

# Public Journalism

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Public journalism is a movement that arose principally among journalists in the United States during the late twentieth century, as an effort to draw the people to the media at a time of declining readership and viewership by showing the value of the media in civic life. Public journalism is also known as “civic,” or less often “community,” journalism. The movement developed in part as an answer to the decline of civic participation that scholars noted (Yankelovich 1991; Merritt 1998; Rosen 1999; Putnam 2000) at a time of renewal in many cities (Sirianni & Friedland 2001). Public journalism refocused news on issues and engagement using a community approach. Its founders believed that journalism could improve public dialogue by developing content that citizens engaged in the deliberative process could use in their communities to develop solutions to common problems.

Public journalism inspired discussion among professionals and scholars about the craft of journalism. The debate between → Walter Lippmann and John Dewey in the 1920s marked a seminal time in determining the role of professional journalists in the United States. Lippmann focused on informing elites and using the media to monitor those in power. Dewey believed citizens were capable of a greater participatory role beyond simply voting. In his view, everyday citizens would deliberate on issues if given the information and the opportunity. Lippmann’s view prevailed, and American journalism spent the better part of a century pursuing greater professionalism and more scientific reporting methods. Public journalism marks a return to Dewey’s view of journalism in democratic life (→ Journalists’ Role Perception; Professionalization of Journalism).

Some critics argue that public journalism is just good “shoe-leather journalism,” implying a tradition of close-to-the-ground reporting and editing, but traditional journalists spend more time in places of power (such as city hall) than in ordinary life (→ News Sources). By rooting stories in communities, journalists capture the richness of civic conversations. Public journalism encourages journalists to probe systematically from the bottom up, starting with citizens. The top-down model of traditional journalism typically starts with officials and their issue frames (→ Framing of the News). Public journalism starts with those living in communities – their concerns, issues, aspirations, and problems – and builds meaningful comparisons, illuminates trends, and seeks out solutions for citizens to consider. Instead of leaving out officials and experts, the process may prevent elites from framing issues without considering alternative community frames.

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The techniques public journalists employ encourage contextual reporting. Reporters develop sources after considering a range of potential stakeholders. “Real people” sources are not simply the opening storyline but the main threads that hold the story together throughout the coverage. Public journalists seek to portray the similarities and differences among stakeholders and look for common ground. The journalists do not select the solutions, but leave the people to decide. By reporting on potential outcomes, journalists help the process go well among citizens.

Professionals and scholars developed public journalism through experimentation and observation. What public journalism seeks to accomplish has come to define the movement. Other characteristics include cultivating diverse sources from all strata of civic life, finding high-quality information for citizens to use, and providing feedback from citizens as well as the information needed for mobilization.

## FOUNDATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Public journalism took shape in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Experiments began in Georgia, but the *Wichita Eagle* of Kansas conducted the first major newspaper project in 1990, when editor Davis “Buzz” Merritt wanted to give the people a voice in election coverage. In another early project, the *Charlotte Observer* ran a series called Taking Back Our Neighborhoods. The paper partnered with broadcast stations to cover housing and crime, leading to changes in policing housing and in housing code enforcement.

On television (→ Television News), public journalism developed in parallel. It began with public stations that developed local public affairs coverage. For example, the Wisconsin Collaborative Project connected stations in small and medium markets to develop cooperative coverage of regional issues. Television eventually connected with print (→ Newspaper Journalism), when commercial broadcasters created project partnerships with newspapers. Such collaboration became a core element of public journalism.

The longest running collaboration is “We the People Wisconsin,” involving Wisconsin Public Broadcasting (the eleven stations of Wisconsin Public Radio and seven stations of Wisconsin Public Television), the commercial CBS affiliate for Madison (WISC-TV on VHF broadcast and cable), the *Wisconsin State Journal* (the main outlet of the Capital Newspapers chain of southern Wisconsin), and Wood Communications, a public relations firm in the region. The partnership continually redefined ways to bring citizens into the deliberative process, developing town hall meetings, mock courtroom hearings, and conferences on issues such as health-care.

*Foundation funding* promoted public journalism. The Knight Foundation funded the Project on Public Life and the Press, led by Jay Rosen at New York University. The Pew Charitable Trusts created the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, under the direction of Ed Fouhy and Jan Schaffer. During its decade-long run, the Pew Center held workshops, created opportunities for journalists to share experiences, and funded grants. The grants were small compared to the budgets of news businesses but were large enough, usually up to \$20,000, to seed experiments. The US Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and Public Broadcasting System (PBS) (→ Public Broadcasting Systems) joint

Challenge Fund, with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, supported Best Practices in Journalism, an effort to improve broadcast coverage of local politics by running campaign coverage workshops from 2000 to 2004. Another offshoot of the Pew Center, the J-Lab Institute for Interactive Journalism, received support from the Knight Foundation and from the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation of Oklahoma. J-Lab continues to focus on interactive journalism and incorporates ideas from public journalism.

Many public journalism grants favored *partnerships*, which combine the capacity of broadcasting to reach a wide audience and raise awareness of a problem with the resources of newspapers capable of reporting stories more deeply. Early grants supported the hiring of people for community liaison; they set up listening posts, organized town hall meetings, and connected to communities. These strategies shortened the start-up time journalists needed for gathering information about community concerns and aspirations. Large public journalism projects would likely have been too costly for media outlets without these partnerships.

## BENEFITS AND CRITICISMS

Public journalism alters long-entrenched patterns of journalistic practice. Newspapers engaged in public journalism use more graphics to present issues and solutions (Coleman 2000). On television, public journalism coverage uses more diverse sources, including women, minorities, and non-elites (Kurpius 2002). Partnerships accompanied increased volunteerism, better political processes, and improved citizenship; the problem-solving frames worked better than traditional human-interest or historical frames; and the opportunities for feedback encouraged citizens to get involved (Nichols et al. 2006).

Early *critics* objected that public journalism pandered to the public as a marketing ploy to sell news or advertising. Others said either that it was no different from good journalism (→ Standards of News), or that it gave too much power over the focus of coverage to citizens, who are not well enough informed to understand complex and difficult aspects of public life (→ Public Sphere). Still other critics said that public journalism imposes the editor's view of political processes on citizens and presumes that editors know the public interest best. The town hall meetings drew fire for failing to produce thoughtful debate. These criticisms diminished in the latter part of the 1990s.

One main criticism has persisted: that public journalism undermines journalistic detachment and the *quest for objectivity*, a core professional norm for journalism (→ Objectivity in Reporting). Public journalism projects challenge the idea of detachment by encouraging journalists to spend time in communities, getting to know their ideas and their issues. Objectivity may be unachievable, a fact professional journalists can skirt by seeking truth and accuracy through lesser, more-realistic goals, such as fairness, balance, depth, and context. Innovative television news managers found ways to alter journalistic routines at the station when implementing public journalism, without raising objections, but not every newsroom had such leadership.

A recent criticism is that public journalism is *too expensive for daily practice*. Deep, contextual news coverage of issues may require resources that news organizations lack (Hamilton 2006). Other ways to fund hard news might relieve the pressures to make a profit, as did the Pew Center grants, which moved news businesses not only to try public journalism but also to delve into reporting on trends facing their communities.

Although newspapers and broadcast stations across the United States practiced public journalism, the experimentation was difficult to sustain. Foundation funding created only enclaves of innovation within newsrooms. A partnership among media organizations often depended on core individuals to keep it going and would falter and die once the key actors left. News outlets would let community liaisons go once foundation money ran out, and the ties they built to the community would wither. Or when the reporters practicing public journalism left for other jobs, the trust they had developed within the community would not transfer to the reporters replacing them. The amount of time journalists spent getting to know the community well instead of turning out daily stories caused economic stress in the system. The commercial media struggled to justify the costs of conducting such an intensive form of reporting.

Public journalism emerged in response to the primarily commercial US media system and did not spread intact to other countries (→ Commercialization of the Media; United States of America: Media System). Although scholars around the world study the phenomenon, they treat public journalism as a phase in US journalism practice.

Foundations that supported public journalism have turned to other issues, but its influence endures. “We the People Wisconsin” is still an active media partnership that reinvents itself, but at a slower pace. Individual public journalists continue to practice their craft at television stations and newspapers, but, in the absence of the labels and the debate, they weave the elements of public journalism into daily routines. The experiments bearing the label and the resulting discussion of the craft aimed at altering coverage routines (→ News Routines). The introspection, research, and development arguably made journalism better.

SEE ALSO: → Commercialization of the Media → Framing of the News → Journalists’ Role Perception → Lippmann, Walter → News Routines → News Sources → Newspaper Journalism → Objectivity in Reporting → Professionalization of Journalism → Public Broadcasting Systems → Public Sphere → Standards of News → Television News → United States of America: Media System

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