesn't lie in the journalism of presidential elections. It lies at the other end of the scale, in journalism that focuses (or should focus) on civic processes and the countless structures that constitute civic life of a local community: neighborhood associations, business organizations, union halls, church committees, PTAs, and so on. The press's performance at this almost cellular political level deserves the same intense scrutiny that the coverage of a presidential election gets.

If the structures of civic life aren't healthy—that is, if they do not produce a civic life in which citizens can act to solve mutual problems—

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## Newsrooms are not organized to cover civic structures.

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then the electoral politics of a community or a state isn't likely to be healthy either. Those civic structures change over time, and those changes will have effects on larger civic and political structures. But if no one reports on those changes, citizens aren't likely to understand them or be prepared to cope with them effectively.

That is why critics interested in producing excellent journalism and a healthier democracy would better spend their time looking at the lower end of the political and journalistic ladders. If they do, here is what they are likely to find.

There is little or no incentive to cover most of what happens in civic structures. While the experience of covering politics often reveals to journalists the importance of civic structures, the dynamics of the news business lead them to discard that knowledge. Put simply, most newspapers and local TV stations don't see any payoff to paying attention to the Gardenview Neighborhood Association. Even if its internal dynamics are important to the health of city politics, coverage won't attract many readers or viewers unless it involves conflicts that result in the police being called to a meeting. If the activities of the group do get covered, the story is usually written by a junior reporter and relegated to the back of the metro section or a "neighbors" section with limited readership. It doesn't take reporters and editors long to figure out that covering the building blocks of civic life is not a path to success.

Most newsrooms are not organized to cover civic structures. Consider the political activities of the imaginary Gardenview Business Improvement Association. Who will cover that? The business desk, because of the nature of the organization? The city government reporter, because streetlights are a city responsibility? The political reporter, because the story is about politics? Most often, there is no clear answer to the question, so nobody covers the group's activities. Here's a less hypothetical



example. One of the biggest political stories of the past 30 years was the rise of evangelical Christians as a force in national politics. This development was first apparent in many communities in the growth of megachurches whose pastors were highly visible in local civic life. Many newspapers (although by no means all) were slow to note this development.

At least part of the problem lay in the practical question of whose story it was. Should it be assigned to the religion writer, who probably worked in the features department? To the political writer, who almost never worked on Sunday? To the reporter whose turn it was to work the early Sunday shift and who thus had to choose between going to a church service or going through the overnight police reports? To a reporter who was a member of the congregation but was reluctant to talk about it for fear of violating the journalists' prohibition between mixing personal and professional interests? Again, if it's no one's story, it's often not a story at all.

Covering civic structures leads journalists into unfamiliar territory and often poses uncomfortable questions. The difficulties begin with the fact that few journalists know how to frame stories involving civic structures—so first, a bit of explanation for nonjournalists.

No part of the journalistic undertaking is more obscure to readers and viewers than "framing" a story. For that matter, it's obscure to many journalists, too. Basically, framing involves deciding what the story is really about and how to tell it most effectively.

Is it about that fatal traffic accident on Locust Street, or is it about the circumstances that make Locust Street the most dangerous street in your city? Is it about the third school

board member in six months getting arrested for drunken driving, or is it about the board's long-standing culture of post-meeting cocktails? Is it best told as a guide on how to prevent heart attacks, or as a moving narrative about one family's struggle with three generations of coronary artery disease and the decision of a young woman to be genetically tested before having a baby? Answering such questions determines how a story is framed.

Consider this example: A citywide organization of church youth groups is trying to get the city council to do more to combat gangs. How that effort will be covered involves answering some questions about framing the story. At what point is this worth a story? What's the story about? What makes this group more worth a story than other groups? Is the mere effort enough to warrant a story? Should the story hang on whether they succeed in getting a hearing before the council or be focused on the council's lack of interest? Should the reporter spend her time on a project exploring the city's gang problem instead? For most kinds of stories, questions like these have answers that are familiar to journalists. Questions about stories involving the activities of civic structures are less likely to have familiar answers, which means that once again the most likely outcome is no story.

**T**he decision to cover what happens inside civic structures often leads to a variety of unfamiliar practical and ethical difficulties for journalists. Consider the youth group's anti-gang initiative. You and your editor decide the combination of the issue and the youth group is compelling. And you decide to frame the story as the ongoing story of the political education of the group's members: What will they learn? Will they succeed? Does their experience make them more

engaged in the life of the community or leave them cynical and alienated?

This approach entails a commendable dedication of time and resources to following the young people's efforts from an early stage. But as soon as you publish the first installment of this ongoing story, another group (maybe

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## Framing involves deciding what the story is really about.

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the police union) complains. You seem to be advocating for this group's agenda, they say, rather than backing the police's recommendations. A nonprofit youth center wants to know when you are going to do a story highlighting a group affiliated with their center that is working on the same problem. Isn't their work just as important and worthy of attention? The adult advisor of the group you are writing about wants the newspaper's publisher to "partner" with the group by making a financial contribution.

All of this leaves you—and even more so, your editor—flummoxed. You can't write a story about every youth group in the city, and the last thing



you and your editor want to do is to get caught in the middle between competing community organizations. You don't get this kind of problem when you do straightforward stories about cops and city council budget

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## Opportunities exist in every community and newsroom.

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deliberations and gangs and drive-by shootings. Faced with the prospect of choosing between so many competing interests, and with legitimate ethical concerns about taking sides in civic controversy, editors and reporters are likely to throw up their hands and wait for the issue to come up in a council meeting or on the police scanner, where the rules of coverage are clear and familiar.

The recent drumbeat for “local, local, local” news content has not resulted in more or better coverage of what goes on inside the civic structures at the heart of democratic life. Partly this is a result of the circumstances and forces cited above. Partly it is a result of the shrinking resources available to newsrooms



across the print and broadcast industries. Partly it is a reflection of the news business's focus on aggregating audience. (How many people want to read about Gardenview or that church group, anyway?) And partly it is a result of the disconnection of newsroom leaders and news executives from the communities in which they live and publish or broadcast.

Well, okay, a reader might well interject at this point. Let's say you're right that newspapers and TV stations do a lousy job covering neighborhood associations and local business groups and PTAs and so on. So what? Maybe the conventional wisdom is correct and people really don't want to read about that kind of stuff. Anyway, how do you plan to get around all those obstacles you just outlined?

Fair enough!

**F**irst, I don't think the goings-on inside civic structures are inherently uninteresting. Lots of it is, to be sure, but most of what happens in the majority of nine-inning baseball games isn't very interesting, either. Yet people read sports sections or watch *Baseball Tonight* because journalists have figured out what is interesting and how to bring it to the attention of readers and viewers. I think it's possible to do the same for significant parts of civic life. The question is how to develop and disseminate the tools that journalists need if they are to do a better job of covering civic life and bringing it alive for readers and viewers to strengthen the civic life of local communities—and, on occasion, even lead to the creation of new, ongoing civic structures. This is journalism that works in what Richard Harwood has called the “Sweet Spot of Public Life.” While it is rarely practiced, and often raises unfamiliar problems and risks, opportunities for it exist in every community and in every newsroom.

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As for getting around the obstacles: It's a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. For one thing, the timing is right for trying some new stuff in American news organizations. It's hardly a secret that the American newspaper industry is in trouble: declining circulation; declining revenues; shrinking staffs, news hole, and newsroom budgets. But while everybody sees the problem, nobody seems to have a solution. As a result, there is a greater acceptance of the need for change in newsrooms in the industry's recent history.

I'm not proposing that covering or strengthening civic life is a cure for the news industry's problems. I do think figuring out how to do it better would help make newspapers and local broadcasters a more important and trusted part of the lives of their viewers and readers. And that, it seems to me, is surely a part of any equation for the survival and success of the press in America.

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*David Holwerk is the editorial page editor of the Sacramento Bee and the president of the National Conference of Editorial Writers.*

# Fifteen Things Every Journalist Should Know about Public Engagement

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by Michael Hamill Remaley

*“We have to create a better system for aggregating citizen input and delivering it to leaders.”*

**W**hen a politician stands at a lectern and speaks to supporters, is that public engagement? When a corporation deploys a multimillion-dollar public relations campaign aimed at “educating” the public, is it public engagement?

The social protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s produced general acceptance of the worth of citizen input into the issues that directly affect communities, as well as some reforms that actually led to institutional changes, which opened up parts of the policymaking process to concerned citizens. But sunshine laws and town hall meetings have not led to meaningful improvement in how we Americans contribute to our nation’s decision making.

Although a sophisticated, nationwide apparatus that supplies information to and gains input from citizens and that matches the complexity and seriousness of the issues facing the United States has yet to be developed, there is growing acceptance of the belief that one should exist. Aside from the anecdotal evidence of more and more politicians embarking on “public listening tours” and seemingly ubiquitous endorsements by leaders of the premise of taking into account the values and priorities of the American people, there are real indicators that the practice of public engagement is growing in size and sophistication. There is an affinity group of foundations dedicated to supporting public engagement efforts, called Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement. There are dozens of academic centers and nonprofit groups working to study and propagate civic engagement practices. And there are more and more advocacy organizations, of many ideological

perspectives, teaming with others to help citizens explore issues and come to some agreement about how to proceed.

Although the practice of public engagement is growing and the field is gaining greater credibility, most citizens continue to see voting as their only way of giving input in our democracy. But judging by election turnout percentages, voting is not a method of affecting public policy that people seem convinced is effective. Unfortunately, *civic engagement* and *public engagement* are not terms citizens use in their daily lexicon, and relatively few have had direct experience with their practice. Americans rarely see substantive public engagement efforts in the news on television, on the radio, or in their online world.

But that is beginning to change. For example, when *USA Today's* editorial board member and commentator Richard Wolf was developing a series on the potentially devastating economic impact of the retirement of the baby-boom generation, after getting the facts and figures on the problem from think tanks and legislators he sought to understand the public perspective on the potential solutions. He started by investigating the learning being



observed a citizen dialogue with political leaders in Manchester, New Hampshire, and the first piece in his series was not only informed by what he learned there, but also included a sidebar looking exclusively at the citizen engagement process, how it worked, and what leaders were learning from the initiative.

As public engagement efforts become more substantial and productive, journalists are beginning to give them more credence and to present more information about them in their coverage of issues. However, most journalists still have a lot of learning to do themselves about what public engagement really is, what it isn't, and how it could be the best thing to happen to democracy since the civil rights movement.

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## Voting cannot do an adequate job.

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developed by the “Facing Up to the Nation’s Finances” initiative. This a nonideological project of the Concord Coalition, the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation, Public Agenda, and Viewpoint Learning was a nationwide effort to help representative samples of citizens learn the core aspects of our nation’s financial challenges and weigh in with their own values and priorities. Wolf

**W**ith that in mind, here are some things every journalist should know about public engagement.

### **One: Voting alone doesn’t fulfill the promise of democracy.**

Voting may have seemed innovative in 1776. Considering the available technology and the distance between people at the time, voting

once a year was probably the most advanced method of gaining citizen input we could have hoped for. While casting a vote for a represen-

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## Leaders tend to view experts as the only reliable sources.

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tative has never been a particularly accurate way of weighing in on issues, the complexity of our nation's challenges today behooves us to use the most sophisticated methods possible to bring citizens closer to the problem-solving process.

Voting for a particular representative does not constitute an unconditional endorsement of every legislative action or administrative reform taken by that individual. Nor is it possible for elected officials, let alone appointed ones, to divine the public will on a host of issues on the basis of Election Day outcomes. Even with ballot initiatives, voting alone cannot do an adequate job of bringing citizens of diverse perspectives together with leaders to explore issues in a fair way—looking evenhandedly at the pros and cons of various



possible solutions—and developing agreement about how to proceed.

Media often seem to operate under the belief that polling fills whatever gaps may exist in our knowledge of public thinking. Although polling has value, it also has great limitations. Brief phone quizzes don't give us a thorough exploration of any issue. Surveys don't allow citizens to hear the perspectives of other citizens who may have valuable points of view to learn from. Many online enthusiasts have similarly asserted that the World Wide Web presents new ways for citizens to voice their concerns outside of the voting booth, but the format of most online "forums" seems to encourage screaming past one another or preaching to the converted than real public dialogue.

The level and scope of public engagement in the United States are far from adequate. We have to find ways to bring more people into the process, apply the practice to a greater number of issues, convince more leaders of its value, and create a better system for aggregating citizen input and delivering it to leaders. Nonetheless public engagement is nonetheless the most sophisticated method available for applying citizen values and priorities to the issues of our day.

### **Two: The conditions for citizen input have to be right.**

If you pick an "average Joe" off the street, stick a television camera in his face, and ask, "So what do you think we should do to improve the economy?" you are likely to get, at best, a simplistic answer like, "Create more jobs." However, if you ask the same individual to come to a several-hour-long dialogue session where time is taken to explain the core challenges and the basic approaches to fostering a strong economy and tell him that he will

be able to offer his own input on how leaders should address the issues, a number of things happen. One, in a surprising number of cases, the citizen actually volunteers his day to contribute to the process. Two, he has a good time interacting with citizens of diverse perspectives, learning about the issues, and talking about the possible policy solutions from his own perspective. Three, he actually shares ideas that are coherent, thoughtful, and enlightening to leaders. The person isn't transformed (public engagement isn't magic), but the dynamic of our politics is changed.

You can't expect citizens to be thoughtful on complex issues unless you furnish a meaningful process that allows them to learn, discuss, and decide. Too often journalists, politicians, and citizens themselves complain that people just give silly answers when presented with tough issues. But if we present a silly process for asking citizen input, such as man-on-the-street interviews and quickie polls that elicit only top-of-the-head responses, we can only blame ourselves for the stupid answers we get. Citizens can give valuable insights under the right conditions.

**Three: Citizens bring something to the table that experts can't.**

In the United States, public decision making is typically the domain of elected officials (who are arguably increasingly distant from average Americans), powerful interest groups, and highly specialized experts. It is generally the most well-funded and best-organized interest group concerned about an issue that is able to move public policy to its advantage. Leaders

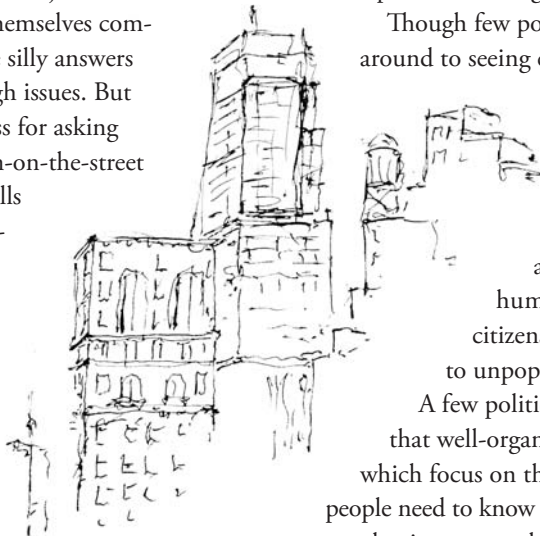
tend to view experts, whether academically credentialed, representing a reputable think tank, or employed by a special interest group,

## Citizens are experts on certain important elements.

as the only reliable resources for the development of legitimate public policy. The public, on the other hand, is generally viewed as an audience to educate or a problem to manage. Citizens are far too infrequently viewed as a vital resource or potentially powerful partner in problem solving.

Though few politicians have come around to seeing citizens as partners in the decision-making process, they have witnessed the great limitations of polling research and have experienced humbling defeat when citizens rise up in opposition to unpopular legislative efforts.

A few political leaders are learning that well-organized citizen dialogues, which focus on the basic information people need to know and help citizens process complex issues, can lead to new revelations and creative approaches to dealing with issues. Most politicians who give lip service to public engagement continue to see it as a tool to gain citizen acquiescence. But leaders who are willing to trust citizens and believe they have valuable experience and diverse knowledge to apply to public issues are learning from the public and applying what they learn to policy decisions.



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**Four: Forget about “public hearings.”**

Many journalists have witnessed, with revulsion, so-called town hall meetings and other public hearings where one or all of these things happen: a panel of experts is presented to “talk” to the public, but there is no real role for members of the public, who are there only to be “educated.” Or perhaps there is a question-

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## Journalists themselves have a lot of learning to do.

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and-answer period in which angry individuals rise to the microphone and confront leaders; a screaming match ensues. Or the meeting is open to the public, but the discussion is hijacked by a special interest group that not only has lots of resources at its disposal and may not represent the best interests of the community but also has special ties to decision makers. None of these things happen in a well-organized public engagement dialogue.

Lots of people use the term *public engagement*, but they may have quite different objectives when they employ their own version of it. As such, public engagement is not an event; it is an ongoing process involving diverse citizens in dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative problem solving around a common concern.

To be truly effective, public engagement should never be a “one and done” event. These public conversations should be considered as moments of reflection in the life of a community that is learning to improve how it communicates and to generally become more organized, democratic, and capable. Simply presenting a host of alternatives for addressing a problem and then taking a vote among those assembled may be an improvement over citizen exclusion,

but it doesn’t go far enough. The best, most comprehensive form of public engagement brings together a diverse array of stakeholders—including citizens who do not usually get asked to events—for problem solving that fits within a larger effort to build a community’s capacity to work collectively.

**Five: Broad inclusion is the key.**

Reaching beyond the “usual suspects” is absolutely essential to an authentic public engagement process. It is easy to bring together those people who are already powerfully involved stakeholders, as well as those who love to sound off in public. Finding ways to include or represent the broader public, especially those whose voices have traditionally been excluded, is a more challenging proposition.

Journalists who are observing public engagement forums or other parts of the process should ask organizers how they went about bringing folks to the table and what constituencies are being represented through the process. Even though it is impossible to bring every voice of every possible stripe into a single room at one time, the whole of the public engagement process should reach out to all of the major groups that are attempting to affect or will be affected by the solutions being explored.

Listening is possibly the most important aspect of any public engagement process. Understanding the public’s starting point and the best ways to communicate with and engage people on tough issues requires careful and systematic listening. Public engagement efforts should avoid making faulty assumptions about people’s positions, or using jargon that, however useful to experts, is counterproductive when it comes to engaging the public.

**Six: Public engagement can take different forms.**

Community dialogues are gaining more and more currency in the world of public decision making, but there are other forms of public engagement that can also be informative and valuable. Interviews, focus groups, and other forms of qualitative research are almost always a useful first step in engagement efforts. In some instances, survey research can add considerable value to a public engagement initiative, broadening insight into the public's starting point.

Like other aspects of our lives, public engagement is beginning to migrate online. Many organizations are experimenting with online forums, community message boards, and other mechanisms using balanced citizen education materials that in some ways replicate live community conversation. To date, no online forums truly capture the same quality of face-to-face dialogue. But online dialogue has great promise for the future.

**Seven: It's not just talking for talk's sake.**

Citizens are experts on certain important elements of any public issue equation. They are uniquely qualified to discuss how issues could have an impact on their lives and reflect on the values and priorities they would apply to solving problems. This is not to say that citizens have innate ability to be familiar with all the elements of a given problem or that their assumptions about certain "facts" shouldn't be challenged.

But their inclusion in the process helps leaders and interest groups understand the public's starting point and, once citizens know the basic facts, how they would apply public resources to solving the problem.

**Eight: Dialogue, not debate.**

Every public engagement process, whether in a community forum, online dialogue, or

an interview with stakeholders, should start with a brief reminder that public engagement focuses on the need for dialogue, not debate. This means that every aspect of the process is aimed at finding the areas of common ground and places of agreement that can be built on. Areas of disagreement should absolutely be delineated and discussed, but the starting point should be that we are working together to find solutions, not to prove who is right or wrong.



With debate, one assumes there is one right answer, and I have it! Dialogue assumes many people may have pieces to the answer. In debate, you listen for flaws in people's thinking and make counterarguments. In public deliberation, you listen to try to understand different points of view and hear new ideas. In debate, you want to end with a conclusion or a vote that validates your own position. In public deliberation, you aim to discover new options and ways of working together that lead to stronger communities and better public policy.

**Nine: Choicework is an important tool.**

Public Agenda's "Citizen Choicework" discussion guides are an extremely valuable tool for creating the right conditions for effective



public engagement in community conversations. These discussion starters are generally composed of three or four perspectives on the issue-at-hand—distinct approaches with different strengths, weaknesses, and trade-offs—that serve as the basis of discussion in a moderated dialogue session.

The choices in these discussion starters, although delineated as distinct approaches, should not be treated as necessarily mutually exclusive. Moderators should reinforce the concept that the framework is a means of helping participants disentangle key elements of complex problems, allowing people to more effectively grapple with the conflicts and trade-offs of each approach, but also that individuals certainly can express interest in pursuing elements of various approaches.

Using Choicework in public engagement takes the process beyond just bringing diverse stakeholders to the table; it also puts diverse ideas on the table. Starting with a clear understanding of the main approaches that have been proposed to address the problem produces greater clarity about disagreements, clarifies lingering questions, gives impetus for new ideas for addressing problems, and ultimately results in greater understanding and common ground. As people work through the Choicework

guides, they have an opportunity to work together in their deliberations, which builds mutual respect, deepens the sense of purpose, and narrows divides between people.

**Ten: It’s not about kowtowing to public opinion.**

The public doesn’t have all the answers. In fact, sometimes the public holds onto beliefs and wishful thinking that well-constructed public engagement can help overcome.

One of the most important things public engagement can do is help citizens confront conflicting impulses and deal with the real trade-offs of difficult choices. If we choose low taxes, what does that mean for the education of our children or the future of our infrastructure? Which specific reform measures would people support? Whereas telephone polls are usually limited by time constraints to ask simple questions with binary or multiple-choice answers, public engagement processes can take the time to delve more deeply into

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**Public conversations should be moments of reflection in the community.**

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issues and help the public confront the realities of their decisions.

**Eleven: It can supply a foundation for strong, principled leadership.**

Political leaders are besieged with requests and have lobbyists at their doors every day.

Political leaders must have a way to come into close contact with the values and priorities of the whole of the public, not just their contributors and the party faithful. Public engagement can take on that function by bringing leaders together with citizens, or by bringing the voice

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## Tough public problems require the work of many parties on many levels.

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of citizens to leaders with reports, multimedia presentations, and face-to-face conversations with public engagement organizers.

Too often citizen participation is viewed as making demands on leadership rather than as a support to it. Political leaders are pulled in a lot of directions and have many competing demands—from party leaders, special interests, voting bases, and contributors. Sometimes taking a principled stand that benefits the whole of the public rather than the leader's voting base or other interest is extremely difficult. Strong citizen participation and a clear voice of public preferences can make it easier for politicians to act in concert with the public good.

### Twelve: It's about citizen action, too.

Citizens who participate in public engagement initiatives should be encouraged and supported to act on their deliberations and not just wait for officials to act on their behalf. The whole concept of public engagement is predicated on the idea that tough public problems require the work of many parties on many levels.

Public engagement isn't just about galvanizing leadership action. The process should also spark citizen action. When done well,

each round of public engagement will set the stage for citizen action.

Even if the dialogues are not specifically designed to create an action plan that citizens can participate in (although many are), participants often come away excited about the possibility of becoming involved in an issue they hadn't previously been engaged on. The best public engagement processes creatively harness that enthusiasm and offer opportunities for citizens to stay involved.

### Thirteen: It's about building democratic habits in communities and in our nation.

Public engagement efforts should always work on two levels simultaneously. On one level it is about addressing a concrete problem, such as improving education, public safety, or jobs. On another it is about growing what philosopher John Dewey called "social intelligence," the capacity for a democratic community to communicate and collaborate effectively in order to solve its common problems and enrich its public life.



Engagement processes are not only exercises in public problem solving. They are civic experiments that help people learn how to more effectively reach out to and include new people, frame issues for deliberation more effectively, and facilitate dialogue and collaboration across boundaries that typically have not been crossed. They build common vision and common ground that allows different kinds of people, with their own interests and experiences, to work together to make headway on common problems.

**Fourteen: Journalists should be asking questions about public engagement initiatives.**

Just as there are some basic principles that must be employed to produce legitimate polling, there are basic elements of public engagement that journalists should know and feel comfortable asking about.

Here are some of the essentials: What efforts were made to include in the process a broad range of citizens, leaders, and other interested parties? Were the citizens a self-selected group, or were efforts made to bring together a group that represents the whole population affected? How were the issues being discussed chosen, and

do they fairly represent a range of the major approaches that have been put forward to address the problem? Who is controlling the initiative, and what is at stake for them? Is this a onetime event, or part of a larger process? What will happen with the views expressed by citizens, and is there a substantial plan for not only taking those views to leaders but also welcoming and facilitating citizen participation over time?

This is hardly an exhaustive list of questions for journalists to ask. But it's a start, because journalists are likely to come into contact with public engagement more and more as the field continues to grow.

**Fifteen: Journalists may have to do some explaining.**

A lot of people—citizens, leaders, and policy types alike—don't "get" public engagement yet. Journalists may have to give a little background and offer some explanation of the process when they talk about public engagement deliberations, so their audiences have the full context.

Authentic public engagement initiatives and other events that purport to be public engagement but fall far short of the mark (such as "listening tour" events, where only the party faithful are allowed in) require equal degrees of inspection and questioning. Journalists should ask the same questions—who was included, what the starting point of conversation was, who has a stake in the outcomes, and what will happen with the concerns expressed by citizens—whether or not the public engagement initiative seems to be well intended.

**T**hese 15 points are merely an introduction to public engagement. Journalists can learn best about this topic by observing initiatives



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in action and asking questions of those who run public engagement programs. One of the most important things they can do is to begin asking political leaders and experts how they are engaging the public on issues in a comprehensive and authentic way. By now, we've all witnessed enough tightly scripted town meetings run by politicians. There are serious and sophisticated

methods of really connecting citizens to issues, and journalists can play a crucial role in examining this growing democratic movement by asking the right questions and focusing more squarely on public engagement practices.

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*Michael Hamill Remaley is the director of communications at the Russell Sage Foundation.*

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# From Priesthood to Partnership: Public Insight Journalism

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by Michael Skoler

*“We need a new journalism, built on a partnership with the public.”*

**F**ifteen years ago, I flew to Nairobi, Kenya, as Africa correspondent for National Public Radio, a nonprofit radio network in the United States. On the way, I stopped in Paris, where a Rome-based correspondent passed on a large bag containing a bulletproof vest and helmet. Within two days, I was in Somalia.

Being a foreign correspondent back then meant seeing for yourself what was happening on the ground—and having a Rolodex of experts to explain what it all meant. When it came to stories about Africa, those expert analysts were nearly always white and non-African, and most were getting their information secondhand, often from foreign correspondents like me. During four years of reporting in Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, South Africa, the former Zaire, and elsewhere, I grew skeptical of those standard sources.

Increasingly, my reporting featured Africans explaining their concerns, their dreams and their world, from direct experience. Yet my stories and those voices were typically lost in the din of expert explanations in other news reports. And the experts were often wrong.

Coverage of the Rwandan genocide was one example. Most people still believe that the genocide was caused by deep ethnic hatred between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority. That was what the experts said. “Will those Hutus and Tutsis ever get along?” my father asked me once when I returned to the United States for a visit. I had been reporting that the Rwandan genocide was *not* about deep ethnic hatred between the Hutus and the Tutsis. In interview after interview in Rwanda, I heard that intermarriage between the two groups was common.

I reported that there was too little land in this most densely populated country in Africa. Rwandans told me how the Hutu government and its militias had incited the genocide through fear and the promise that Hutus would get new land as the countryside was cleansed of Tutsis. My father had listened to my stories. Yet, the voices of those living the news in my reports lost out to the more frequent voices of experts elsewhere, citing tribalism as the root of the genocide.

Today's journalism has lost its connection with people!

I fear that today's journalism, like the journalism I saw emerge from Africa, is more about experts than about people. The voices of direct experience and the questions that matter most to the audience are often sidelined by the authority of experts and the judgment of journalists who see themselves as arbiters of the news. Some news organizations even *brand* experts as their own and feature them again and again in reports and interviews. In the current U.S. election, journalists seem more comfortable asking pundits what Americans think about an issue, rather than asking citizens themselves.

The irony is that in today's increasingly Internet-linked world, it has never been easier for journalists to connect with people around the globe through blogs and social networks, chat rooms and bulletin boards.

I certainly don't mean to paint journalism (which I have been part of for 25 years) as all wrong or all bad. In the United States, journalism has exposed scandals like Watergate, told us why the poor of New Orleans suffered most from Katrina, and explained everything from climate change to credit fraud. There is a great deal of excellent journalism happening, and it does reach people, inform them, and

add to their lives. But, on balance, much of the news does not.

I believe journalists have become disconnected from the people we are meant to serve and that this situation is dangerous in a free

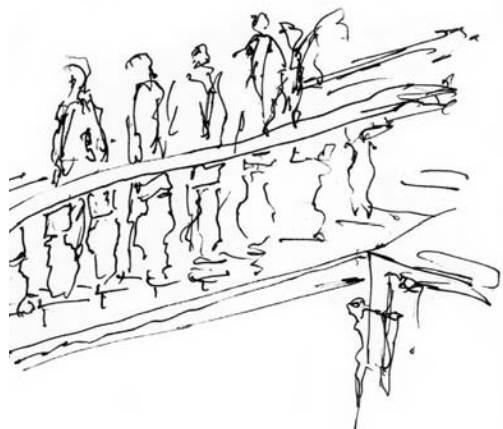
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## Today's journalism is more about experts than about people.

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society. The news media, when independent and connected to the public, is the foundation for government by the people. Ideally, journalists are trusted truth-tellers who enable people to come together to learn from each other and solve common problems.

But when journalists become disconnected, the public becomes distrustful and disdainful of newsmakers and newsgatherers alike. The weakening connection between journalists and the public in the United States has led to 20 years of declining public trust in the media. Our poor relationship with the audience wasn't as problematic or obvious when there were no alternatives to mainstream media and no easy ways to get information from different voices





and perspectives. But the rise of the Internet has changed all that.

The Web has broken the monopoly of mainstream news. In the United States, big city newspapers and national

television news programs are struggling

to survive as the audience, and advertisers, go elsewhere. In the emerging information-sharing, open-source culture of the Web, people expect to share what they know and be engaged in a conversation.

They expect to learn from a huge range of sources, many informal and expert by experience, rather than by title. And they expect this from their news. Mainstream journalism, as a priesthood whose role is to determine the news that is fit to print and inform the uninformed masses, seems outdated, arrogant, and disconnected.

What we need is a new journalism—one not handed down from the pulpit, but built on a partnership with the public. It's a journalism that asks, listens, and engages with the public and taps the widest possible source network, while still preserving the hallmarks of quality reporting: verification, independence, and powerful storytelling. It's a journalism that values collaboration and diversity, while still filtering for truth. It's journalism that's relevant because the audience is deeply involved.

Quality journalism, as a trusted truth-teller that helps create shared understanding, is more needed than ever. Our world is growing more complex and more interdependent, while the understanding and tolerance needed to tackle common problems seems to be shrinking. This new journalism is long overdue.

You can already see the first drafts of it. It's there in crises, like the South Asian tsunami of 2004 or the Hurricane Katrina disaster in the United States, when people living the news shared their knowledge and questions on hastily created Web pages. It's there in the BBC's interactivity desk that vets thousands of photos, videos, information, and comments from the public every day and distributes them to its editorial staff.

It's there in sites like Global Voices ([www.globalvoicesonline.org](http://www.globalvoicesonline.org)) by Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, which find diverse voices and sustain conversations with a worldwide audience. It's there in the collaboratively written encyclopedia, Wikipedia, and South Korea's online OhMyNews service and other experiments in citizen journalism. And it is spreading in America's nonprofit, public radio system.

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## Ideally, journalists are trusted truth-tellers.

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For the last five years, my colleagues and I at American Public Media have worked to create a set of principles, practices, and tools for this new journalism of partnership. American Public Media is the largest owner and operator of public radio stations in the United States and produces national programs that reach over 15 million people

each week. We call our model Public Insight Journalism,<sup>®</sup> and we are using it daily to create stronger local news coverage in our Minnesota Public Radio newsroom and national coverage on our shows like *Marketplace*, *Weekend America*, and *Speaking of Faith*.

Public Insight Journalism is about tapping the knowledge, experience, and insights of

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## These citizen sources have knowledge.

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a vast network of people who have expertise but are rarely recognized as experts by the media. These *citizen sources* have knowledge from their training, their work, their passions, their community life, and their personal and professional contacts. They also know what questions, issues, emerging trends, and stories are most relevant to their lives.

Public Insight Journalism creates a partnership between people willing to share their knowledge with the press and experienced journalists willing to listen. It relies on communications and knowledge management technology to maintain and tap relationships with tens of thousands of people in hundreds of communities. Public Insight Journalism harkens back to an earlier age when reporters spent time at community meetings, cafés and coffee shops, bars and pubs, building hundreds of relationships with people and reporting based on those relationships.

We start by asking people on the radio, over the Web, in person, or by e-mail to share their knowledge on issues or stories our news programs are exploring. We ask people to share their knowledge, not their opinions. And we promise we will not share their personal information or their comments without their permission.

Those who respond become part of our Public Insight Network,<sup>®</sup> which is growing daily and now includes more than 50,000 sources in over two dozen countries. After people register, we ask them for information about their lives, experience, and expertise, so we can ask them questions that are relevant to their knowledge. We learn more about their expertise and experience every time they respond to a request for help with a story.

**W**e gather this information in a database using knowledge-management tools we have built and fine-tuned over time. The system is automated and efficient so that a few journalists, called Public Insight Analysts, can quickly identify those people most likely to have knowledge on a topic, contact them by e-mail or phone, and then rapidly review and synthesize their responses. These journalist-analysts check the information provided by public sources, follow up with them, and pass the vetted information and sources to reporters and editors for use in shaping our coverage.

A typical request for help, or an e-mailed “query,” goes out to 500-1,000 people and responses start arriving immediately. We also invite those in the network to contact us



whenever they want with information, changes they notice in their communities, and story suggestions.

Several times a month, we gather groups of our sources to help us think through an

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## We ask people to share their knowledge, not their opinions.

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issue, such as immigration, health care, crime, or education. Often, we reach out to under-represented groups—ethnic minorities, youth, religious minorities—to inform our coverage and deepen our understanding of the stories that matter most in our communities.

The Public Insight Analysts are the connectors that make Public Insight Journalism a real partnership. They ensure that our relationships

are real rather than virtual. They welcome new people into the network and send thank you's to all those who share their knowledge. They ask follow-up questions and call people. They invite people to meet with reporters. And, most important, they close the loop, letting people know when their ideas, contacts, and knowledge have informed our coverage and providing a link to the stories that result.

We also complement these more personal requests for partnership with broad invitations to share knowledge with many others. We are a pioneer in creating online “serious” games and new social discussion tools that engage many thousands in public knowledge sharing and help us gather insight broadly and understand differing perspectives on major issues.

During the U.S. presidential election, we offered a game called Select a Candidate ([www.mpr.org/selectacandidate](http://www.mpr.org/selectacandidate)) where people could see how their stands on issues match or don't match the positions of candidates. The game showed players the candidate that most closely matched their positions and then allowed players to compare their matches and the issues they find most important with those of other players of different ages, U.S. states, economic classes, and political parties.

American Public Media has created budget games that allow Americans to create their own budget plans for the government and compare them with politicians and other players. And we recently created a game called Consumer Consequences ([www.consumerconsequences.org](http://www.consumerconsequences.org)) that invites Americans to weigh how their lifestyles impact the Earth's resources. Our games record the choices and comments of every player and our Public Insight Analysts study the results to understand how people think through these issues and to help guide our coverage.



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**P**ublic Insight Journalism is now a part of our daily news process, informing our reporting and the choice of stories to cover. The result has been a greater diversity of voices in our coverage and an increased ability to spot stories and trends that matter to our audience. In a world where news organizations face shrinking audiences, our news audience continues to grow.

And this new journalism of public partnership helps ensure, first, that news organizations have the most complete information possible from the widest array of sources. And second, it can help ensure that news coverage, rather than being disconnected from the audience, focuses on the stories and issues that matter to them.

Jay Rosen, a professor of journalism at New York University and author of the PressThink blog, calls this a pro-am model, mixing professionals with amateurs. I see it as journalism that's deeply connected to the public it serves.

In July 2006, American Public Media created the Center for Innovation in Journalism to share this model with other newsrooms and to lead our work in creating genuine partnerships with the public. Four other public radio newsrooms are now using the Public Insight Journalism model and we are in talks with other news organizations to share the model.

The *old* journalism model was built for a culture with a scarcity of information and connections. Journalists had the means to distribute news widely ... and took on the mantle of deciding what information people

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## Our sources help us think through an issue.

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needed, which sources to use, and how to define the news. That old model of journalism has lost its connection to the public.

As our societies increasingly face complex problems that require global understanding and cooperative solutions, the media has a critical role to play. To save journalism in today's open-source, information-sharing culture and to ensure it remains a force for shared understanding and positive change, we need change. The media alone cannot do it. We need a new journalism of partnership. And it is coming.

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*Michael Skoler is an award-winning journalist in radio, television, print, and the Web. He is currently on leave from running the Center for Innovation in Journalism at American Public Media. This essay was originally printed in Kosmos Journal (Spring/Summer 2008).*

# The Future of Public Media

by Patricia Aufderheide and Jessica Clark

*“Public media make people aware of their role as members of the public.”*

**P**ublic media are projects and behaviors that address and mobilize publics, within any media. Some media are designed for this purpose (prestige journalism, public broadcasting), while others may do this occasionally (commercial television and radio, blogs).

What makes public media public is the public.

The term *public* doesn't simply refer to a demographic or serve as another word for audiences, but is a concept that draws upon the work of theorists like John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, James Carey, Benjamin Barber, Nick Couldry, and Michael Schudson. We are all, potentially, members of the public when we encounter problems that can only be addressed by common action aimed at our governments and other institutions. Such public issues may emerge spontaneously, such as when epidemics or natural disasters occur, or may be caused by an identifiable actor.

For instance, if a factory pollutes the air, that affects everyone in the neighborhood. But to solve the problem, members of that neighborhood will need to know about it, understand related structures of power, and work to bring a group of neighbors together as members of the public (i.e., the affected people who are also aware of their power in a group). They could demand that their democratic government respond to their needs; they could ask the factory to improve (or run the risk of government regulation); they could mobilize a boycott of the factory's products; they might discover another way to respond, by brainstorming together and drawing on skills and connections in the group.

A public, then, exists because particular kinds of problems exist. These problems are created, often accidentally, by some private action or by bureaucracies. They affect lots of people, many of them outside the private

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## The public provides essential accountability.

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firm or governmental body that may have a relationship to the problem. The public—all of us when we share problems and find each other to help solve them—provides essential accountability in a healthy society. Each of us may be a member of a number of several publics organized around specific issues, locations, or shared identities. Publics check the natural tendency of people to do what's easiest, cheapest, and in their own private interest—even when it's bad for others in some way (including ways they may not even have recognized or thought about). They are not rigid structures—publics regularly form around issues, problems, and opportunities for improvement—and this informality avoids the inevitable self-serving that happens in any institution.

Publics are served by standing institutions, although they may be oblivious of that service until they encounter them. For instance, nonprofit organizations that employ scientific and social scientific professionals to generate and analyze information; state-supported social and legal services; and commercial and noncommercial media all enable public life from time to time.

The phrase *the public interest*, a term of art in U.S. policymaking, sadly begs the question of who the public might be and therefore has become a political football.

The term *public opinion*—usually meaning the results of a poll of individuals—refers to aggregated individual opinions but avoids the question of how publics can form and be nurtured. More helpful are terms that describe public life as something that people actively engage in.

For instance, British scholar Nick Couldry uses two terms: *public attention* and *public connection*. *Public attention* is focusing on a particular issue, and *public connection* is a precondition of understanding oneself as a potential member of the public—a citizen with access to a shared communication space where issues can and should be addressed. Another useful term is German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's *public sphere*: social spaces and practices in which people discover their public aspects and find political mechanisms to resolve them. The public sphere is a set of social relationships created in the course of communication; media platforms are tools for creating it, not the sphere itself.

**P**ublics create themselves, and they do so with communication. While the forms and outlets for such public communication have changed over time—from the face-to-face meetings of the Roman





Forum, to the newspapers sold to members of the emerging middle class in 18th-century London coffeehouses and French salons, through the emergence of U.S. broadcast television in the 20th

century, to the internationally available blogs and digital video sites of today—each has served as a central site for social interaction around shared issues and a tool for the construction and maintenance of democratic principles.

Communicating about shared problems—whether it’s traffic congestion in a city; lower wages for women; soldiers not receiving adequate body armor; threats to the business model of public broadcasting; legislation that imperils the environment—builds a group’s awareness of itself as a public. In this context, public media are media that aim to increase public knowledge and mobilize audience members. Media, which are synthesized and coherent cultural expressions, have become over the last few centuries critical intermediaries in public communication. When people meet (virtually or not) to discuss what’s important to them, they typically draw upon their experiences with media.

*Public broadcasting* got its name in 1967, when Congress passed legislation creating special federal funds to support noncommercial broadcasters. The people who pushed for that law imagined a service that could fuel public life in many ways and deliberately chose a word with

strong civic connotations, although the legislation itself studiously avoided any specifics. The end result has always been hobbled by the fact that Congress decided not to pay for most of the services envisioned. Public broadcasters in the United States have been forced from the start to be full-time beggars.

Public radio and television—funded by a mixture of federal, state, and local funds; listener and viewer support, and corporate underwriting—do sometimes feature programs and series that inform and engage the public. However, these outlets also offer programming that caters usefully to individuals outside their public roles—for instance as consumers who need home improvement information or investment advice, as potential entrepreneurs who want to sell antiques at auction, as caregivers who learn skills, and as children who learn basic concepts. They also offer comforting entertainment that often falls into the realm of what broadcasting historian Erik Barnouw has called the “safely splendid.”

Another protected media zone for public projects, public access television—which cable companies provide in localities where officials

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## The public sphere is a set of social relationships.

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have bargained for it in the cable franchise or contract—also offers opportunities for public media projects and behaviors. But whether it actually engages them depends on the political savvy and vision of the local access director. Direct broadcast satellite television is required to set aside some channels for nonprofit use, but those channels have suffered from lack of resources for programming.

Some programmers do take the opportunities of these venues and engage publics with them. In public broadcasting, public affairs programs like *Now* and cultural reporting, such as that sometimes featured on *This American Life*, often engage viewers and listeners to act as members of the public. *Storycorps*, featured on public radio, brings new voices and viewpoints to big issues and also enhances

## Publics mobilize around the problems they encounter.

a sense of shared community. Web sites and outreach programs created by pubcasting projects like ITVS and P.O.V. directly engage publics around issues.

Niche media outlets—newsletters, magazines, low-power radio stations—also appeal to and grow social networks of affinity groups that can mobilize as publics. For instance, New America Media, an ethnic media syndication service, extends the capacity of individual niche outlets both to respond to their own publics and to extend their reach to involve larger publics. Independent film, alternative newsweeklies, 'zines, community radio, and other platforms have served as tools and rallying points for social change movements that mobilized publics.

Mass media, especially television, have had to struggle against the very architecture of the medium in order to act as public media. Their one-to-many, top-down architecture makes the interactivity that fosters public life hard. Nonetheless, public broadcasters have long practiced outreach to nonprofits and community groups; talk radio hosts take questions; newspapers have letters to the editor and

ombudsmen. Yochai Benkler, Henry Jenkins, Mimi Ito, and Danah Boyd have described a movement to seize media-making tools and use them to create culture and to generate and sustain social life. The same impulses can also fuel interaction with each other as members of the public, when the need arises.

Many mass media forms—book publishing, journalism, personal narrative, filmmaking, musical recording, magazine publishing, videography, photography, and more—have developed interactive capacities as they become digital. The Web has spurred new, many-to-many media, and Web 2.0 technologies like wikis and vlogs expand interactive options.

Public media exist and have flourished in all of these forms, and they continue to emerge with each new wave of technology. Wikipedia pages on certain topics—abortion and 9/11 conspiracies are two examples—are good examples of online, interactive public media. They are constantly changing reflections of the existence of a group of people who often disagree with each other about how to understand and share information about something that they all agree is important.



Projects like Congresspedia and Citizendium adapt the behaviors developed through the Wikipedia experiment to explicitly public purposes.

Emerging social network and media-sharing sites—from Facebook to Flickr to YouTube and beyond—are also flipping the media distribution equation on its head, detaching content from its original outlets and placing user relationships to the content and one another in the foreground. They are creating platforms for people not only to share their fascination with the latest celebrity but also to share media—their own or others’—about issues ranging from global warming to Darfur. In addition to large commercial sites, more targeted public social networks are emerging. Take oneclimate.net, which provides a media-rich platform for mobilizing around global warming, offering reports and video clips created by OneWorld reporters and partners.

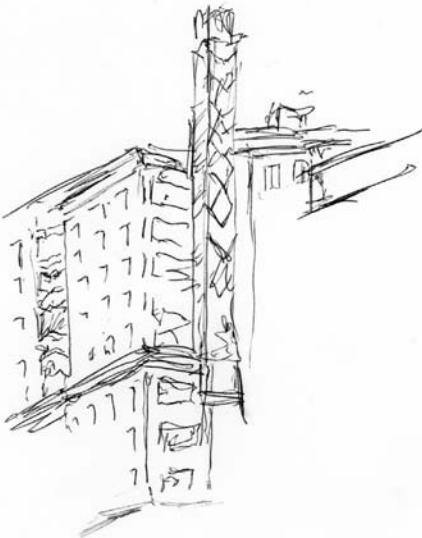
These platforms generate new possibilities for forming publics around media—sharing, rating, and creating media online is much quicker and easier than it was with media in

its analog forms. In such an environment, media that were not originally designed for a public purpose can become the center of a movement or an educational campaign. Users are remixing and recontextualizing clips from mainstream sources, for example, to tell new stories and highlight issues. DIY media—usually shut out in the one-to-many broadcast era—can also quickly rise to prominence in such open environments.

**I**nteractivity alone is not the standard for public media, as *American Idol* demonstrates. Instead, it’s about intention and process—interactivity harnessed to mobilize publics. Publics mobilize around the problems they encounter, and they usually need to act politically and through or against political institutions to effect change, reform corrupt practices, or bring good new ideas into practice.

Public media have often been associated with educational, documentary, or journalistic approaches. However, personal expression and entertainment can equally serve a public media function if they grab attention, helping people to recognize, articulate, and act upon a political or social issue.

Some kinds of media are rarely public media—examples include commercial advertising, political campaigns, and promotional and fund-raising materials. Publications, Web sites, and other media created in the course of doing business as a corporation rarely qualify as public media, though they may trigger it. Your personal diaries and home movies aren’t public media, but they might become a public media project. If, say, you’re the parent of an autistic child, the daughter of an underresourced soldier on the front lines, or a person returning to a family after incarceration, you may decide to turn this private material into public media by crafting an expression using it and sharing



that with others who connect with you about the issues you're raising.

Individual communication, via phone, e-mail, or snail mail, isn't public media, no matter what it addresses. Media are bodies of expression that mediate our understanding and facilitate our communication.

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## Media facilitate our communication.

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How do we know when we're creating public media? There is no union or guild for creators of public media, and new opportunities present themselves every day. Until recently, our public media have always been proxies for the public, involving editors and producers who decide for us all what's important to know about and how to portray it. Not any more. New platforms, such as nonprofit news site OneWorld.net and international metablog Global Voices, have sprung up. Cell phones, mp3 players, and other mobile media devices are providing public media makers with new opportunities to reach and inform micropublics as they go about their daily lives. The limitations of old mass-media-style public media no longer have to constrain our imaginations.

Public media are no longer static sites on the media landscape; they are interwoven in a complex, constantly changing media landscape. We can now begin to create public media made by publics, for publics. We can find creative ways to combine the resources, skill, and knowledge base of mass media with the energy, curiosity, and passions of new grassroots media makers.

This is also an unstable and experimental moment, and we don't have public policies

that nurture such experiments in public media. New challenges are emerging along with opportunities. Can you trust that online information? Will your participation invade your privacy? Will the site you've helped build be there tomorrow? Can potential allies and colleagues find and exchange information easily without your software or your kind of broadband access? Will our infrastructure support our connectedness as members of the public?

High-quality public media make people aware of their role as members of the public, not just consumers of information. The best public media don't just provide information; they also contribute to helping people understand ongoing and complicated issues. They offer models for respectful and engaging conversation. Public media projects are not the preserve of any particular political party, ideology, social group, or aesthetic style, although they are (implicitly or explicitly) supportive of and conducted according to democratic principles. Public media can be generated via partisan or advocacy organizations



and become more than partisan or advocacy media if people use them to fuel their ability to act as members of the public.

Good examples of public media are open, accountable, transparent, and participatory,

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## Public media are no longer static sites on the media landscape.

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rather than hegemonic, top-down, cloistered, or cheerleading. For entertainment and leisure, most people today still like professionally produced commercial media. Personal media (your baby's first steps on YouTube) are important for family and friends. Public media serve a different and crucial function: as a form of communication for assessing and resolving differences.

You may not always want to make or view or read media for public knowledge and action, but you want them there when you need them. You want reliable sources of information about events and processes that affect your quality of life and political options. You want reliable communication platforms that allow you both to use and make media to contribute to public knowledge and action. You want the opportunity to benefit from public media when you need it.

Standards are evolving for making and recognizing public media on digital platforms as we develop practice. It will be important to articulate and share those standards in the public spaces where such media are created. Scholars, such as Henry Jenkins and Peter Jaszi, have argued that standards and practices are critical resources for governance of participatory media for the public good.

Communities of practice and professionalism have grown up around those forms of me-

dia that have traditionally served a public role. For example, through practice and academic training, the field of journalism has developed standards for judging objectivity, vetting and protecting sources, limiting libel and slander, and protecting free speech. Prizes, professional schools, membership organizations, ombudsmen, and trade groups all uphold and reward these journalistic standards, creating an accepted community of practice. Legacy public media organizations, such as PBS and NPR, stake their reputations on providing evenhanded, informed reporting that prepares audience members to serve as informed citizens.

Standards are easier to monitor in top-down media organizations. Open platforms, which allow users to post content that hasn't been assessed for accuracy, bias, or malice, raise questions of truth and legitimacy. The community of practice has not yet stabilized. In some cases, the users of these platforms serve as monitors. Through ranking, editing, and feedback tools, sites like Slashdot self-police. Other communities of new media makers—such as political bloggers—have embarked on their own standard-setting efforts,



forming online and offline networks to discuss ethical guidelines and sanction bad actors.

Users, academics, membership organizations, media monitors, foundations, and media makers themselves all have a role to play in determining the behaviors that will mark public media in a digital, participatory era.

**A**lthough public broadcasting is an important public resource, into which billions of taxpayer dollars have been sunk and which millions of Americans trust and benefit from, it cannot be the only platform for tomorrow's public media. In fact, public broadcasters are struggling to adapt to the opportunities presented by an open, digital environment. What public broadcasters can provide is an important service of taxpayer-funded, user-supported, high-end media with a mission to mobilize publics. (In that case, many public broadcasters will have to refocus their daily priorities.) Similarly, today's leading journalistic operations, such as the *New York Times*, could be important platforms to grow tomorrow's public media, benefiting as they do from public trust and experience. They too would have to focus their core-mission efforts to engage and mobilize publics.

Tomorrow's public media can grow not only from those bases but from many other current and emerging sites of media for public knowledge and action. These include professional and citizen journalism; nonprofits' databases and tools for public knowledge and action; and Web sites that aggregate, focus, and showcase diffuse knowledge.

How will tomorrow's public media projects support themselves? In the past, public media have depended on a mix of taxpayer dollars, incentive policies, and donations. Even with volunteer knowledge-building projects like Wikipedia, there are real costs, ranging from

servers to electricity to computers to your time. They also depend on often-hidden policies that financially support such projects (including taxpayer support for the creation of the Internet!). So figuring out how to pay for public media creation is a real issue. Business models for an open, participatory, peer-to-peer environment are all experimental and unstable. No one, including commercial media, knows what emerging business models will look like for any digital media. Some people envision a future of volunteer public media—publics self-forming through the creation of do-it-yourself media that they volunteer to make and share freely, like what happened with Wikipedia. Others think that taxpayer support, both through direct allocations and through policymaking, will be critical to a stable set of public media practices.

Certainly all commercial media are working hard to create strong brand identification, to channel user interest, and to create zones of activity, whether through partnership or aggregation. Whether employed for profit-making

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## We don't have policies that nurture experiments.

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or civil-society purposes, zones and brands (such as PBS and NPR) are effective ways to help people find not only what they are looking for but other people who are interested in the same thing.

Zones and brands can make clear to people where they can find the media that can help them be the best members of the public they can be, and where they can upload their own contributions.

However, today's media for public knowledge and action are created far beyond restricted

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zones, such as public broadcasting. Tomorrow will also bring new opportunities to infuse our media practices with civic culture. Decentralization and disintermediation have typified the growth of digital culture, and if publics are to be nurtured as digital culture grows, they need to use all the tools and platforms they can.

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## How to pay for public media is a real issue.

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Commercial media corporations, whether really big (as they were 20 years ago) or super big (as they are now), have never had mobilizing the public on their agenda. Nonetheless, commercial media companies, which themselves are struggling to make the transition to a digital era, may yet provide useful examples, tools, and models, as well as shared cultural context, for members of the public. Media consolidation is an issue that may become relevant in some circumstances. Control is an enduring issue.

In order to identify what policies about control are central, you have to know what you want out of media for public knowledge and action. Among the key features are universal access to communication and media platforms and products; freedom to speak, make, and share; and knowledge of both techniques and cultural habits of communication and media for public knowledge and action. What kinds of policies are needed to let makers and users of media for public knowledge and action have control?

Public media will need not only creative use of existing and emerging platforms, but also protection and support from government. Local, state, and federal governments have done this in the past. For instance, the federal government provided low-cost postal rates to newspapers in 1794 and created a national system of public broadcasting in 1967.

Opportunities to support making public media through policy will continue to emerge as the digital environment grows.

The hard part is raising political capital to be able to win battles over policies, regulatory strategies, and enforcement to structure and fund the media environment. Publics will have to mobilize to demand of their elected officials, their regulators, their communications service providers, and their media entities the platforms, services, and opportunities to be able to use and make media for public knowledge and action.

We live in a time when we are connected by information networks as never before. The possibilities are boundless. How will they actually develop? The growth of commercial digital media needs to go hand-in-hand with the nurturing of public media opportunities and practices. Public media incentives and practices are investments in the public health of a democratic society.

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*Patricia Aufderheide is a professor in the School of Communication at American University in Washington, D.C., and founder-director of the Center for Social Media there. Jessica Clark directs the Future of Public Media Project, funded by the Ford Foundation, at the Center for Social Media.*

# The Ethics and Politics of Professions

by Albert W. Dzur

*“The gap between professionalized politics and a mass public is perhaps greater now than it was.”*

As Adele Haber lay in a hospital bed staring at the ceiling, down the hall a team of doctors and ethicists were discussing whether she should live or die. The team, at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, is part of a program ... that aims to resolve medical conflicts at the end of life.

In the waiting room of the pulmonary care unit, where a small window air conditioner struggled against the heat, members of the medical staff gathered that Tuesday afternoon to discuss Mrs. Haber's case. The team included ethicists and staff members working with the patient. Nancy Neveloff Dubler [the director of bioethics at Montefiore] led the meeting with a blend of warmth and briskness, drawing out each participant in search of a consensus.

*John Schwartz, “A Team Effort to Resolve Family Bedside Conflicts,” New York Times, July 4, 2005.*

On a sunny Saturday ... citizens streamed into an auditorium on the University of Pennsylvania campus, wending their way around television trucks and a maze of wires. Inside, seated on a stage, were the five candidates for the Democratic nomination for mayor of Philadelphia.

The questioners this night would not be the usual blow-dried television anchors and print journalists in scruffy shoes. They would be citizens, clutching index cards in their hands. On each card was written a question that represented the fruit of four months of public deliberation involving more than 600 citizens and reaching into every corner of a city that is famed as a

mosaic of neighborhoods. Citizen Voices was one newspaper's [the *Philadelphia Inquirer*] attempt to engage a cross-section of a diverse city in a yearlong civic conversation.

*Michelle Charles, Harris Sokoloff, and Chris Satullo, "Electoral Deliberation and Public Journalism," in The Deliberative Democracy Handbook, ed. John Gastil and Peter Levine.*

Police caught Craig Langsdorf urinating behind a trash bin last July in downtown Minneapolis. He'd been out drinking with friends, was walking to his car and, well, he had to go.

For his offense, Langsdorf could have pleaded guilty, paid a fine and gone on his way with a petty crime on his record. Instead, he chose to face upset neighbors, take responsibility for his actions, and clean urine off the loading dock of his downtown workplace.

Over two years, this sort of justice has been used ... under a program of the Central City Neighborhoods Partnership, a coalition of neighborhood groups in Minneapolis.

*James Walsh, "Restorative Justice Program in Minneapolis Showing Results," Minneapolis Star Tribune, February 16, 2000.*



All across the country, similar efforts by reform-minded professionals are bridging gaps between the lay public and key social institutions traditionally dominated by professionals—hospitals and clinics, newspapers and broadcast studios, courtrooms and corrections facilities.

Why have doctors, nurses, and hospital and clinic administrators carved out an institutional place for laypeople incompetent to treat but well equipped to discuss ethical problems related to patient care and institutional standards? Why have these bearers of considerable power over human lives chosen to share some of that power not just sporadically but daily as a feature of organizational life?

Why have journalists, editors, and newspaper owners conducted public forums designed to foster conversations about Social Security, welfare reform, economic policy, and other current topics? Why have they pressed one another to include the voices of laypeople prominently in their stories, voices unaffiliated with the world of state and national capitals, not officials, not business representatives, not political operatives, not academics well versed in the public policy concern of the week?

Why have judges, defense attorneys, prosecutors, and corrections administrators sought out citizen boards to hear some kinds of criminal offenses? Why have they decided to share some of their authority and include members of the lay public in discharging some of the responsibility of keeping the public safe and doing justice?

There is a fragmented but forceful reform movement in a number of socially and politically significant professions that deserves a good name. I call it "democratic professionalism" because bioethics, public journalism,

and restorative justice reformers are drawing new attention to the democratic significance of professional domains, such as hospitals and clinics, newspapers and television stations, courtrooms and corrections facilities, and to

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## Democratic professionals are fascinating bridge agents.

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the fact that these are public places in which members of the public can share authority over tasks that affect them. Far from a deprofessionalization or antiinstitution movement, these reformers still value the specific, specialized knowledge of the seasoned journalist and editor, well-studied and practiced physician, and well-trained and experienced judge and attorney. As they try to be more democratic and help laypeople gain useful civic skills, they also seek to transform ossified conceptions of professionalism, but they are in no way antiprofessional.

The questions stated previously are political, ethical, and practical questions about the status of contemporary professionalism. From the perspective of political science and political theory, the democratic professionals in journalism, criminal justice, medicine, and elsewhere are fascinating bridge agents—people who can mediate between complex institutions and members of the lay public who lack hands-on knowledge of these institutions and the political issues related to them. Though professions, professionals, and ideals of professionalism are not presently studied by political scientists and political theorists, for reasons I will suggest shortly, they ought to be included prominently in the burgeoning research on civic engagement and public deliberation.

From the perspective of those generally interested in the ethics of professions, “democratic professionals” suggest a new way of approaching traditional questions about the specific social responsibilities of journalists, lawyers, doctors, and others—one that draws attention to the civic and democratic nature of these responsibilities. Reform-minded journalists, for example, write about the civic responsibilities of journalists to ensure greater accountability of elected officials to citizens. But they also claim a democratic responsibility to include citizens in dialogue about what, exactly, the social responsibilities of journalists are. This is an exciting shift in focus for professional ethics, I believe, that emphasizes the public justification of normative issues that are currently private and extremely academic.

From the perspective of professionals themselves, the new model of professionalism suggested by reformers is both challenging and rewarding. At a time when even traditional professions are losing ground in public opinion, democratic professionalism shows how to regain trust, respect, and perhaps even authority. By sharing in some of the experiences of



the journalist, physician, judge, or prosecutor, lay citizens come to recognize the complexity of these roles and better discern what good reporting, doctoring, or judging looks like. Yet sharing tasks and authority pose difficult trade-offs for democratic professionals, who now hold themselves to both professional and democratic standards of conduct.

**T**he role of those with specialized knowledge in modern democracy has been an unresolved issue since public intellectuals began to confront it in the Progressive Era. Most recognized the necessity for specialists in applied sciences, such as engineering, and applied social sciences, such as economics, to be engaged in policy implementation, if not policymaking, in the wake of the massive economic and social changes of industrialization and urbanism. Intellectuals like John Dewey, Herbert Croly, and Walter Lippmann had come to question the modern relevance of old-fashioned ideals of face-to-face democracy—in Dewey’s words, the “local town-meeting practices and ideas” that still had a hold on the hearts of Progressives. Some proposed a new ideal of professionalism grounded in natural and social science methods and the special training needed to solve complex social and economic problems but also dedicated to public well-being and responsive to public opinion. As Woodrow Wilson wrote in his early contribution to this discussion, “The ideal for us is a civil service cultured and self-sufficient enough to act with sense and vigor, and yet so intimately connected with the popular thought, by means of elections and constant public counsel, as to find arbitrariness or class spirit quite out of the question.” Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann proposed that such a professionalized cadre of policy specialists and civil

servants, if removed somewhat from the democratic political process and allowed to take their cues from their professional training, experience, and fellow colleagues, would be uniquely capable of solving social problems

## Sharing tasks and authority pose difficult trade-offs.

and making difficult policy choices in the best interests of the public, even if the public did not immediately recognize this. For Croly and Lippmann, as with Wilson before them, popular elections would ensure that these professionals and those who appointed them could be held accountable for their policy failures.

Other Progressive Era intellectuals like John Dewey, though sympathetic to the new ideal of public-spirited professionalism, worried considerably about the gulf separating these specialists and the rank-and-file citizens purportedly served by them. If the outcomes



of American democracy were determined by experts behind closed doors, then to what extent could the political processes open to laypeople, such as elections, really give voice to the collective interests of the public? The horn

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## The professions have been neglected in political theory.

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of the dilemma facing Dewey, however, was the obvious problem, as he was quick to point out, that the American mass public was too “scattered, mobile, and manifold” to follow policy deliberations or even to determine what its public interests were in order to voice them to policymakers. Even policy deliberation on issues that directly affect citizens, such as public transportation, admitted Dewey, could hardly be done in public by the public given “the very size, heterogeneity, and mobility of urban populations” and “the technical character of the engineering problems” involved.



Dewey’s contribution to this debate was to conceptualize the democratic professional, the applied social scientist, the engineer, the teacher, and the reporter who worked *with* rather than *for* the public, who *facilitated* public understanding and practical abilities rather than *led* the public. Dewey’s thoughts on professionalism help us understand the significance of current reform movements and assess their strengths and weaknesses, but they are far from contemporary theories of professionalism and democracy.

The gap between professionalized politics in American democracy and a mass public that is only minimally participatory and only barely knowledgeable about public affairs and political institutions is perhaps even greater now than it was in the Progressive Era. As in that period, scholars and intellectuals are pressing for new conceptions of democracy that can bridge this gap. Unlike the Progressive Era, however, professions, professionals, and ideals of professionalism barely appear in contemporary discourse as key actors. In part, this is due to the negative connotations of professionalism in relation to democracy—elitism, technocracy, inequality, superior knowledge, hierarchy, meritocracy. More important as a reason for neglect, however, is a disciplinary ignorance of professions in political science.

The professions have been neglected in political theory with negative consequences for the field in general and for the development of democratic theory in particular. To see this, we do not have to fully agree with Talcott Parsons that the professional complex is the “crucial structural development in 20th-century society,” something he believed had displaced the state and the “capitalistic organization of the economy.” We need only recognize, as many Progressive Era intellectuals did, the

political implications of professional knowledge and practice.

The function, status, and authority of professional work have not been even minor topics in political theory. There is no doubt that political theorists have dealt with issues that overlap professional domains. Michel Foucault's treatments of disciplinary power and Jürgen Habermas's concern for instrumental rationality in the system world are two strong examples. However, political theorists have not analyzed the specificity—what Emile Durkheim would call the “moral particularism”—of professional activity in public life. They neglect to see professions as political agents separate from other powerful economic and political organizations, particularized in their functional and associational differences from each other (e.g., the political agency of law is different from medicine in part because of the different functional roles and the different organizational histories of the two professions), and as mediating between self, other, and group in ways that have both harmful and beneficial consequences for democracy.

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## Citizens have become bystanders to collective decisions.

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Even though professional practices are marked by relations of power and authority and raise questions of proper representation and accountability,—all central concepts for political theorists—professional ethics has come to be seen as primarily the jurisdiction of philosophers rather than political theorists.

More generally, too, professional practices raise issues of power and authority relevant to democratic citizenship that have been



left largely untreated by philosophers of the professions.

Contemporary political theory has taken what some call a “deliberative turn.” Many scholars believe that features of contemporary politics, such as declining citizen participation, are signs of deep alienation from collective decision making. As citizens have become bystanders to collective decisions, they have become distanced from one another and have lost opportunities for advancing public goods. The distance between citizens reduces awareness of others’ lives and lessens engagement in the social practices that would allow citizens to learn how others different from them in class, region, race, and gender are affected by collective decisions.

The solution for many scholars is public deliberation in which collective decisions are more closely tied to public forums marked by equality, active participation, and reasonableness. So far, students of public deliberation have largely ignored a crucial dimension of the intermediary realm between individual and state in which professions that possess the power to distract, encourage, limit, and inform democratic deliberation exist. Moreover, some of the most aggressive current efforts at fostering public deliberation are located in just

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this intermediary realm. A closer relation between political theory and professions would allow professional ethics to catch up with the developments like those illustrated by our ini-

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## Professionalism has a civic dimension.

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tial snapshots of increased lay participation in professional decisions and activities. Reform-minded professionals show a growing awareness of how the institutions and practices they so strongly influence—the hospitals and clinics, the newspapers and news stations, the court rooms and correctional facilities—can either exclude or engage lay members of the public and can either play a disempowering or empowering function in American democracy.

Rightly understood, professionalism has a civic dimension. Such civic roles both strengthen the legitimacy of professional

authority and render that authority more transparent and more vulnerable to public influence. Once it is understood that professionals can help mobilize and inform citizen participation inside and outside spheres of professional authority, many of the negative, counterdemocratic connotations of professionalism fall away. Indeed, rightly understood, democratic professionals are some of the best candidates today for bolstering the deliberative democracy urged by contemporary commentators. This is not to ask professionals to substitute political for occupational duties but rather to become aware of, as well as enlarge and enrich, the already existing connections between professional and democratic practice.

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*Albert W. Dzur is associate professor of political science and senior research fellow at the Social Philosophy & Policy Center, Bowling Green State University. This essay was adapted from his book, Democratic Professionalism, published by Penn State Press.*

## ... afterthoughts

by David Mathews

*“There is a deeper stratum of democracy, more civic than institutional politics and more political than civil society.”*

**I**n a recent *Review*, I wrote about Don, Mary, and their neighbors on the Gulf Coast who wanted to come together to rebuild after their community was devastated by hurricane Katrina. Over the years, in different communities facing similar challenges, Kettering has seen that same impulse—to join forces. Many citizens want a stronger hand in shaping their future and greater control over their lives in the face of a faltering economy, increasing threats to the environment, or alarming crime rates. Their political instincts tell them they have to join forces and act as a community in order to combat such problems.

While outside assistance is appreciated, Don and Mary aren't just asking for help or for assurances that others will take care of them. They and their neighbors want to be more in charge *themselves*. In order to do that, they have to be able to act and make things that will benefit their community. If the threat is reoccurring hurricanes, these “things” could be a neighborhood plan for mutual assistance before relief agencies arrive. Or if the danger comes from drug dealers who prey on children walking home from school, they could be a schedule for adults to patrol the streets.

I mention citizens like Don and Mary because the Kettering Foundation works for them. Of course, we are a research organization, but the objective of our research is to provide insights about how people can make the sound decisions that will lead to effective collective action, both with other citizens as well as with governments and major institutions.

The articles in this issue have to do with the media and journalists, and while we don't study journalism or any other profession, we

do want to know how journalists understand the work that people like Mary and Don do. We also want to know what journalists think are the implications in the work of citizens for their own work as professionals. We listen, too, to physicians, public administrators, and lawyers. And we talk to professionals in a wide range of institutions, from public schools, colleges, and universities, to NGOs and foundations. What do these professionals think citizens are supposed to do, other than the obvious: vote, pay taxes, and obey laws? As Albert Dzur notes in his closing essay, what professionals think and how their work is aligned with the work of citizens is important.

**M**ost professionals believe in serving democracy, but the kind of democracy they have in mind varies considerably when it comes to the role of citizens. The citizens may voice opinions yet not actually produce anything through their collective efforts. That is unfortunate, because if the work that citizens do to rule themselves—the work that gives them the ability to shape the future—isn't recognized, the concept of democracy that will prevail in a profession will be limited.

There are signs that this limitation is already occurring, not because professionals intend to weaken democracy, but because of a number of influences now coming to bear on the media and other institutions. According to a recent report, done for Kettering by the Harwood Institute, entitled *The Organization-First Approach*, some of the nongovernmental organizations that Don and Mary might turn to are looking mostly inward, trying to demonstrate the impact of *their* programs, rather than looking outward to build civic capacity in communities. These organizations want to show measurable results, but building

civic capacity could make it difficult to prove that *their* interventions are the ones that led to progress.

Furthermore, citizen boards for institutions like public schools—which would appear to be naturally venues where people exercise control—can be obstacles rather than avenues if these boards see their role as representing the schools to the community rather than the community to the schools. Many boards, to their credit, have launched campaigns to reengage their communities and its citizens; yet even these campaigns often treat citizens merely as potential “supporters” for schools, rather than as actors in their own right, coproducers of education in concert with schools.

Institutions of higher education, also to their credit, are reaching out to citizens and communities with a multitude of services provided both by student volunteers and faculty with professional expertise. Yet here again, these civic engagement initiatives may not be in sync with the community building that democratically inclined citizens want to do. Although the sample was small, one recent study of university-community partnerships couldn't find any projects designed to build a capacity for self-rule.

Fortunately, there are countertrends. The Centers for Disease Control, for example, is among a group of professionals who realize that a resilient community is greater protection against natural disasters than well-stocked pantries. (Such resilience comes from the results of collective decision making and civic action.) Other professionals are trying to overcome institutional barriers that stand in the way of developing a more civic professionalism. In this *Review*, while Michael Remaley, David Holwerk, and Michael Skoler all recognize institutional barriers, they go on to discuss ways of overcoming them.

On the whole, however, the work that citizens can and must do doesn't seem to be on the radar screen of most professionals, whether they are journalists or in other fields—and more seems to be involved than just institutional barriers. Professionals certainly know people like Mary and Don, yet the political significance of what these citizens do may not be obvious because it doesn't fit the conventional definition of *politics*. In his book *Democratic Professionalism*, from which the essay we publish is excerpted, Albert Dzur suggests that the work that citizens do occurs at a level of politics other than the more familiar level, which is dominated by highly visible elections and much-publicized law-making. Don and Mary's work with their neighbors lacks the drama to be picked up by the "big media," despite the priority they give to local news, David Holwerk observes.

On a more positive note, Noëlle McAfee points out that new media are being created that might be more useful to citizens coming together *in* communities to *build* communities. She describes these as the "little media," and Patricia Aufderheide and Jessica Clark see such media as a vehicle "for public knowledge and action." It will be interesting to see what concept of democracy and citizenship in fact becomes fostered in this emerging media.

**T**his *Review's* discussion of democracy at two levels contributes to the foundation's investigation of "the politics that isn't called politics." We think there is a deeper stratum of democracy that is more civic than the grass roots of institutional politics and more political than civil society. Just as there are wetlands in our physical environment, we suspect that there are wetlands for political life. This is where the citizens who are struggling to build resilient

communities live and work. We do *not* assume, however, that everything in the wetlands of politics is beneficial, nor that everything that happens at the institutional level (where professionals have a prominent role) is bad. The comparison to physical wetlands has been useful in describing our findings because these acres of mud and matted vegetation, once overlooked and unappreciated, are now recognized as indispensable to life everywhere. Swamps along the Gulf Coast, for example, were filled in by developers, and the barrier islands were destroyed when shipping channels were dug through them. The consequences were disastrous: sea life that bred in the swamps died off, and coastal cities were exposed to the full fury of hurricanes.

The wetlands of politics play roles similar to swamps and barrier islands. They spawn political life in the seedbeds of kinship groups and social gatherings, and they protect people against the ravages of natural disasters—even repression and war. Yet their structures, like informal gatherings, and ad hoc associations, are easy to dismiss because they are so fluid. And the banter that goes on when people mull over the meaning of their everyday experiences may seem insignificant when compared with professional analysis and partisan debate. Even though a standard for politics may be what happens in elections, legislative bodies, and courts, what happens in the political wetlands has both intrinsic value and importance to politics at the institutional level. Talking over the meaning of everyday experiences in grocery stores and coffee shops can be a wellspring of public decision making; connections made in informal gatherings can become the basis for political networks; and ad hoc associations could evolve into civic organizations. If without vibrant wetlands, our physical environment suffers, the same seems true of political wetlands.

During this past year, we have sharpened our understanding of the distinctive characteristics of the political wetlands, which we see as more organic than institutional. For instance, in organic politics, citizens are defined by what they do with other citizens in collaborative, civic work. That is different from the way citizens are defined in institutional politics, by what they do as voters, taxpayers, consumers, supporters, and critics.

In organic politics, change occurs as a result of civic or collective learning. This civic learning isn't about acquiring information; it is learning as a political mode. In the politics of learning, the citizenry is both the agent and the object of the learning. People learn through experimentation, trying what seems best and then assessing the results for the next experiment. Did we have the most complete definition of the problem? Did we consider all that was truly valuable to us? Did we have all the options on the table? Did we weigh the pros and cons fairly? Did we identify the resources that might help us? Did we organize our efforts so they were mutually reinforcing?

We have noticed that communities that are resilient in the face of adversity are eager learners. They are somewhat like inventors in that they pay attention to what others are doing; but they don't imitate, they create. They have learned how to fail successfully; they know how to benefit from their mistakes.

Learning to invent suggests the ability to redefine problems, to name them in ways that open the door to new approaches and new actors. We've seen this occur during deliberative decision making because the first and ever-present questions are, what is the problem? what does it mean to us? why do we care? what is deeply valuable that is at stake? As people struggle with these questions, the name of the problem changes: it expands to include

different people's experiences and concerns. And this change promotes innovative action.

So in this *Review*, Michael Remaley advises journalists to pay more attention to public deliberation, because it plays a key role in civic learning—so much so that the ancient Greeks called it “the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act.” While there are many forms of deliberation going on at different levels of politics from the Supreme Court to Don and Mary's decision making with their neighbors, public deliberation is an organic practice. We have been surprised to see deliberation written off as simply a mode for civil discourse that has no relation to action, or that is, confined to well-educated, affluent citizens with a virtuous bent. Officials in the Pennsylvania prison system, who have encouraged deliberative forums among inmates on issues that prisoners will face when they are released, would take exception to this characterization; so would tenants' associations that hold deliberative forums. The decisions citizens make about what their community *should* look like evoke serious, value-laden disagreements that can't be resolved by negotiating, mediating, or even voting. These decisions require the sound collective judgment that can come from public deliberation.

**I**f organic practices in the “political wetlands,” then, can enrich democratic politics through civic learning, if they can be sources of innovation, and if they can provide opportunities for generating the sound judgment needed to inform the work of citizens, what are the implications for professionals and the institutions they direct? Professionals and their institutions don't necessarily have to add to what they ordinarily do in order to better align their routines with the work of a democratic citizenry. They might, however, consider doing what they do differently.

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Take the matter of aligning institutional routines with work that citizens have to do in order to make sound decisions—that is, decisions consistent with what people consider most valuable. Professionals might pay more attention to how citizens name problems when they deliberate. The names that people give to problems reflect the things they hold dear and their fundamental concerns, their highest hopes and deepest fears as human beings: being safe from danger, being treated fairly, being free to act as they see best. These names are different from those that people use when they are acting as professionals and politicians. Citizens, for example, want to feel that they are secure in their homes, and this feeling of well-being is less quantifiable but more compelling than the statistics professionals use to describe crime. Michael Skoler points out how important such intangibles are in the way people experience and name issues—and how easily these subtleties are overlooked by journalists. Of course, professionals shouldn't forgo statistical data and precise terminology; they could, however, be more open to the names that people use and what citizens hold dear.

When editor of the *Virginian-Pilot*, the late Cole Campbell encouraged his reporters to listen to the way people named their problems in living room interviews. What Campbell heard led him to two simple but profound questions: what do people need to know in order to govern themselves? and how do they come to know it? These questions take journalists straight into the political wetlands. Citizens don't come to know what they need to know in the same way that professionals do. Recognizing this difference has implications for the professionals who create expert knowledge, as well as those who disseminate it. Professionals create knowledge by vigorous

scientific investigations. That is unquestionably necessary and useful. Yet it isn't sufficient to answer the questions citizens face, which are normative or moral, not technical. These are questions of what we *should* do, and they are matters of judgment. Facts alone won't provide answers. The knowledge that informs this judgment has to be socially constructed ... in deliberation.

What role, then, might journalists play in the creation of this knowledge? Campbell knew this was a tough question because it challenged the dominant paradigm of his profession, which (as he pointed out in the *Winter 2007 Review*) presumes "that someone always knows the truth about complex issues, and the public interest is served when journalists faithfully fulfill their role in transmitting expert truth to the public." This professional paradigm doesn't recognize the knowledge that citizens construct out of their experiences and what they hold dear. So the professional paradigm is misaligned with the democratic practice of creating what the Greeks called "practical wisdom."

Campbell's question hasn't been fully answered; nor has the misalignment of public with professional routines been fully addressed. That probably won't happen until civically inclined journalists are able to experiment more with ways to augment organic practices like public deliberation. The same is true for other professions. Initial experiments can be done simply and inexpensively; they can start inside people's heads. Professionals can explore questions like, "if our job is to serve the public and there is no public, what is our job?" Or, more straightforwardly, professionals can ask, "what is the work of public citizens and what impact are we having on it?" These questions were implicit in the issues Campbell was raising. Fortunately, journalists in the

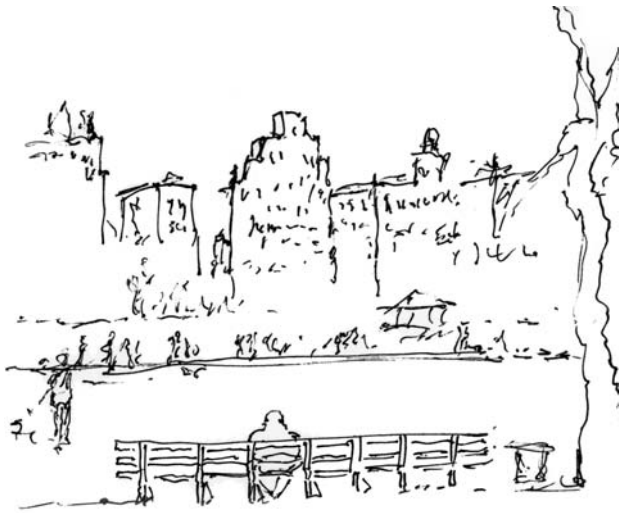
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United States and in other countries like South Africa, Colombia, and Kenya are taking up Campbell's quest, because democratic movements in those countries require citizens to act and make things. Though they may be continents away from Mary and Don, these experiments

may help them and every other community that sees the need for people to come together, as a community, to sustain the community.

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*David Mathews is president of the  
Kettering Foundation.*







200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799 (937) 434-7300

444 North Capitol Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478

6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016 (212) 686-7016