THE CONVERSATION OF JOURNALISM

COMMUNICATION, COMMUNITY, AND NEWS

Rob Anderson, Robert Dardenne
and George M. Killenberg

journalists will forever be branded as subversives or as governmental apologists.

The conversation of journalism is necessarily a conversation about journalism in which no answers are automatic or easy. Certainly, the remainder of this book will not package and peddle answers. In the spirit of questioning that Gadamer (1982) says underlies all dialogue, however, we hope to inquire, probe, and offer alternate perspectives on how journalism can contribute to a society that ultimately will attempt to talk with itself, whether or not journalists participate.

3

News and Realities: Exploring Practice and Promise

News is what people talk about, and news makes people talk. Yet newspapers publish millions of words that stimulate little talk and no interest, and to the extent that people quit reading or attending to the news, that is a profound dilemma. News, as we have come to know it, fails to engage many people, which they acknowledge by not buying papers, not watching traditional network news shows, flocking to radio talk shows, buying alternative publications, and watching pseudo–news shows and "reality" programs on TV.

Newspapers in the last decade fluffed up graphics, redesigned pages and sections, and started programs designed to get the public involved. Some reorganized newsrooms to get more and different perspectives and ideas and redistribute work loads and responsibilities. Several have cut back international, national, and state reporting to concentrate their resources on local and community news. Projects abound that attempt to put the paper in touch with its own readers and community, and thus to engage the public in a conversation.

Eventually, these efforts may succeed and spread. In the meantime, most current news looks a great deal like news has looked

since the Penny Press. Those who create and produce it seem bound by persistent conventions, traditions, definitions, and routines and fated to repeat their histories and perpetuate their mistakes. It is not for lack of criticism. Will Irwin, Walter Lippmann, Louis Brandeis, Upton Sinclair, the Kerner and Hutchins commissions, H. L. Mencken, A. J. Liebling, I. F. Stone, and others have pointed out numerous contradictions, absurdities, inequities, biases, and assorted conscious and unconscious problems in news.

Privacy, press arrogance, education of reporters, truth, fact, objectivity, ethics, and many other major issues have been debated for decades. Insightful documents, such as the report on mass communication by the Commission on Freedom of the Press (Leigh, 1974), have explored the strengths and weaknesses, offering guidelines and directions for a more diverse, responsive, and responsible mass communication environment. It is unfair to say the press ignores all criticism because, like news, criticism's complexity makes it difficult to determine what is worth considering.

This chapter explores some of the conventional, objective, commercial, and ideological characteristics of news and suggests some of their influences. Despite efforts to change, news remains largely confined to conventional boundaries. News emphasizes government and authority, leaders and celebrities, thereby limiting its range and access. It has a comfortable familiarity reinforced through consistent structure, presentation, and stereotype.

objecti vity

The most pervasive claim made about U.S. news is its supposed objectivity. Beyond certain verifiable facts, however, news is not and cannot be objective in the sense that it is without human bias, although it can and must be fair. Forcing news into this objective mold drastically limits its content and expression, discouraging and devaluing participation by the public journalism purports to serve.

News in a capitalist society cannot escape influences from the bottom line. Economic considerations shape the form, content, and presentation of news, though the extent of such influences is usually excluded from the news itself. Recognizing the vast economic influences and making them part of the conversation can help journalists and the public understand and perhaps modify the role of economic decision making in news.

Critics have analyzed news from various political and ideological perspectives with mixed results. Most, in one form or another, argue that news reflects and therefore reinforces the dominant ideology, in part by underestimating its audience. Vast changes in information technology, altered attitudes about democratic participation, and an uncertain economy may have opened the way for a different kind of journalism, one that encourages and legitimizes participation by citizens rather than informs and entertains consumers.

BOUNDARIES: OLD AND NEW

To say news is complex understates the problem. Every semester, journalism students struggle through assignments to "define news," handing them in to professors who are themselves unsure how to define news. Those students generally rely on the same conventional wisdom, reiterating qualities or attributes in virtually every news-reporting textbook and reporter's head—timeliness, proximity, consequence, conflict, prominence, and human interest. Some academic treatises on news offer more sophisticated terms and explanations, but the result, in most cases, is consistently conventional news.

Definitions of news inexorably lead to the way in which the press reports news and the content of the news it reports. Textbook definitions encourage us to think about surface phenomena: something dramatic, emotional, that happened recently, close by, involving or affecting people of importance or large sums of money or many people. Reporters, in fact, cover the news, as, for example, paint covers the basement wall: a thin, functional, perhaps decorative, surface layer hides whatever is underneath. In a way, the attributes internalized by reporters provide only minimal criteria for news. The attributes, at least as they are taught in classrooms, simplify news decisions, usually resulting in simplistic news. Once

an event or issue passes the threshold that makes it news, reporters need not explore further (although, of course, some do).

Critics often attack news for what it is not, which leaves vast areas vulnerable to attack. If a dog biting a man is not news but a man biting a dog is, then news is what is odd or different; what is normal or the same is not newsworthy. That means that most of life is not news and, therefore, rarely becomes part of the public conversation. If Walter Lippmann (1922) correctly described news as the spotlight, then most of life remains in the dark. If news is just what breaks the surface, then what remains below will go untold or undetected. If news is timely, then much of what happened the day before yesterday is not news. If news is important or significant, then the unimportant or insignificant do not qualify. That means, in turn, that most of what people do is considered unimportant and insignificant. If news focuses on conflict and change, then peace and stability are not news. If news is basically "what went wrong," then most of what is right will not make the news. If most news is made by people who are important, then the rest of us are unimportant because, by definition, we rarely make news. Are we willing to live with the social consequences of these messages?

Hartley (1982) defined news in terms of *frequency*, the timespan of both events and their meanings; *threshold*, the size of an event; *unambiguity*, clarity of an event; *meaningfulness*, cultural proximity or relevance; *consonance*, predictability of or desire for an event; and *unexpectedness*, an event's unpredictability or rarity. These somewhat different perspectives still describe conventional news—quick, big enough to be noticed, simple, culturally and socially relevant, and expected. A shoot-out in the street is more likely to be included in the news than a series of articles exploring conditions that might lead to community violence.

Even relatively complete lists never satisfactorily define what news is, though they are used to define its boundaries. Journalists use these and other conventions to judge newsworthiness. The attributes alone or in combination mean little. Timeliness, proximity, conflict, drama, or emotion, for example, could easily

apply to working-class families faced with economic, school, religious, and other crucial decisions, but the experience of ordinary people is rarely news, even though the decisions they must make are of great import. Their decisions become news if something happens to bring an issue or problem to the fore, such as a new government policy or a large protest. A family or families might be used to illustrate the dimensions of a problem in a news article, but rarely more than once, and then usually at the height of reporting of the issue. As other issues emerge to occupy the news, families still decide to declare bankruptcy, sacrifice a child's education for food on the table, or suffer through abuse or neglect, and they do so silently, often anonymously, and certainly without making news. They are the same decisions that once made news, consuming as many or more people, changing lives, rending families, draining finances, yet we do not call these private experiences news.

News necessarily excludes most people, just as it excludes most situations. It has focused primarily on *the important*, and it has defined "official," "authoritative," "widely known," and "expert" as such. In a sense, news has become society's stage, its everyday Broadway or Hollywood. It is filled with officials, socialites, celebrities, experts, authorities, leaders, people who speak for groups and organizations, deviates, lawbreakers, con artists, the rich and powerful. They fill the news because the usual attributes assigned to news and the way in which journalists use them require that the "usual suspects" be sources and subjects. A teacher's colon operation is not news, but a political leader's surgery is—only the latter is important by news definitions. Lunch at a local restaurant by an out-of-town welder is not news, but lunch at the same restaurant by a visiting movie star or other celebrity often is. The welder is an ordinary citizen whose visit is routine; the celebrity is, as Daniel Boorstin (1961) once wrote, a person who is well known for well-knownness, an "important" person whose visit is not routine but rather unexpected and novel.

The point is not that all colon operations and restaurant lunches should be news, but that we need to reexamine the shape of our

definitions. Why is the political leader's colon surgery news and the teacher's not? The politician is theoretically in a position of power and influence, and his or her life-threatening surgery could affect many people. Why is the celebrity's visit to the restaurant news and the welder's not? People have been taught to be curious about the celebrity because he or she is famous. Why is the celebrity famous? The fame comes from media attention. Curiously, our current situation is one in which the news must cover what has been legitimized as news by repeated past practice.

Most news outlets continually provide news similar to the leader's surgery and the celebrity's visit. News attributes and conventions almost require that these be reported, and conveniently, they are relatively simple and inexpensive, requiring little time or expertise. In each case, press agents might furnish almost all the information needed. But what of the teacher and the welder?

News recognizes the power and influence of politicians but not necessarily of teachers. Politicians are elected, make news, and presumed to have power; they serve a defined public in defined ways. The teacher is not widely known or in the same public ways accountable to the public; a teacher's successes and failures are difficult to measure and rarely publicized. However, when incremental and cumulative effects are considered, the teacher may be more influential than the politician, and all teachers combined may be more influential than all politicians combined. Nonetheless, the politician's operation is automatically presumed to be newsworthy and the teacher's is not.

The contributions of welders and celebrities are not parallel in the way that those of teachers and politicians are, though if we had to choose a world in which one role or the other immediately vanished, the decision would not be automatic. Furthermore, if the restaurant and the town depend on an influx of visitors, it is less easy to gauge the importance of the visits. While publicizing the celebrity's visit might encourage more people to visit, the welder represents all the people who do, or could, regularly visit.

By deciding what and who is news, the press emphasizes some values over others. We do not argue that news determines values,

because media content must be analyzed in the context of society, culture, and environment, yet news remains the most consistent source of information that people consider reliable, truthful, and accurate. Therefore, its values certainly affect and reflect our values as citizens. In the world of news, people with power, authority, and celebrity prevail over the weak, disenfranchised, and unknown. The rich prevail over the poor, the official over the unofficial, the knowledgeable over the ignorant, the smart over the stupid, the attractive over the plain, and the vocal over the voiceless. The important prevails over the common, the unexpected over the routine, the dramatic over the casual, and so forth, through the list of attributes. The news also bestows authority and defines and bestows importance in some cases, while at the same time, it withholds authority and importance in others.

Not everything can be news, so something has to be omitted. Perhaps the teacher's colon operation or the welder's trip to the restaurant should not be reported individually in the news, but that does not mean that the teacher, the welder, and so much of the rest of the public need be invisible, represented only as statistics, referred to as part of the "mass" audience (or as consumers, readers, or viewers). News outlets attempt to include "ordinary" people, but these often, unintentionally yet uncomfortably, mimic television's "Real People" or home video programs in which ordinary people do weird things for a few seconds of fame. Most news outlets have not realized their potential to engage individual members of the public, nor have they recognized people's potential for valuable, vital, and necessary contributions to the conversation of news.

We do not contend that all mundane events be defined as "news," but only that the activities and talk of everyday people should be given greater recognition as important. News can, and perhaps should, be about what people do: the human condition or human affairs. Given a voice, people become part of the conversation. Many are excluded now, in part because definitions of news and people's perceptions of it remain encapsulated in traditional molds. Public affairs reporting involves affairs of the public, but

usually from a perspective of government, business, or the institution. Just as the study of complex organizations has evolved from an almost exclusive focus on management decision making to a newer, more inclusive focus on the everyday talk that sustains what is termed "organizational culture," so, too, must news temper its infatuation with politicians and celebrities. "Public affairs" as "human affairs"—news of the human condition—directs emphasis unmistakably to the things people do to give meaning to their lives—to their obstacles and triumphs—and broadens the scope of what can be reported as news.

A conversation of journalism opens up possibilities far beyond official actions of government bodies, political leaders, and the actions of large organizations and institutions. Such news reporting adjusts our notions of importance, proximity, timeliness, and other traditional attributes. Events might be important not in and of themselves, but because they illustrate what people endure or celebrate daily, and people might be important not because they are officials, leaders, or authorities, but because they are interlocking parts of an event. If the news made a place for people's enduring struggles, their little triumphs, and the daily interactions that give their lives meaning—their humanity—then proximity might become more than just physical or geographic closeness, as people are tied together by more than space. Moreover, the moments illustrating or even defining our humanity—absorbing insults, facing up to authorities, signing up for or leaving welfare, getting mugged, passing the high school equivalency exam, getting a loan, moving, falling in or out of love—are important not because they just happened, but because they speak to our values and our lives, no matter when they occurred. In contrast to the usual news criteria, this approach emphasizes nontraditional attributes such as perspective, context, completeness, and enduring human values.

Newspapers in the late 1700s and early 1800s published stories that taught lessons about greed, love, faith, constancy, and other qualities of being human. The stories often had little or no anchoring in time, and if true, could have happened the previous week,

year, or century. They were not important because they were recent, timely, or even true (although most readers no doubt thought them so); they were important for their content, and the lessons or morals derived from it. That is, they were published to contribute to a better, more interactive public—not because of a simple impulse to *report* what happened. Because they were published in newspapers, we study them as news, and as news, they represent a far different definition of what is important than news today.

Offering insights into the human condition has to be more than a feature or story here and there. We cannot say: "OK, here's the story on the human condition. Now we don't have to do that again for awhile." Reporting human affairs brings in a multitude of voices, including the paper's own, as part of a conversation about people and how they survive or thrive in the community. Providing insights into the human condition is different from providing the truth about the government, providing a complete record of the city council meeting, or doing many other things that fall under traditional definitions of journalism. We need not abandon conventional news, but we can supplement it and remove it from its pedestal.

Suggestions that reporters rely less on official sources and more on ordinary people, less on policymakers and more on people affected by the policies, often go nowhere because it is impossible to find people who accurately can speak for all women, all blacks, all white males (though it is all too easy to find those who *will* do so). The press would not need so many official statements or spokespeople if indeed news were seen as helping provide context for the human condition. The press needs official statements from official people when it hands down official versions. Even then, it is ludicrous to allow one spokesperson, or even several, to sum up the opinions of all black or white people, all brown, yellow, or red people, all women, all gun owners, or any group. Nonetheless, news organizations validate, cultivate, and depend on a handful of such representatives because the definitions and conventions of news require it.

Moving away from the tyranny of official sources requires bringing more diversity into the news arena. It means supplementing the official perspective (sometimes seen as the true or even only perspective) with several others. A conversational journalism is a pluralistic journalism.

Journalism should provide people with opportunities to see familiar things, governmental actions and pronouncements, for example, in fresh and unfamiliar ways. Making the familiar strange is generally a province of art. News tends to make almost everything familiar by enveloping the novel with familiar forms and contexts. It might be argued that this is one of the appeals of news as it appears in newspapers and television. Despite mayhem, violence, revolution, and chaos in the world, news is constant, consistent, and orderly—everything has its place and little happens to change that. The paper is in the yard or mailbox at the same time each morning. It is comforting to know that the same kinds of articles will be in the same sections, or in the same order on television, day after day, week after week, and month after month, no matter what happens. The world is skewed and crazy, but the packaging and presentation of news is orderly and sane. Articles, too, fall into familiar, comforting, rhythms and patterns, with the most important information in the first paragraph and the least important in the last.

In its content as well, news offers pronounced villains and heroes, ostensibly as the source of most of our bad and good fortune. The news often breaks exceedingly complex issues, such as inflation, economic growth, civil rights, health care, into digestible pieces characterized by personal conflict and motivation. We do not have to understand inflation if we can know the personalities promoting opposing policies designed to affect inflation. Ross Perot voters in the 1992 presidential election, for instance, told interviewers they were not sure what Perot would *do* about the economy if elected—but that they were sure he was the kind of man to back his promises to "get under the hood." Further, certain words serve as codes to evoke certain images: "urban renewal," "transitional neighborhood," "Korean shopkeeper," "Jew," "football player," "supermom," "corporate executive." Stereotypes, while necessary, provide easy shortcuts, and whether conscious or unconscious, they contribute to the familiarity and comfort of the news environment. Writers can avoid elaborate explanations by plugging in a code word or stereotype to relay messages that many people might readily understand (though not all in the same way).

News is comfortable, for those who write it and for those who read or hear it. By making it less familiar, breaking old rules, and moving outside old formulas, we make it less comfortable, which might be dangerous, if exciting. News will not usually be art, but news that breaks away from conventions and traditions might creatively infuse new perspectives into old debates, stir thoughts, and invite wider participation in the public drama.

BEYOND THE OBJECTIFICATION OF NEWS

Objectivity is the enduring myth of journalism. Its shrouded origins have never clearly emerged from the hundreds of studies and discussions of wire services, the telegraph, the scientific method, capitalistic enterprise, the search for community, and many other factors that no doubt contributed to the evolution of objective news in the United States. Journalists struggle to provide objective news—news with as little bias and as much "truth" as possible. This brings up philosophical, and other, dilemmas. Can news or any other human communication be objective or without bias? What do we mean by truth?

Most journalists think that news is objective; they would argue that they try to be as unbiased as possible. Moreover, though they might not think about it in these terms, most see a world that has an objective reality—a world that has a concrete truth that can be reported faithfully and perhaps even reflected or mirrored. Consequently, when reporters cover school board meetings, for example, they return with articles that they think come close to reflecting "what happened" at those meetings. They believe the meetings were news events and that by covering them, they gathered the news and wrote articles that presented what happened truthfully,

accurately, and fairly, thereby providing their readers with an objective record of the meetings.

Objectivity

From another perspective, we might assume that reporters cannot be objective because no objective reality exists ready to be gathered. Instead, reality is composed of *human perceptions* of what is happening. In what social scientists refer to as the social construction of reality, journalists create or produce news; the reporter's decisions determine what to report, who to interview, what to ask, what to record, what to include in the article, what to emphasize, and so forth. Journalists essentially construct the article, and therefore the news. They do not fabricate its raw materials, but they do shape and determine, every step of the way, what is told and what is not.

Whatever constitutes reality does not present itself in forms convenient for mass media news, for human events seldom happen in most-to-least important order and generally lack clear beginnings, middles, and ends. These are, essentially, artificially created from the existing chaos of facts, assertions, events, pseudo-events (made only to be reproduced), emotions, and so forth. Even a life cycle is not a complete "story," though the biography might start at birth and end at death, because important elements, including influences on the subject of the biography, occur before birth and after death. A lifetime is not a time line. A lifetime is unfathomably complex, webbed with myriad events, thoughts, obstacles, emotions, values, attitudes, and interlocking influences. A biographer builds an account out of choices made from available versions of different negotiated realities, which accounts for drastically conflicting interpretations of the same life by different biographers.

In many ways, the reporter faces a comparable task after attending the school board meeting, which is itself not a complete "story," even though the news article might "cover" its duration. But what happened before the meeting might affect, or even determine, some happenings at the meeting. In addition, what happens at public meetings affects people, sometimes drastically, well beyond the physical site of the meeting and well beyond any reporter's ability to anticipate the outcome. Some articles, despite

inherent difficulties and complexities, attempt to reflect such circumstances, but too many define the news narrowly as *what happens during the meeting*. Reporters, relying on news values, tradition, convention, routines, practice, perception, socialization, training, and sometimes ideology, deem certain items important and others not, deciding which are worth reporting. Often, besides reporting actions taken, the article bears little resemblance to the actual meeting, which can include long, boring interludes, comments by audience members labeled as crackpots, asides from one board member to another, outbursts of laughter, and any number of other things that are never recorded. In that sense, the person's life and the school board meeting, no matter how neat and complete they seem, must be constructed by a variety of journalistic decisions before they appear as a biography or news article. That reporters sometimes efficiently, automatically, and unthinkingly accomplish this construction of news should be a cause for concern, not a badge of professionalism. (Some reporters even boast that most of their stories are more than half written by the time they arrive at the scene.)

Facts & Truth

Considering objectivity in journalism forces, in turn, consideration of the slippery nature of "facts" and "truth." Reporters go out to "get the story," which is not always the same as getting the news and certainly not the same as getting the truth or even the facts, although the public and the newsroom often think of them as the same. What is a news fact? How is one captured? Romano (1987, p. 62) quoted Ridder (1980): "A fact merely marks the point where we have agreed to let the investigation cease" (p. 62) and Richter (1978): "Facts are the shadows that statements cast on things" (p. 9).

News facts are indeed shadowy. Some might argue, for example, that an accurately produced quote is a fact. If the mayor said spending by the city was less this year than last year and the reporter quoted the mayor in an article to that effect, that quote constitutes a fact for many readers. If the mayor produced figures from last year showing how much the city spent, the reporter could cite that as a fact in an article. If the mayor produced a budget

showing how much the city planned to spend this year, the reporter could cite that as a fact as well. These examples do not nearly exhaust the range of possibilities, but which of them are truly facts? The mayor's quote might be untrue, last year's budget may be inaccurate, and this year's budget may be speculative. In each case the journalists would have reported a "fact" which, after publication, turned into something quite different.

Journalists, as a rule, cannot be responsible for the accuracy of every statement they quote in articles and, especially in political reporting, they may include quotations they know to be false or at least highly exaggerated. When they quote statistics "proving" opposite points on the same issue from opposing candidates, they know that at least one set is wrong. Fact and truth create the same dilemma of definition. For example, it may be that it is a fact—it is true—that the Bulls beat the Rams 21–20 in the state championship. It may be true that two players on the Bulls scored the three touchdowns and one kicker scored all three extra points. For both teams, the usual statistics—the score, yardage gained and lost, interceptions, and fumbles—are usually verifiable by comparative observations, even though the people keeping statistics make mistakes, consciously and unconsciously. It might be argued that if sports reporters confined articles to those kinds of statistics, articles would be, by most definitions, factual and true.

Facts & Truth

However, articles about most games contain more than bare statistical coverage. We are told of momentum shifts and other team and individual psychological states, crucial plays and series of downs, coaches' and players' viewpoints and comments, reporters' and columnists' analyses of what went right and wrong, and speculations of all kinds. These, inasmuch as they purport to tell us what happened, are not verifiable, nor are they necessarily true. At best, they are informed guesses or interpretations based on special knowledge. They frame reality so that audience interpretations are more likely to be coherent and meaningful.

These same observations apply to elections as well as football games, in part because throughout much coverage these events resemble each other, but mostly the observations apply to virtually

all news. For example, generations of students now have learned the dubious "fact" that John Kennedy defeated Richard Nixon for president in 1960 because of a televised debate in which Nixon looked weary, unshaven, and perhaps faintly unsavory. In this way, folklore and guesswork, repeated often enough with confidence, assume the status of fact.

A vast and varied public can agree on many things. The Bulls and the Rams played a game and the Bulls won. We can agree on most statistics. To that extent, reporters can be objective. A sports reporter, no matter how much he or she loved the Rams, would be exceedingly foolish to report in the paper the next day that the Rams won. He or she could, however, write a story in such a way that the Rams appeared to have been cheated by officials, hurt by key injuries, played better than the Bulls, or valiantly fought a far superior team. Such an article can be framed in numerous ways. The point is that beyond the facts that can be proved or shown to be true, news is largely speculative and interpretative—a constructed reality.

Most reporters attempt to harness the speculative nature of news by attempting to write fairly and honestly. In the football story, beyond the verifiable statistics, what constitutes objective reality? If the coach and several players on one team think a certain play was the turning point of the game, is it indeed the turning point? Would not the other team have to agree as well? How much of this consensus is necessary before such assertions can be made? What in the game, aside from statistics, can we say constitutes a reality on which all can agree?

There is little on which to agree, argue the social constructionists. We invent key elements of that game for ourselves, in our various groups. Moreover, while journalists might have some special training to see things in ways that the general public might not, they, too, because they are human, create the game for themselves. That is not to say that 100,000 fans and 500 reporters witnessing a game will report 100,500 different versions, but neither will they all agree on every point. In effect, to social constructionists, no single game existed, and if these theorists are

correct, we might say that the dilemma of the journalist is that he or she will report on several of them and ignore several others in creating only one cohesive account.

That we report on some of many possible situations is true of most news, and it results in, among other things, some distrust of a press that many people feel is arrogant, untrustworthy, and inaccurate, or at least biased. In a sense, however, this is a dilemma only to the extent that journalists insist they are delivering the Truth, the official and perhaps only definitive version of an event. It is the kind of attitude illustrated by frequent and loose use of the phrase, "We stand by our story," as though it were the only possible one.

Providing "both sides" of an issue, or sometimes even several sides, does not by itself make a news article objective and unbiased, and it certainly does not provide people with a complete view of an issue. Often, when news organizations have covered the abortion issue, for example, they make sure that the anti-abortion versions of events and issues are offset by the pro-abortion versions. This bipolar decision to stack the deck into two piles is usually called balanced coverage. Even if coverage is weighted somehow in favor of one side, the news is dominated by those adamantly for or adamantly against, whereas most people fall somewhere in between.

Most people do not demonstrate on either side and many harbor conflicting feelings and emotions, often feeling opposed to both extremes. News defined as current, significant, important, and filled with conflict and human interest rarely explains the social ambivalence of such issues. Abortion usually gets covered when "antis" and "pros" meet in some dramatic conflict, the more physical the better, but day after day, women (and often their families) struggle to decide to have or reject abortions, follow through on those decisions, and face the consequences of their actions.

Reporting protests, arrests, violence, and conflicts at clinics that perform abortions probably will not help most people clarify the abortion issue in their own minds, yet most news organizations

cover "abortion" almost exclusively under these circumstances, which conveniently lend themselves readily to "two-sided" coverage. Other less charged issues, including environmental concerns, business markets, and most Republican-Democrat political issues, receive this approach as well. Greenpeace and other environmental activism groups have learned that to the American media, confrontations are newsworthy in ways that reasoned advocacy is not. In most cases, the issues are not covered at all, only the more newsworthy or easily identified or measured circumstances, including protests, violence, personalities, and conflict. Two-sided coverage is the journalists' insurance policy against charges of bias—it is automatically balanced and demonstrably "objective." With it, journalists keep themselves blameless while providing opposing and dramatic viewpoints from easily accessible, usually authoritative sources.

TwoSides
Balancing

Two sides cannot represent the range of possible positions on social issues, and by offering two opposing, and often canned, practiced, and entrenched, viewpoints, journalists clarify neither people's struggles over the issues nor the public dialogue. The two-sided approach kills more discussions than it fosters; even presenting multiple sides of an issue, as long as news is packaged as Truth in definitive articles, does little to encourage people to debate issues or offer more than their own surface evaluations and put-downs.

The two-sided model would pose fewer problems if journalists and their readers were regularly reminded the news is only one version (perhaps even an authoritative version) of an event. It might be an important or even influential version, but it is still one that does not close the subject and shut down debate. News articles are most appropriately considered as contingent messages contributed to the public conversation, ones that could be sharpened, or rounded, even substantially altered, and certainly explored by a variety of subsequent voices. This invitational or forum quality of news means that a "story" or issue is kept alive in the press by people's ideas and comments in the conversation, rather than simply by protests, violence, conflict, or official staged proceed-

ings, such as arrests, arraignments, meetings, trials, sentencings, or press conferences.

Journalists need to report comprehensively on whatever might be said to exist as objective reality or truth. Beyond those things on which most, or many, reasonable people can agree (the Bulls beat the Rams, or the school board met and recommended a 22 percent increase in the library budget, for example), journalists should solicit as many perspectives as possible and spend as much time involving as many sources and discussants as they can.

Reporters, editors, and probably millions in the public might object, arguing that the result of such coverage is not news. It may be a good magazine piece or something for a book, but it is not for the newspaper. In fact, this is *not* news as we know it. However, a central argument of this book is that news as we know it does not work well because it does not, by and large, help improve the quality of public discourse. Television and radio focus on timeliness and transitory events, and given the nature of those media, they are well suited to do so. Newspapers traditionally focused on the same things, but as competition with other media intensified, they explored other kinds of information and avenues of presenting it. Many of these efforts have been frivolous. Newspapers and other written media can explore alternative ways of sharing information with the public. In so doing, they will not negate criticism or make it unnecessary, but they will enable people to participate better in their own communities and give them a more active role in determining their own fates.

Since the problem of fact and truth remains unresolved, how journalists perceive the result of their work determines what becomes news. As Romano (1987, p. 42) noted, "Nothing in the nature or meaning of 'news' and 'facts' requires the press to cover what it does." Many journalists see what they do as reflecting reality rather than offering stories and information that serve particular interests or purposes. To see news as coherent narratives rather than mirror images of truths or realities would, as Romano suggested, provide more flexibility and allow for different, and probably better, news.

Objectivity is not obsolete; in fact, our major argument is not with objectivity in its connotation of fairness, but with objectification and nonengagement. News seems sterile and meaningless to many people, in part because of the routines, rituals, and contents and forms that are made necessary by strict adherence to traditional notions of objectivity. This adherence leads to a news driven by objective realities in a world driven by selective perceptions and other human qualities that encourage multiple realities. The artificial balancing of extreme positions that masquerades as objectivity in U.S. news is more likely to polarize and entrench opinion rather than encourage discussion. Such an objectivity turns news events into objects and commodities, making them and the news they engender distant and disengaged.

News formats that honor only entrenched opinion ultimately discourage participation and create an audience of consumers. A lively, involved news that both encourages and provokes participation is not likely to be viewed as objective. This does not mean devaluing fairness, but it means that journalists must experiment with approaches, activities, and perspectives that result in stories and articles that engage readers, bringing them into the conversation of news.

THE COMMODITY CRITIQUE: ALL THE NEWS THAT'S EASY TO PRINT

Critics attack the capitalistic nature of news frequently and on several fronts. Entman (1989) observed that economics "shapes the values that guide the creation of news—brevity, simplicity, predictability, timeliness" (p. 19). Short, simple, predictable, and timely articles have proved cheap, efficient, easy to produce, and popular, leaving their creators with little incentive to do anything different. Given increased chain ownership and larger media conglomerates, along with uncertain economic times for various media, including newspapers that face competitive pressures from emerging and newly defined electronic media, the focus on

economics and bottom-line management seems now to be a permanent part of journalism.

That news is a commodity is hardly debatable. Early American newspapers published articles about all kinds of things, but for the most part emphasized opinion. Through the middle 1800s or so, partisan papers enthusiastically supported their own political agendas and vigorously and even viciously attacked those of their opponents. The papers focused political issues and tenaciously clung to their own views while hammering the opposition. This preaching to the converted limited the potential for vastly increased circulations.

When publishers fully realized the economic potential of newspapers reaching vast numbers of people, advertising became the primary means of income, and newspapers redefined articles, by practice, at least, as commodities that must be sold to ever-increasing numbers of people. Before commercialization, news seemed dedicated to inform, incite, stimulate, and move people to do something or think some way—to influence. After the commercialization of news, its purposes seemed to narrow to gratification and appeasement. News creators concentrated on topics that large numbers of people might enjoy or be fascinated by, including much of what papers offer today—crime, sex, sports, financial news, and "human interest," a vaguely defined concept that includes everything from highly charged accounts of abused children to cute briefs on the exploits of heroic pets.

Critics such as Postman (1985) have charged that news media, as well as education and religion, stress entertainment too much as a dominant function. Many newspapers increased this emphasis at the same time that talk, reality, and magazine-type, pseudo-news shows multiplied and flourished on television and radio. Local and national network newscasts often feature entertainment-oriented pieces, and the cult of celebrity seems to have sharply increased its members. "Entertainment" spawned "infotainment" as documentary begat "docudrama" and "information" begat "infomercial," all of which signaled the blurring of fact, fiction, information and entertainment or, to some, the real and the fake. Boorstin

(1961) foresaw these kinds of metamorphoses when he wrote about pseudo-events and the gradual overcoming of substance by shadow.

Criticism of this "blurring" often focuses on television, but most of us can name several prominent events, including Janet Cooke's fabricated *Washington Post* story about Jimmy, the child drug addict, or *USA Today*'s misused photos of gun-toting gang members, to show that newspapers are not immune to contrived, entertainment-driven stories and images. Still, newspaper readership is at best flat; thus, many news executives accepted the notion that entertainment increases people's interest and so provided more entertainment, chiefly by expanding "lifestyle," "entertainment," and other so-called "nonnews" sections of the paper.

The blurring of news and entertainment is most evident in sensational coverage of crime, sex, and natural disasters. The term "sensational" is thrown around frequently, especially when violence or crime dominates news coverage, as the beating by Los Angeles police of Rodney King, the rioting that followed the acquittal of four police officers accused in that beating, or the rape trial of William Kennedy Smith in Florida. (Critics complain of excessive and exaggerated coverage, a reasonable complaint given the nature of the events.) Accounts of massive natural disasters, such as an earthquake in San Francisco or the onslaught of Hurricane Andrew in southern Florida and Louisiana, also stimulated such complaints as their coverage lingered in the news for weeks and even months.

Newspapers and newscasts, however, often focus on far more trivial events of disorder, sex, violence, and crime that leave them more vulnerable to charges of sensationalism, illustrating their attempts to provide "news" that is entertaining as well as inexpensive. Newspapers, particularly in medium-sized and smaller metropolitan areas, often emphasize murders, rapes, kidnapping, carjackings, robberies, suicides, and other individual crimes tinged with violence, sex, or oddity. Editors defend extensive use of these articles as giving people what they want,

as reflecting what's happening in the community, or as a warning to citizens.

News outlets have little economic incentive to examine crime differently by deemphasizing the individual acts and exploring the roots of crime in a community. Interpretive articles might be less interesting without gruesome, graphic, titillating detail and are more expensive to produce because they require time and experienced, specialized, or more educated reporters. Emphasizing entertainment, whether in features or crime and violence, is generally cheaper and easier than involving people as part of the news through engaging stories of context and perspective. One approach provides entertainment, the other engagement; one is for the consumer, the other for the citizen.

A news-as-commodity approach conforms as well to traditional content and forms that are based in the capitalistic system. Once publishers realized higher revenues came from advertising rather than from news, they sought audiences to sell to advertisers, which, in turn, created a need for larger quantities of interesting news and information. To extend profits, meet daily deadlines, and guarantee interest, news and information had to be not only compelling but easily and inexpensively obtained. Evolving strategies for news "gathering" met these needs remarkably well, and most journalists of the late 1800s would recognize them in today's newspapers. Reporters were assigned to strategic areas or topics called beats. Police, courts, schools, various government agencies and bureaucracies, legislatures, and local and state governments contained the "news" within quite specific boundaries, almost as if news grew in cultivated, defined fields for harvesting. The metaphor of gathering became pervasive in the modern era.

As the beat system evolved, reporters and their sources—usually officials and various authorities—developed relationships in which each fed off, helped, needed, and used the other. Sources, attempting to control and manage information, recognized their favored positions and hired liaisons between themselves and the press. These developments provided even more cheap and ready

information to reporters at the same time that they gave sources more, but by no means total, control over the kinds of information that became available to reporters.

Naturally, savvy reporters discovered news by other means and used information provided by press agents in various, and not always flattering ways. However, as functionaries within increasingly complex and profit-oriented bureaucracies, they did what was necessary to get as much information as efficiently as possible. Newsrooms streamlined and routinized reporting, editing, and printing activities, under pressure from daily deadlines.

Form in journalism has been at least as oppressive as content. Darnton (1975) reminded us, in his memoir about his days at the *New York Times*, that reporters often rely on widely used and even ancient story forms. Eventually, journalists honed form down to the simple, efficient *inverted pyramid*, an ordering of information from most to least significant, which dictates content by limiting not only how articles are written but also what subjects are reported. Readers, and perhaps journalists as well, in part define news through its inverted pyramid mold. Publishers of supermarket tabloids often put even their most outrageous articles in inverted pyramid format (Bird, 1992), making them more credible, perhaps, and lampooning the seriousness that people accord to news accounts. An account of a school board meeting, for example, when written as a review or an essay, may not be seen as "news" in the same sense as a school board article written in traditional journalistic style, even though they provide the same information.

Inverted Pyramid

The inverted pyramid and its pervasive acceptance defines, in effect, what is reportable and models a worldview that is essentially positivist in philosophy and naively modernist. The inverted pyramid model presumes that human stories are not webs of significance with multiple interconnected causes and effects but are instead linear sequences of acts and events in which it is possible, through diligent investigation, to know and uncover the single most important fact or set of facts, irrespective of audience or context. If they spotlight and isolate that fact, some reporters

believe, the rest of the article will largely write itself. However, some of our most critically important human stories are so culturally embedded (e.g., racism, homophobia) or so incrementally slow to develop (e.g., the deterioration of road and bridge infrastructure, an increasingly unstable natural ecology, or changing public attitudes about libraries) that they do not fit as news stories until a crisis—a riot, bridge collapse, or censorship flap—recognizably jumps to the foreground of our consciousness. In other words, the inverted pyramid model subtly presumes that journalists will tell primarily those stories that are easiest to tell—the stories of the surface, the events of entertainment or fear. The hardest stories to talk about, and the ones for which we need journalists the most, remain too deep for the inverted pyramid model to probe.

The model proved economical, however, for gathering, presenting, and reading simplistic news, and it remains economical in several important respects. Reporters at various stages of training use it to write efficiently about specialized topics without any particular expertise in them. Consistency of form makes it easier for reporters to reach quick judgments of newsworthiness, which means that issues and events that easily fit into the form more often become news. Furthermore, the form reduces the burdens of writing. With the form of virtually every kind of article preset, reporters can think more about wording and style, though in time, those also tend to become routine. Because the least important information is at the bottom of the article, editors find the inverted pyramid easy to edit. Shortening often requires no more than trimming from the bottom, a procedure that is less advisable with other narrative forms, such as cautionary tales or jokes, where important information is more likely to be at the bottom than at the top of a story. Finally, readers have grown accustomed to getting important information quickly, thereby making it unnecessary to read beyond the first couple of paragraphs.

The inverted pyramid essentially made it easier for journalists on deadline to select information that made sense out of a complex and chaotic world. As journalism developed, the need for fairness and responsibility increased. To mollify critics, meet emerging

journalistic standards, and appeal to the broadest possible public, journalists developed strategies, routines, and procedures for a fair and responsible news, further reinforcing the efficiency of the inverted pyramid form, which was convenient, perhaps even ideal, for presenting stripped down facts with little apparent interpretation or personal stain. Accurately quoting authoritative, and often official, sources on "both sides" of an issue effectively still meets the guidelines for complete, fair reporting. Newspapers and reporters are less likely to be blamed for these so-called objective articles, in which acusations, assertions, and controversial comments are attributed to the proper sources.

Articles about complex issues frequently became articles about people deemed as leaders who offer supporting or opposing viewpoints on those issues, simplifying them and meeting the editors' insistence that the news be "humanized." News often reduces enormously complex issues to conflicts between politicians or other people the news elevates to celebrity status or anoints as important enough to be quoted. Otherwise, the news is peopled with "sources," who again are usually authoritative and official but are usually unrecognizable as human beings. Essentially interchangeable, news sources are valued for their titles, position, expertise, or known views, but not for any unique character they might have as people.

News content results from economic decisions as much as from any decisions based on what people need to participate in a democratic process. However, even a notion of "what people need" can be argued from an economic perspective. Critics put many spins on the issue of the public's need for news. Those who favor giving people what they want might argue that people are smart and know what they need, and that they communicate that to news organizations through ratings, circulation figures, and other feedback, including letters and phone calls. They say it is presumptuous of journalists to think they know what people need and to force-feed them news that they do not want or cannot use. Giving people what they want solves several problems—it eliminates the dilemma of deciding what people need, clears the

way for relatively inexpensive information such as police reports and trial proceedings, and enhances news as a product that people will buy, thereby enhancing the news outlet as a source of advertising.

Giving people what they need to function as collaborative citizens within the public sphere is altogether different, in part because answers do not come from simply inquiring about needs; or, when answers do come, they are open to question. Who decides what people need? McManus (1992) used the terms *economic* and *journalistic* to label models of news, and the kinds of news that encompass what many would assume people "need" fall under the journalistic model. The models exist in tension with each other. An economic approach tends to maximize profit while a journalistic approach tends to maximize public understanding. Both models can be seen at most news outlets, and editors consider many issues and events from both journalistic and economic perspectives. As McManus pointed out, investigative reporting, extensive community surveillance, and most reporting that engages people in the community are expensive, taking up the best reporters and often inordinate amounts of time. Obviously, relying on other agencies, whether wire services, police, courts, or public relations people, is a much less expensive way to accumulate information.

Articles produced by a journalistic model often tend to be future-oriented and complex, and not necessarily tied to such traditional news values of efficiency as timeliness and human interest. They require greater investments of time and energy from news organizations and readers alike, and their rewards are rarely immediate. This is often the kind of news used as examples of what people need—how school board politics influences decisions, why city tax increases have produced both failures and successes in service programs, and how people cope with financial or other kinds of adversity. These articles require tracing money, people, and institutions through tangled trails of contradiction, certainty, vagueness, truth, lies, deceit, heroism, confidence, collusion, and complexity. They require talking and listening to many people.

They also require decent, sensitive reporters and writers, unintimidated by dealing closely with the public, and who can start public conversations about how and why things work, not just tell us that they are broken. A conversation of journalism requires engaging stories from journalists knowledgeable and skilled enough to interpret and provide perspective and context.

McManus noted that people often find serious articles dull or unpopular, perhaps because many tend to be lengthy and to conform to staid journalistic conventions and traditions (making them dull) or because they challenge conventional wisdom, quick-fix solutions, values, prejudices, policies, or leaders (making them unpopular). From an economic point of view, it is an easy decision about what to do with supposedly dull, unpopular, expensive news—discard it in favor of more exciting, popular, and, not accidentally, less expensive news.

A news organization that provides dull and unpopular news will, in a capitalistic system, fail—even if it is efficiently dull. A news organization that engages the public, brings people into conversations, presents a broad range of news, helps them find a perspective, and makes an effort to discuss news in forms that encourage public response and participation is less likely to fail—even if it treats serious issues seriously.

Such an organization should also be less susceptible to the influences of advertisers on content. Newspapers weakened by recession in the late 1980s and early 1990s were seen as vulnerable, and journalism reviews reported horror stories about the press caving in to car dealers, for example. Some papers have automotive sections written by the advertising department to pacify car dealer advertisers offended by articles describing how to buy an automobile wisely, evaluating performance of new cars as poor, or even reporting slumping automobile sales.

The influence of advertisers on news is frequently debated. Car dealers who threaten to pull advertising if the paper publishes certain types of articles clearly attempt to influence editorial content. The attempt is successful when papers publish apologies where none is justified, provide free space in "advertorial" sec-

tions, monitor their news for information dealers might find offensive, or publish largely positive articles about dealerships, their cars, services, or personnel. Perhaps the most insidious threat to editorial integrity comes when news outlets modify news or kill article ideas because they involve large advertisers.

These practices may be in critics' minds as much as in the day-to-day working world of media news but that they exist at all damages the integrity of journalism. Short of drastically changing the way media make money—that is, abolishing advertising as the major source of revenues—these kinds of influences, or the threat or perception of them, will always exist. Rather than shrink, advertising seems to grow. Some outlets ostensibly free of advertising, such as the Public Broadcasting System or local "community radio" stations, are slowly coming to resemble commercial outlets as their recognition of sponsors and benefactors increasingly look and sound like commercials. Furthermore, the "total management concept" strategies embraced by some newsrooms encourages closer working relationships among the various departments, including news and advertising, which traditionally had little communication.

In short, we see little evidence that news can be free from advertising influences or that news outlets will become less dependent on advertising. In fact, advertising is likely to move into many more areas of our lives. Therefore, to maintain relative independence from advertising influences, journalism should solidify its relationships with the people, for it is ultimately the people, and not advertisers, who provide a news outlet's reason for being and source of power.

One way to build public confidence and trust is to bring economics openly into the conversation. Does advertising affect news? People have their own suspicions and hopes and will share them. Academic researchers have studied the question for decades and published stacks of articles and books on it. Editors, publishers, producers, reporters, and advertisers all have ideas. Advertising influence has been an important question in schools; why should it not be in the news?

NEWS: TOWARD PARTICIPATION AND CONVERSATION

News alone, as we have seen, has no exact, universally accepted meaning. A newspaper article in Taipei will mean something entirely different than an article with the same content in Tacoma. As part of a social and cultural environment, news derives meaning from that environment and its people. News is not gathered and distributed but created and shared; therefore, writers and readers, as part of a particular society and culture, contribute to its meaning. To paraphrase Hartley (1982), news does not originate meanings as much as it reproduces or reflects dominant meanings.

Even though news reinforces the power by which the powerful obtain and maintain influence, Hartley argued that news is more than propaganda for the power structure. Propaganda is contestable; news is not. Media content, as it is casual, often serendipitous, cumulative, and based on common sense, develops like conversation. In the sense that and to the degree which news inhabits a framework of common sense—recognized, accepted, and shared without a lot of reasoning, thought, or analysis—it is, Hartley thought, seen as natural and therefore incontestable.

Rachlin (1988) argued that the perception that media provide objective information gives them status and power, particularly because they package a particular worldview, which both he and Hartley say is perceived as natural. The media project this view, which is in part generated through media practices, conventions, routines, rituals, and traditions, throughout their content and form. In so doing, they inculcate hegemonic values and attitudes by "simple repetitive exposure, rather than considered judgment" (Rachlin, 1988, p. 25). Some argue that the diffusion of a consistent set of values and attitudes decreases or contains conflict, effectively preventing challenges to "the way things are," thereby reinforcing them as natural and incontestable.

European scholars, including Hall (1975, 1977, 1984), Hall and colleagues (1981), Hartley (1982), and van Dijk (1988), have been more inclined than scholars from the United States to

critique hegemony and ideology in the news. Van Dijk, for example, found that news reports not only provide the general outline of "social, political, cultural, and economic models of societal events" but also adopt frameworks that make the models intelligible (p. 182). This, he argued, discourages people from developing knowledge and attitudes that lead to alternative frameworks. If news provides a dominant interpretation of events, then people dependent on news for much of what they know about the world are likely to accept that interpretation as "correct" and are less likely to understand the necessity of dialogue with opposing or different perspectives.

Two U.S. media critics arguing along similar lines, Chomsky (1989) and Herman (1992), claimed that the U.S. press reflects values and ideologies of government by consistently supporting the party line or, as Herman more colorfully asserted, consistently swallowing government propaganda. Blatantly political, these critics often seem more disenchanted with society than media, though they may argue that media cannot be seen as separate from the society in which they reside. In fact, for Jensen (1990) virtually any criticism of mass media is a critique of modern society. Chomsky and Herman explore the stifling of dissent through two themes: media news acquiescence to official government versions of events and interpretations of issues and inaccessibility of media news to all but the rich and powerful.

In a less ideological critique, Bennett (1988) said that "advertisements for authority" dominate news, which is otherwise filled with articles of violence, disorder, economic and social insecurity, deviance, cultural erosion, and threats of war, all of which "reinforce public support for political authorities who promise order, security, and responsive political solutions" (xii).

News, Bennett argued, is not fit for democracy because it is "superficial, narrow, stereotypical, propaganda-laden, of little explanatory value, and not geared for critical debate or citizen action" (p. 9). News does not advance the cause of democracy, he says, because it *personalizes* (gives preference to individual actors over institutional or political considerations), *dramatizes* (emphasizes crisis over continuity and personal drama over persistent problems of our time), *fragments* (comes in self-contained capsules without context), and *normalizes* (assures that officials acting in our interest will return things to normal).

Bennett argued that people do not receive enough critical information from the press to make informed decisions, thereby decreasing their psychic and behavioral participation in the democratic process. As participation decreases, people are less likely to perceive the need for or request critical information. News media perpetuate the cycle. In so doing, they discourage people from being reflective about their communities and their own lives.

The most prominent academic approach to the study of news has been the sociological, which usually stresses creation of news and organizational forces or routines. These shed light on some variables of publishing and broadcasting, but rarely do more than describe. Some influences on the creation of news include gatekeepers (White, 1964); socialization (Breed, 1955; Molotch & Lester, 1974); the nature of story (Darnton, 1975; Hughes, 1968); processes, routines, and rituals (Tuchman, 1972, 1978; Fishman, 1980; Roshco, 1975; Epstein, 1974); values (Gans, 1979); and conventions (Schiller, 1981).

News is more than its practice, its form or content; it is more than information, fact, or entertainment. Media abhor a vacuum, and as they spread to fill every empty space, they make it impossible to live in the world and escape their content and influence. As we liberalize our notions of definitions and venues of news, suggesting, for example, that "new news" comes from movies, rap songs, talk shows, computer networks, and other sources (as compared with "old news" from packaged mainstream news sources such as newspapers), news becomes more culturally significant and understanding it in a larger context more relevant. Because of the ephemeral and often superficial nature of the culture-driven "new news," however, we must strengthen the emphasis of mainstream journalism on stimulating thorough discussion and deliberation.

Many of these arguments about news influences, both ideological and sociological, contradict the conventional wisdom about journalism, particularly that in which the press claims to be free and have an adversarial relationship with government. Freedom of the press is relative, and no doubt the U.S. press has more technical freedoms than most. But those freedoms operate within parameters limited by many considerations, including: adherence to the journalistic ideal of objectivity; more or less rigid journalistic forms; dependence on official sources, press releases, "pseudo-events," and beat systems (in which specific topics or areas are systematically covered); traditional definitions and attributes of news; journalists' perceptions and ideological learnings; and resistance to change other than technological. Journalists also operate within many other boundaries: libel, copyright, and other laws; codes of ethics and internal guidelines; pressures from special-interest groups, critics, and peers in the newsrooms; and economic pressures from corporate owners and advertisers.

Empirical scholars and researchers have attempted to measure these influences but have provided, as we might guess, little hard evidence of precise effects. Instead, they have shown clearly that the media operate in a system of enormous complexity that defies linear cause-effect models and explanations. Comparatively free, our news media nonetheless operate under restraints that for whatever reasons result in a news that reflects society's authority structure. A vast number of citizens thus become invisible, and then, functionally powerless.

In the early 1990s, at a peak of U.S. antitax, antispending sentiment, several events highlighted the influence of talk shows and other participative media formats. When Congress attempted to increase salaries, Washington was flooded with letters and calls originating from radio talk show discussions. In the 1992 presidential election, third party candidate H. Ross Perot bought thirty-minute blocks of commercial time on network television stations and toured TV and radio talk shows, essentially skirting the traditional press. Journalists criticized Perot's and Bill Clinton's decisions to submit to fewer traditional interviews in favor of

appearances with more direct audience contact. Rather than agree with this press condemnation, the public appeared to welcome and encourage the candidates' tactics. At the same time, even tradition-bound newspapers instituted programs designed to increase the people's involvement in news operations (Rosen, 1991a).

The previous few years had already seen cataclysmic events, including the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of Soviet communism, bloody protests for democracy in Communist China, diminished white rule in Africa, the Gulf War, and the creation of new democratic republics in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Images of freedom and people fighting and dying for freedom filled American mass media for several years. In this context, changes occurred in the United States, too. *Rolling Stone* writer Jon Katz (1992) and others argued, essentially, that people had finally taken matters into their own hands and, armed with talk shows and other interactive media, particularly computers, they had changed the nature of news. The more extreme of these observers believed that the arrogant press and its tradition of delivering the Truth from official sources on high to a thankful and passive audience was shaken. People sampled participation, they liked it, and they had the means to break free from a press that had ignored them too long. This interpretation may or may not prove to be valid, but certainly the mainstream press now has to face the challenge and potential to revitalize its notions of "news" and "audience."

Journalism can broaden its notions of news by bringing more dimensions and perspectives into the conversation, by including a larger spectrum of people in society; news need not be only the official version, and it can explore human affairs as much as government affairs. It can remove bonds and boundaries of objectivity without abandoning fairness as it encourages journalists from various ideological perspectives to use the full range of their abilities to converse with the full range of their audiences. At the same time, we can define those audiences as active, inquiring citizens who have something worth saying about what concerns them and their community. Citizens might consume food, tooth-

paste, and other products, but they live within news, and it is the responsibility of the journalist to include them in the social and political conversation. After all, who else will?

4

Ecumenical Journalism: The Multicultural and Multidisciplinary Commons

John Calhoun Merrill invited criticism, and even ridicule, with his book *Existential Journalism* (1977). He wanted to inspire a serious discussion of journalism's intellectual roots and concerns but doubted whether the journalism community, including fellow academics, would be receptive. Prior to writing the book, Merrill surveyed journalists and journalism educators, asking: "What meaning do you give to the term 'existential journalism'? Please give main characteristics that come to mind or anything else you would like to say about the term" (p. 25). The professional journalists' responses especially revealed what Merrill described as a "mixture of mystification, irritation, and sarcasm, and—I might add—ignorance" (p. 25). One editor wrote: "We are getting people out of the journalism schools who can't spell, who can't compose a lead and never heard of libel, and you ask me to share your concern about existential journalism. I've never heard of it, I haven't got the time to look it up, and I doubt whether it has anything to do with the real world of writing and editing—or the teaching thereof" (p. 26). The survey responses reinforced Merrill's belief that journalism would rather not engage in seri-