

Coverage on Coverage: Journalists Debate Their Role in Public Life

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Journalism 539

Ethics and the News Media

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November 12, 1997

ABSTRACT

This paper will examine whether a 'public journalism' project, called "1996 Your Voice, Your Vote, by a coalition of 15 media organizations in North Carolina had compromised journalistic objectivity in its coverage of the 1996 races for governor and U.S senator. This paper will also examine the implications of the project as an example of public journalism on the rightful role of the press in public life. This paper will examine these through the critique and defense made by journalists regarding the coalition's coverage.

Research involved a qualitative analysis of news stories, editorials and columns directly critical of the coalition's coverage against those that directly defended it, between September 1996 and February 1996. A description of the project was derived from publications posted by the coalition on the Internet. To provide background for "public journalism", research also involved news stories, editorials, columns and books about 'public journalism'.

The research showed that the North Carolina coalition had compromised journalistic objectivity in pursuing an agenda to downplay the candidates' agenda and put people's concerns first for their election coverage.

This paper concludes with the dangers of overdoing 'public journalism' and suggests instead a continual, heightened awareness of the role of the press as embodied in the U.S. Constitution as well as the changes in the contexts of that role.

Introduction

This paper will examine the controversy among journalists that surrounded the "1996 Your Voice, Your Vote" project in North Carolina where fifteen media organizations joined together to cover the 1996 races for governor and U.S. senator.

The controversy reflected the wider controversy that the "public" or "civic" journalism¹ movement has caused regarding the rightful role of the press in public life. Because the controversy involved mostly editors and other journalists, this paper will try to clarify the issues raised through their critique and defense of the North Carolina project.

The project was considered one of the more extensive experiments in public journalism, a reform movement within the ranks of the American press whose goal is reconnecting the press with the public. The rationale for the movement has its roots in what social critics bemoan as the fragmentation of American society into self-interested groups indifferent to a broader idea of public life that has traditionally characterized democracy in the United States.

Advocates of public journalism blame the media for much of the public's apathy and cynicism toward public life. According to a report titled, "America's Struggle Within," compiled by the Harwood Group for the Pew Center's Citizen Election Project, "People felt betrayed and bewildered by the news media. They said that too much of what the news media convey is endless dirt and gossip, sensationalized coverage and confused and polarized public discourse."²

Civic journalists "believe that reporting only society's shortcomings day after day does little to alleviate those ills; in fact, focusing primarily on the negative and desensitizing people to the crime, violence, or despair around them may contribute to citizens' growing alienation and

¹ "Public" and "civic" were used interchangeably in the material studied for this paper. However, this paper will use the term "public journalism" to refer to the movement or philosophy and the term "civic journalists" to refer to the reporters and editors participating in this movement.

² Hernandez, Debra G. "Bewildered by the Media," Editor & Publisher 24 February 1996, p. 11.

sense of hopelessness and apathy."³ Civic journalists "believe that they can play an important role in helping their communities solve the problems that plague them."⁴

Jay Rosen, director of the Project on Public Life and the Press at New York University who is considered the movement's leading theoretician, stated in an extensive essay that public journalism is a kind of journalism that "clears a space where the public can do its work."⁵

Another dean of public journalism, Wichita Eagle Editor Davis "Buzz" Merritt, wrote a book for the movement, *Public Journalism and Public Life, Why Telling the News is not Enough*. In it, he argues for a journalism that should be and can be a primary force in the revitalization of public life. For that to occur, he argued for cultural and generational changes in the profession.⁶

Rosen and Merritt worked together to present complementary accounts of the birth of the movement in *Imagining Public Journalism: An Editor and Scholar Reflect on the Birth of an Idea*. They also wrote a Kettering Foundation paper, *Public Journalism: Theory and Practice*, in which a brief explanation of the conceptual basis and professional expression of the early experiments in public journalism can be found.

The theoretical literature of the movement is relatively sparse but more than 200 daily newspapers from Maine to California practice public journalism through various projects. The projects have had titles like "Maine Citizen's Campaign '96," "A Question of Color" in Akron, Ohio, "Our Jobs, Our Children, Our Future" in West Virginia, "A Pepperoni for Your Thoughts" in Spokane, Wash., and "Voice of the Voter" in San Francisco, Calif.

Several foundations and organizations support public journalism. The Washington-based Pew Center for Civic Journalism, run by former CBS News producer Ed Fouhy, has funded several public journalism projects since the early '90s. The Knight Foundation funds Rosen's

³ Bowman, M. and Bjornlund, L. "Civic Journalism and Local Government" *Public Management* April 1997, p.A3.

⁴ Bowman and Bjornlund.

⁵ Rosen, Jay. "Getting the Connection Right: Public Journalism and the Trouble in the Press." <http://epn.org/tcf/xxrosen.html>

Project on Public Life and the Press. The Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, which includes Merritt's Wichita Eagle, has a partnership with the Pew Center to support public journalism projects. The Gannett newspaper chain also has cooperated with the Pew Center on several projects. The Poynter Institute for Media Studies and National Public Radio have teamed up with newspapers and television stations to provide citizen-driven election coverage.

While the movement has highlighted the troubling scenario of a democracy threatened by a public disconnected from public life and a press actually contributing to the problem, many journalists are worried that the movement's rhetoric on "solutions" and "connections" will inevitably distort the news agenda, devalue problems for which no remedy is apparent, and end up compromising the independence of the press.

Howell Raines, editorial page editor of the New York Times, charged civic journalists for preaching heresy against the ethical tradition, held by mainstream American newspapers, that "calls on reporters to forswear partisan advocacy, to be indifferent to the fortunes of individual candidates, and to be agnostic as to public policy outcomes."⁷

Leonard Downie Jr., executive editor of the Washington Post, said it is "beyond the pale" for news organizations to get involved in advocating solutions, or even urging people to vote. "That is a great danger to the credibility of the newspaper, even when the cause is the best possible cause."⁸

Rosemary Armao, executive director of Investigative Reporters and Editors and a journalism professor at the University of Missouri, said the movement is "almost like a cult." She said advocates of the movement "change their mindset and they develop a whole new vocabulary.

⁶ Merritt, Davis. Public Journalism and Public Life, Why Telling the News is not Enough. Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, N.J., 1995.

⁷ (quoted by) Harwood, Richard. "The Legitimacy of 'Civic Journalism'." The Washington Post. 8 March 1996, p.A21.

⁸ (quoted by) Kurtz, Howard. "When News Media Go to Grass Roots, Candidates Often Don't Follow." The Washington Post. 4 June 1996, p.A6.

They tell us to connect with our audience. What the hell does it mean to connect with the audience?"⁹

Jane Eisner, editorial page editor of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, said, "Our central mission is to report the news, to set priorities, to analyze but not to shape or direct events or outcomes. Subsume or diminish the central mission and we become like any other player in society, like any other politician, interest group, do-gooder, thief."¹⁰

Just where to draw the line between detachment and advocacy, between the role of the journalist as dispassionate conveyor of information and as an involved citizen has been debated before in different times and circumstances. This paper will attempt to analyze whether the controversy about the North Carolina project adds anything new to the debate.

The focus of this paper will be the implications of the project on how contemporary journalists view their role in a society that is seen as disconnected from the process of choosing public officials.

In addition, because the criticism and defense of the North Carolina project involved charges of populism and elitism¹¹, this paper will analyze whether these elements add anything new to the old debate on objectivity. Who should set the agenda in election coverage? Who controls the news? What does a free and independent press mean?

This paper will first present details of the North Carolina project based largely on articles available on the Internet and which were published by the coalition between January 1996 to November 1996. The details were cross-checked with what critics said in their articles.

⁹ (quoted by) Hackley, Robyn T. "Broadcasters Team Up to Help Voters Take Back the '96 Campaign from Spin-doctors and other Insiders." <http://www.clark.net./pub/rothman/nc.htm>

¹⁰ Eisner, Jane R. "Should Journalists Abandon Their Detachment to Solve Problems?" *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 October 1994, p.E7.

¹¹ In referring to these terms, this paper will use Jeffrey Bell's definition of populism and elitism. (*Populism and Elitism*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992.) Populism is optimism about people's ability to make decisions about their lives. Elitism is optimism about the decision-making ability of one or more elites, acting on behalf of other people. Populism implies pessimism about an elite's ability to make decisions for the people affected. Elitism implies pessimism about the people's ability to make decisions affecting themselves.

The criticisms and the defense will be analyzed next. The critical articles include front-page news stories that appeared, one each, in the New York Times and the Boston Globe in September and October of 1996, an essay in the Washington Post in September 1996, one article in the New Yorker in October 1996, one article in the Columbia Journalism Review, January 1997 and one in the Media Studies Journal, Winter 1997.

The defense arguments include articles by the editor of the Charlotte Observer directly responding to the critical articles, an article by Merritt defending the North Carolina project and which was published in several newspapers and comments by two other journalists regarding the project.

This paper also considered comments made by other journalists regarding public journalism as a whole and as it relate to the debate on objectivity.

The "1996 Your Voice, Your Vote" Project

The project arose out of The Charlotte Observer's experience with public journalism projects that include coverage of the 1992 elections titled "Your Vote" and the award-winning 1994 "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods". The coalition grew out of talks between the Charlotte Observer and the News & Observer in 1995 and was joined later by four smaller papers. The coalition also modeled its project on a similar partnership in Florida in 1992 called "Voices of Florida". By the end of 1995, six TV stations and three radio stations joined the coalition.

The partners were:¹²

Newspapers

- *The Charlotte Observer* (Knight-Ridder Inc.)
- *The News & Observer* of Raleigh (McClatchy Newspapers)
- *News & Record* of Greensboro (Landmark Community Newspapers)
- *Fayetteville Observer-Times* (Locally owned)

- *Asheville Citizen-Times* (Gannett Co.)
- *Morning Star* of Wilmington (New York Times Co.)

Television

- *WBTV*, Charlotte (CBS)
- *WTVD*, Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill (ABC)
- *WGHP*, Greensboro-High Point (FOX)
- *WLOS*, Asheville (ABC)
- *WWAY*, Wilmington (ABC)
- *University of North Carolina Center for Public Television*, statewide (PBS)

Radio

- *WFAE-FM*, Charlotte
- *WUNC-FM*, Chapel Hill
- *WFDD-FM*, Winston-Salem

The gubernatorial candidates were Jim Hunt and Robin Hayes. The U.S. senate race was a rematch of 1990 between long-time incumbent Sen. Jesse Helms, a Republican and former mayor of Charlotte, Democrat Harvey Gantt.

Two polls - the first in January 1996 of 1,000 North Carolinians and the second in July 1996 of 1,001 state residents - were done by KPC Research, a division of Knight Publishing Co., which publishes the Charlotte Observer.

The adult state residents were polled on the following issues: crime, social security, public education, budget deficit, drug abuse, taxes, strengthening families, children's issues, government spending, the poor, health care, jobs, moral values, welfare, the economy, and the environment.¹³

¹² "Your Voice, Your Vote" and the Charlotte Observer, <http://www.charlotte.com/politics/yv.htm>

¹³ "N.C. Voters' Priorities," <http://www.foto.com/foto/politics/voterp.shtml>

Based on the January poll and leading to the spring primary, the partnership published a poll report and pieces on government spending, families and values, crime, healthcare, education and financial security, in that order on consecutive Sundays beginning March 10 and ending April 13.

For the November elections, the newspapers worked together on outlining the findings of the statewide poll in July and then published packaged reports that explored issues of crime and drugs, taxes and spending, affordable health care and education in that order, also on consecutive Sundays from early September to late October. The radio partners produced five shared pieces on the same issues. The television partners worked with their local newspaper affiliates to produce separate reports, also on the same issues. The TV partners did not share reports because of affiliation and network agreements.

Each "issues" package that appeared in the newspapers took two-plus pages and consisted of the following elements:¹⁴

- A 35- to 40-inch story contrasting the views of the major candidates for governor on the issue.
- A 35- to 40-inch story contrasting the views of the major candidates for U.S. Senate on the issue.
- A full-page grid outlining the positions of the major-party candidates on three questions central to the issue. The grid included vignettes of people who are affected by the issue to give context to the questions.
- A pullout box discussing options on a particular issue and pros and cons for each option.
- A graphic explaining the background on the issue.
- A box explaining the partnership.
- A box briefing the positions of minor-party candidates seeking the two offices.

¹⁴ <http://www.charlotte.com>

- Reference lines to the "Your Voice, Your Vote" homepage, where complete transcripts, stories and poll results were posted weekly.¹⁵

The packaged reports were the same from paper to paper. The bylines were different for each paper but below each byline is the tag "Your Voice, Your Vote" instead of the name of the paper. However, each of the partners supplemented these packages with reports on other issues not covered by the coalition.

The newspapers and commercial television stations shared the polling and administrative costs of the project. Only the PBS station paid for its share of those costs through a foundation grant of \$3,500 from the Pew Center for Civic Journalism.

In addition to the polls and packages, the coalition invited all the 13 candidates who ran for the two offices to sit for three-hour interviews before both the primary and general elections. Twelve of the 13 candidates chose to participate. Sen. Jesse Helms declined. Some of the papers left blanks for Helms in their weekly reports but eventually filled it up by questioning Helms at public appearances and by telephone.

Furthermore, the coalition sponsored a citizen forum in mid-October during which North Carolinians questioned the major-party candidates for governor. The forum was moderated by a news anchor from one of the partner TV stations but all questions came from citizens who participated in the project. The partnership did not sponsor a similar forum for the U.S. Senate candidates because Sen. Helms declined.

Critique and Defense of the Project

After the New York Times run a front-page news article on Sept. 24, 1996, several major newspapers severely criticized the North Carolina election coverage in news articles and opinion columns and were equally scathingly responded to by advocates of the project.

¹⁵ www.nando.net/nao/choices/voice

The fact that the public journalism coalition published articles that were identical from paper to paper was criticized as homogenizing the news thus limiting coverage of the campaign and elections.

Thad Beyle, a professor of political science at the University of North Carolina who analyzed the coverage for a book on state media was quoted in the New York Times article as saying, "They're cutting back on the diversity of news you're getting."¹⁶

Beyle was also quoted in the Columbia Journalism Review article as saying that by homogenizing issues, the project "took away the notion of what politics is all about - working towards coalitions, seeing what motivates voters and getting voters to the polls."¹⁷

Michael Gartner, former president of NBC News and now editor of the Daily Tribune in Ames, Iowa, wrote in an article in the Media Studies Journal: "One voice, even if it's a strong and somber voice, is just not as good as many voices. And this effort at community journalism wildly named "Your Voice" was but one voice, a homogenized, poll-fed voice."¹⁸

Gartner argued in the same article that "if five competing newspapers had gone after the stories, their reporters would have written the story in five different ways, held five sets of interviews, found five sets of facts. At least one of the five might have uncovered something startling, something new."¹⁹

Jennie Buckner, editor of the Charlotte Observer, responded in the same journal to Gartner's article. She wrote that Gartner's "criticism might be fair if "Your Voice, Your Vote" were the only election coverage we offered. It was not even close."²⁰

¹⁶ Bennett, James. "North Carolina Media Try to Lead Politics to Issues." The New York Times, 24 September 1996, p.A1.

¹⁷ Efron, Seth. "The North Carolina Experiment." Columbia Journalism Review. January-February 1997, p.2.

¹⁸ Gartner, Michael. "Public Journalism - Seeing Through the Gimmicks." <http://www.mediastudies.org/cov96/gartner.html>

¹⁹ Gartner, Michael.

²⁰ Response to Gartner. <http://www.mediastudies.org/cov96>

Buckner wrote that the six participating newspapers comprise only 13 percent of the dailies in North Carolina and that the 12 stories they shared during a nine-month period is little compared to the many thousands of political stories run in the coalition newspapers.

Davis Merritt defended the N.C. project by writing an article in late November that was run in his own Wichita Eagle well as in the Charlotte Observer and the Sun Herald. He said, "the shared material amounted to only about 20 percent of the election material printed, so their natural competition on the other 80 percent was unaffected."²¹

Apparently, the 20 percent may have covered issues North Carolinians said were important according to the polls but the 80 percent did not cover what the candidates thought were important. At least according to reports quoting Harvey Gantt and his campaign manager, Jim Andrews.

Gantt told Curtis Wilkie of the Boston Globe that "Here you've got two situations, and you can't get them covered because they're not on the list of things voters supposedly care about."²² Gantt, who lost to Helms, said that his events were ignored while reporters and TV crews flocked to Helms' appearances because it was their only chance to take the measure of a man who gives interviews grudgingly.

Part of Wilkie's article was about the non-coverage by the coalition partners of reports that the Jesse Helms Center, a foundation created to honor the senator had received money from the governments of Taiwan and Kuwait and also from the tobacco industry. That, despite the fact that Helms is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Andrews told Michael Kelly of the New Yorker, "There are serious disagreements here but all the disagreements are sanitized, everything is put through the washing machine."

²³ Andrews said the coalition ignored the issue of race.

²¹ Merritt, Davis. "Sniping Reveals an Ugly, Elitist Slant." Wichita Eagle, 24 November 1996; Sun Herald, 29 November 1996, p.A12; The Charlotte Observer, 01 December 1996.

²² Wilkie, Curtis. "'Public Journalism' Plays Out in N.C." The Boston Globe, 30 October 1996, p.A1.

²³ (quoted by) Effron, Seth and Gartner, Michael.

Gantt is black and Helms used an ad in 1990 suggesting that white workers lost job opportunities to affirmative action policies. In 1996, he accused Gantt of using his "minority status" to obtain a contract for his architectural firm from the Charlotte school system and to buy part interest in a TV station "under false pretense."²⁴

"This philosophy (public journalism) says, it is up to the polls to determine what should be covered and what should not be covered," Andrews was quoted in the New York Times article. "Part of the job of the candidate is to talk about something he feels is important,"²⁵ Andrews added.

The New York Times article noted that even some who support aspects of public journalism say that the coalition newspapers may have gone too far in ignoring the horse race. The article quoted Philip Meyer, a former Knight-Ridder reporter who is a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina, as saying, "There's no reason you can't do both. Think how boring basketball or football would be if we hid the scoreboard, or didn't announce if the extra point attempts were good until the end of the game."²⁶

Merritt wrote in his article that the critics "rushed off to North Carolina and interviewed the candidates and their handlers. Not surprisingly, they found the candidates and their handlers deeply unhappy about no longer being in full control of the electoral dialogue." He went on to write that the critics talked to a few journalists involved but only to demand that they respond to the campaign's protests and that they hadn't really talked to the citizens to find out if the people were benefiting from the information they were getting.²⁷

Lew Friedland, a journalism professor at the University of Wisconsin and co-author of Civic Lessons, a study of four civic journalism projects supported by the Pew Center for Civic

²⁴ Wilkie, Curtis.

²⁵ Bennett, James. The New York Times.

²⁶ Bennett, James.

²⁷ Merritt, Davis.

Journalism, said the critics "didn't actually look at what they were reporting about. They made a set of assumptions based on what my buddy told me at ASNE." ²⁸

Jim Morrill, veteran political reporter at the Charlotte Observer who helped launch the paper's foray into civic-style election reporting in 1992 said, he felt the critics of the North Carolina 1996 effort "got the facts wrong. They listened to some political operatives and took their opinions."²⁹

The question of control of the news was further echoed by Jonathan Yardley, a columnist for the Washington Post and formerly with the Daily News (now News Record) of Greensboro, N.C. Yardley denounced the project as an attempt by a "cabal" of news organizations "to control the political agenda rather than to report on the candidates' activities and positions."³⁰

Buckner responded soon after in an article published in the Washington Post in which she wrote, "We expect politicians to lead and address issues that they consider important, but we also expect them to address issues that the public considers important." ³¹

Gartner criticized the project for "ceding editorial judgment to pollsters or worse, to readers or viewers in focus groups who have no particular knowledge of a state, of politics or of politicians." ³² Yardley and Kelly also echoed this view in their articles.

Buckner responded to that charge in her Washington Post piece. "We report what we think readers need to know, as well as what they want to know. We're not about to abdicate that responsibility. We feel we're capable of being informed by polls without being slaves to them."

But the charges by the critics of crossing over to advocacy, of confusing the news pages with the editorial pages, and of serving up involvement and attachment instead of disengagement and detachment were quickly responded to by the advocates in terms of populism and elitism.

²⁸ (quoted by) Schaffer, Jan. "The Best or Worst?" The Quill, May 1997, p.25. (ASNE - American Society of Newspapers Editors).

²⁹ Schaffer, Jan.

³⁰ (quoted by) Efron, Seth and Wilkie, Curtis.

³¹ Buckner, Jennie. "Assault on 'Public Journalism.'" The Washington Post, 31 October 1996, p.A21.

³² Gartner, Michael.

In a statement echoing the opinion that critics of public journalism are elitist news organizations in the East Coast, Buckner stated that she is "particularly astonished by the number of journalists who seem offended by the suggestion that they might learn something valuable by listening to citizens."³³

Merritt stated the same opinion more forcefully in his article. "It is difficult to understand how asking voters what they want the candidates to talk about can approach anything like "fraud" until one recognizes what a threat such unleashed populism presents to the elite political press of this country."³⁴

He went on to write, "That journalistic gentry believes it is supposed to tell citizens what issues to be concerned about, not the other way around, so reversing the flow is akin to a threat of emasculation. Further, it threatens the cozy, incestuous relationship between the elite press and the politicians they cover."

The critics charged the project of resorting to populism in order to increase readership and ensure a customer base.

³³ Buckner, Jennie. "Assault on....." and in Public Journalism - Giving Voters a Voice."
<http://www.mediastudies.org/cov96/buckner.html>

³⁴ Merritt, Davis. "Sniping Reveals....."

Conclusions and Recommendations

While this author thinks most of the critique and the defense were put forward on the basis of the journalists' pre-conceived assumptions about each other rather than on the bare facts of the coverage of the project, this paper concludes, based on some facts reported in the New York Times and the Boston Globe, that the North Carolina project had compromised the journalistic principle of objectivity by ignoring to report important facts about the candidates' activities. This omission was not unintentional but was driven by the coalition's explicit goal to downplay the horse race and emphasize the issues North Carolinians said were important.

This author shares the view that the coalition may have gone too far in downplaying the traditional focus on the political operatives in election reporting.

The New York Times article noted the paradox of the approach taken by public journalism: while it tries to eliminate the public's cynicism towards government, in some ways the solutions it forwards derive partly from a cynical attitude toward the daily work of politics.

Therein lies the wisdom of traditional journalistic objectivity: when journalists abandon their professional distance from the issues they are covering, it becomes easier to abandon that "balance of reason" and become driven by one point of view.

On the other hand, there is truth in the assertion by civic journalists that the ideal of detachment and professional distance can push journalists to the other extreme of alienation from the very people they are supposed to serve.

The elusiveness of objectivity is complicated by the forces that control the news.

Books like *Breaking the News* by Fallows and *Manufacturing Consent* by Herman and Chomsky have raised issues of who controls the media, of the role of liberal elites and corporations in setting the agenda for news. While the scenario of an elitist-thought-controlled and profit-driven press brought up by these books is worrisome indeed and should be addressed,

advocates of public journalism should be aware that they could just as easily turn public journalism into populist demagoguery and marketeering.

While public journalism decries the corporations behind media organizations, it should be wary about the foundations and media chains behind its projects. There is, after all, a lot of wisdom in the traditional view taken by newspapers and television that outside money is tainted.

This paper takes the view that the press can be reformed not by declaring a "new" kind of journalism but by continually relating it to the special role of the American press in the governmental and public life in the United States. The press should always remind itself that its First Amendment privileges and protection speak less of their own prerogatives than of the right of all Americans to a press unconstrained by government, corporations and ideologies.

However, if there is anything new that the public journalism movement has contributed to the discussion of the rightful role of the press in society, it is that it highlighted the changes in contemporary society and contemporary journalism.

This paper takes the view that while the role of the press must be rooted in ageless principles, the press must be alert to the changes (demographic, cultural, technological, economic, etc.) in society to make the principles relevant to the present times. Furthermore, that the press must be aware of the changes in education and class status among journalists and how these changes affect the selection and organization of news.

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*<http://www.nando.net/nao/choices/voice>

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