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JOHN L. MORRIS

## NEWSPAPERS IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET: ADDING INTERACTIVITY TO OBJECTIVITY

Four books on public journalism have been published in the past three years, and they make clear that this movement has drawn attention to the interactive processes of journalism over the static products of journalism. This emphasis on process has led many critics to connect public journalism with activism and, consequently, a loss of objectivity. Scholars of the writing process and social psychology maintain that all human communication is interactive, however, and some theorists argue the more interactive the communication, the more effective it is. Research shows that interactive discussions affect news by helping reporters see public issues as readers see them; providing feedback for accuracy of information; complementing - not sacrificing - an objective writing style; offering a deeper understanding of issues; inspiring frames that would not have been considered; and providing a news product distinct from traditional journalism.

*Keywords:* Civic Journalism, Public Journalism, Audience, Feedback

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Civic journalists and Internet journalists have a lot in common — both groups place a high value on interaction. Civic journalists, also known as public journalists, interact with readers and other citizens through focus groups, resource panels, town meetings and community conversations, whereas online journalists interact with citizens through e-mail messages, list-serve postings, interactive web pages and hypertext links. Both believe including average citizens in public discussions is good for democracy (Morris 2002).

Four scholarly books on civic journalism, also known as public journalism, have been published in the past three years, and they make clear that this ideological movement has drawn attention to the interactive process of journalism more than the static products of journalism (Lambeth et. al. 1998; Corrigan 1999; Glasser 1999; Rosen 1999). Theodore Glasser even cautions civic journalists about adopting a “strictly procedural role” in *The Idea of Public Journalism* (1999: 9) and Don Corrigan catalogs numerous civic journalism processes in *The Public Journalism Movement in America* (1999: 185-209), such as teamworking, alternative framing, exchanging civic capital, acting as civic catalysts, civic mapping, collaborating, conducting community conversations, connecting with the community, deliberating, engaging the public, participating, conducting focus groups, mobilizing, public living, public listening, telling stories and working through problems. The other books that analyze the process of civic journalism are *Assessing Public Journalism* by Edmund Lambeth et al., and *What are Journalists For?* by Jay Rosen.

This emphasis on process has led many critics to connect civic journalism with activism and, consequently, a loss of objectivity. Scholars of the writing process and social psychology maintain that all human communication is interactive, however, and some theorists argue, the more interactive the communication, the more effective it is (Wood 1992; Meltzer 1967). In other words, communication between human beings assumes symbolic interaction between or among them. Many critics of civic journalism seem to prefer to limit the study of journalism to the products of journalism: examples of good news stories, profitable newspapers, effective layout, dramatic photography and perhaps most of all, good journalists. Products are objects, and they are easy to objectify; processes are fluid and harder to analyze.

The field of English composition, which is the study and practice of effective non-fiction writing, went through a paradigm shift more than a decade ago when many of the nation’s college writing scholars concluded

they could not teach a student to write like Hemingway simply by having the student read Hemingway (Laine and Schultz 1985; Bruffee 1986). They concluded more than examples of products were needed to teach students how to create good writing from blank paper or computer screens. Most writing teachers now stress two seemingly contradictory ideas simultaneously: product and process, which are noun and verb, object and action, and they imply both objectivity and activism. This requires a tolerance for tentativeness.

Underlying this apparent conflict is the theory of paradox, which holds that two opposites can't exist in the same time and place. John Donne, one of the most articulate English writers, made a career of debunking this myth (Morris 1989). According to Donne, paradoxes are a part of life, they require tolerance for tentative truths, and strictly linear logic can't explain them. Civic journalists seem to have at least a greater tolerance for tentativeness and paradox, as they accept their action-oriented roles while preserving an objective point of view in their search for truth. They pursue truth but they never have it. People who deny the existence of paradox in their lives reject the affect of interaction on their minds. They ask, "How can we ever arrive at the truth when we openly encourage so many different voices to be heard? How can we reach a conclusion?" This stance appears to reject the process of communication.

A civic journalist, on the other hand, may be tempted to say, "Conversations need no conclusions. The interactive process is an end in itself," but that would be a rejection of the communication product. We need both sides to mint this coin. We create a product every time we go through a decision-making process, whether it be to elect one candidate over another, change a law or publish today's news. We cannot function without products, just as we cannot create products without processes. Civic journalism has gained widespread attention from scholars and practitioners by focusing on a neglected side of the art of news writing.

Civic, public and online journalism — sometimes collectively referred to as citizen-based journalism — tends to emphasize interactive communication, and the resulting two-way process is popularly referred to as interactivity (Lambeth, Meyer and Thomson 1998). Interactivity refers to action-reaction interdependent relationships (Berlo 1960). It involves reciprocal sending and receiving of messages. Some scholars of this journalism move quickly from communication to democratic theory because both involve interactivity, but this study focuses on communication by asking the question, "How does interactivity affect objectivity?"



## Interactivity

Sally McMillan and Edward Downes conducted an extensive literature review and 10 highly-structured interviews with online educators and publishers in order to define interactivity. They concluded all communication is interactive to some extent, but interactivity increases when individuals (McMilan et Downes: 17)

- perceive the goal of the communication is more oriented to exchanging information than attempting to persuade;
- they perceive they have greater control of the communication;
- they believe they must take an active role to fully benefit from the communication;
- all participants act and react to messages;
- the time of the communication is flexible for participants; and
- they think the environment fosters a sense of place.

The researchers note that some of these ideas are far from new, but the Internet seems to have been designed with interactivity in mind (McMilan and Downes: 9). They also concede there is a large amount of existing research in feedback and sociology scholarship pertaining to interaction in communication. Despite this, their focus is on computer-mediated communication research. The established concepts of feedback and sociology adds rich insights to the new concept of interactivity.

Interactivity is an alternating process of feedback, a term defined by mathematician Norbert Wiener in his theory of cybernetics as “the feeding back of operating data into a system from the interactions of the system with the environment” (New Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia, 1993: *Cybernetic*). The term also was used by communication theorist Wilbur Schramm in *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, published in 1954. Schramm said the sender and receiver of a message must share common meanings of a signal for them to understand each other. They reach common meanings through two kinds of feedback: a message from the receiver to the sender, and a message from the sender to himself or herself when he or she reads her own message. Both processes involve moving targets.

Before the rise of the personal computer spurred popular interest in interactivity, the military’s need for anti-aircraft artillery spurred the development of the personal computer (Burke 1986). The accuracy of such a weapon requires computing distances, speeds, angles and trajectories,

all of which can change during the process. A small, portable computer was needed to make such calculations quickly and constantly in the battlefield.

Just as changes in altitude affect gunners' aims, readers' attitudes affect the aims of writers. Constant feedback is necessary for good communication, though it is not necessary for one-way delivery of information. Citizen-based journalism stresses communication over information delivery, and the quality of human communication can be measured according to the ease with which feedback is obtained (Berlo 1960: 131). Civic and online journalists appear to be more interested in communicating with an audience than in simply delivering information to it.

Scholarly research on human interaction is far from new, but it seems to have been overshadowed in recent decades by the apparent successes of scientific methods, expert opinion and competitive debate in determining truth. From a social psychology perspective, however, each individual's very self identity is the product of symbolic interactions with other people's minds or "selves" (Meltzer 1967). The process of symbolic interaction shapes our beliefs, our facts, our knowledge and our truths. There is no such thing as a self-made person, or even idea, according to well-established social psychology. Even general semanticists point out that these words — belief, fact, knowledge and truth — are only abstractions for attributes of our inner selves. The word is not the thing; the map is not the territory (Hayakawa 1990).

Human minds cannot communicate directly. All human communication from one mind (or self) to another or a group of minds (selves) happens through the socially understood objects of a physical medium, ranging from gestures and signs to words and symbols, to computers and modems. The theory of symbolic interaction expands the concept of communication from simply exchanging information to creating self identities. Under this paradigm, no one who believes in developing strong self-identities would accept a one-directional-delivery model of mass media.

When two or more minds share symbols through a medium, such as language, a two-way construction of meaning takes place. This symbolic interaction, or alternate sending-and-receiving of symbols, is the root of a developing epistemology called "social construction of meaning," also known as structuralism, semiotics or constructionism. This view of knowledge — or truth — stresses that meaning, "even when it seems natural or inherent, is always the result of social conventions" (New Grolier

Multimedia Encyclopedia 1993: *Semiotics*). This epistemological movement, developed by George Herbert Mead, Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure and Thomas Kuhn, focuses on the fragile relationship between signs and what is signified.

Mead presented seminal ideas about the ability of humans to create symbols to his students at the University of Chicago in the 1920s. Though he never published a book-length systematic statement of his theory, four posthumous books bearing his name provide detailed ideas about how human communication differs from the direct stimulus-response communication of animals. Bernard Meltzer (1967: 19) summarized Mead's theory of symbolic interaction:

The human individual is born into a society characterized by symbolic interaction. The use of significant symbols by those around him enables him to pass from the conversation of gestures — which involves direct unmeaningful response to the overt acts of others — to the occasional taking of the roles of others. Concurrent with role-taking, the self develops, i.e., the capacity to act toward oneself. Action toward oneself comes to take the form of viewing oneself from the standpoint, or perspective, of the generalized other (the composite representative of others, of society, within the individual), which implies defining one's behavior in terms of the expectations of others.

In the process of such viewing of oneself, the individual must carry on symbolic interaction with himself, involving the internal conversation between his impulsive aspect (the "I") and the incorporated perspectives of others (The "Me").

Mead compared this interactive process to the reactive process of animals to discount simplistic theories of the human mind that suggest a direct stimulus-response relationship to the physical world. In a footnote explaining the idea of thinking by means of symbols (Mead 1934: 122), Mead wrote, "Rational conduct always involves a reflexive reference to self, that is, an indication to the individual of the significance which his actions or gestures have for other individuals." This reflection creates past, present and future points of view that permit the human mind to try various responses in the imagination before selecting one. He calls this process of the mind "the individual (Mead 1934: 124)." Meltzer describes the human mind and the meaning of symbols (Mead 1934: 19):

The mind, or mental activity, is present in behaviour whenever such a symbolic interaction goes on — whether the individual is merely "thinking" (in the every-

day sense of the word) or is also interacting with another individual .... The meaning of an object or event is simply an image of the pattern of action which defines the object or event. That is, the completion in one's imagination of an act, or the mental picture of the actions and experiences symbolized by an object, defines the act or the object.

Meltzer emphasizes that symbolic interaction is both the medium for the development of human beings and the process by which human beings associate as human beings. Thus as early as the turn of the century, Mead was teaching students that the human mind was a dynamic process rather than a static product. Meltzer believes that some of Mead's terms are vague, his theory omits important references to the unconscious, and it does not seem highly researchable, but he also believes Charles Cooley fills in some of these gaps. Cooley suggests that men and women are innately social beings who derive pleasure from sharing common meanings. Despite the fact that the development of the mind is essentially introspective in nature, individuals share their thoughts with one another. To do this, they use external symbols with shared meanings (Cooley 1967: 75):

As we perceive and remember sensuous images of gesture, voice and facial expression, so, at the same time, we record the movements of thought and feeling in our consciousness, ascribe similar movements to others, and so gain an insight into their minds. We are not for the most part, reflectively aware of this, but we do it and the result is social knowledge. This process is stimulated and organized by language and — indirectly, through language — by the social heritage of the past. Under the leading of words we interpret our observation, both external and introspective, according to patterns that have been found helpful by our predecessors. When we have come to understand ... words recalling motions of the mind as well as of the body, it shows that we have not only kept a record of our inner life, but have worked up the data into definite conceptions which we can pass on to others by aid of the common symbol.

Mead and Cooley attempt to describe process and motion of the mind. This makes a static diagram of symbolic interaction particularly elusive, but helpful attempts by Joel Charon and Julia Wood appear in the appendix (Wood 1992: 26).

The focus of Mead's theory is on how minds interact and create one another:

(Mead) is interested in the communication acts among individuals, conducted by means of significant symbols. He further posits that social communication leads to the capacity of the individual to be a companion to himself, to think of himself — indeed, to think. Mead insists that one cannot converse with oneself without first conversing with others. Thought is itself social in origin and interactive in its nature, with the thinker taking alternatively the roles of actor and audience (Scheibe 1985: 47; Vygotsky 1990: 243-249).

Cooley's concept of this formation of self as "the looking glass self" is interesting and memorable, but it does little to explain the process. One must struggle to remember that Cooley's looking glass is metaphorical, not literal:

Cooley is widely identified in modern secondary sources as the author of the conception of the "looking glass self" — the idea that the raw empirical material for the formation of self consists of reflections provided by others. That Cooley is so closely identified with this conception is testimony to the power of metaphor as the vehicle for memory. While this identification is certainly correct, it seems a particular injustice to Cooley's life work to be so summarily captured in a snippet of a phrase (Scheibe 1985: 44; See also Vygotsky 1990).

Many objects can be symbols. Even a communication medium can be a symbol. Marshall McLuhan extolled the importance of the medium as a meaningful symbol in his famous claim: "The medium is the message," or "massage" (McLuhan 1967). There is no doubt the medium of a message is part of the message, but the comprehensive symbolic system of language — written or spoken — also is part of the message, and it is rich with socially constructed meanings. The computer as a symbol, therefore, may contribute meaning to computer-mediated messages, but it is never the entire message. Language remains our most powerful medium of symbolic meanings.

The Internet is a medium, like television, newspapers, radio, pamphlets, handbills, telephones, films, register receipts, airplane banners and billboards. Each of these media shares the most common symbolic medium created by the human mind: language, either printed or oral. What distinguishes the Internet from these other media is its ability to provide feedback quickly and easily from receivers to senders. The Internet has introduced mass interaction to mass media.



## The Internet

The Internet is the world's first two-way, electronic mass medium. The use of photos, graphics, text, sound and video does not distinguish it from traditional newspapers and television. Its level of interactivity is its most distinguishing characteristic. Indeed, citizen-based journalism may represent newspaper and broadcast journalists' attempts to increase audience interactivity in an intuitive response to the increasing interactivity on the Internet. Civic journalists are using public forums, community conversations, surveys and other interactive information-gathering methods to increase interactivity with their readers, viewers and listeners. The Internet complements these democratic methods of social construction of meaning.

Executive Director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism Jan Schaffer wrote that civic journalism "builds in some interactivity for readers, viewers or listeners. They can talk, deliberate, meet, question — even calculate (alternative tax returns on the Internet). ... It forgoes some traditional journalistic control and gives citizens some space to have a voice (Schaffner 2000)." Indeed, Internet discussion groups and interactive web sites may be the most efficient way to achieve citizen-based journalism (Civic Catalyst 2000: 2).

New Hampshire Public Radio's "Tax Challenge" web site featured an Online Tax Calculator that allowed people literally to test drive how different tax proposals would affect their individual tax bills. The web site was used by more than 31,000 people. Complemented by on-air reports and 10 citizen forums, the initiative empowered people to engage in intelligent debate ... and gave them the tools they needed to consider a statewide tax to fund education.

Interactivity does not come automatically with two-way technology. Despite the World Wide Web's flashy graphics and photos and even some sound and video, many Web pages are not very interactive. The most interactive feature of the Internet continues to be electronic mail, which also is its oldest feature. Hyperlinks to related news stories, editorials, photos, movies, songs and documents enable readers to selectively add information to a news story, but to increase interactivity and improve communication, writers must receive and interpret messages from their audience. So, the relatively simple process of including hypertext links to e-mail addresses of reporters or other people concerned with a certain news story may be the biggest attraction of a Web page over a paper page.

Three books that guided the civic journalism movement in its early stages also focus on interaction between journalists and members of the public: *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*, by Daniel Yankelovich (1991), *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning* by Russell Neuman & Marion Just and Ann Crigler (1992), and *Public Journalism & Public Life: Why Telling the News is Not Enough* by Davis Merritt (1995). This general area of communication study has been called "audience analysis," and it tests the hypothesis that the better writers know their audience, the better they can communicate with that audience (McQuail 1997; Deweth-Pallmeyer 1997).

Underlying the audience analysis approach is a communication triangle that connects author, audience and reality through a commonly understood signal. James Kinneavy's *Theory of Discourse* presents a list of many prominent scholars who have employed the communication triangle in their theories (Kinneavy 1971: 19). Some have altered the names of the components and a few have objected "to the artificial separation of speaker, speech and reality as if they were three actors in a play. But this seems to be the danger inherent in any abstraction, and science must abstract. (Kinneavy 1971:20)"

More generally, these factors in the process can be viewed as the *components* (signal), the *interpretations* given to the components (reference to reality), and the *use* given the interpreted components by the users (encoder, decoder). Viewed in this general way, the components become similar to what mathematicians or logicians sometimes call a *grammar*, the interpreted components are a *language* and this is used for specific purposes as a *calculus*. Or the triangle thus becomes what some mathematicians call a "theory," and each interpretation becomes a "model."

The technological success of science in explaining and manipulating nature and the commercial success of huge media corporations during the past half-century seem to have overshadowed the social and democratic role that individuals play in public communication to acquire knowledge and seek truth. This technology bias has firmly entrenched the one-way mathematical theory of communication in the minds of many journalists. As citizen-based journalists turn their attention to creating interactive mass communication channels that encourage multi-directional discourse, American culture may return to a more interactive and democratic form of public discourse. Civic journalists seem to embrace such a paradigm, while traditionalists seem to operate under



the assumptions of a one-directional information paradigm (Schudson 1995: 40).

Journalism always has been tied to technology, starting with the invention of reusable type, viscous ink and the printing press more than 500 years ago. Mass audiences first began to appear as readers of inexpensive penny newspapers during the late 1800s. The large press runs were made possible by steam-driven, rotary press technology. The advent of radio in the 1920s seemed so pervasive it was considered a dangerous tool of propaganda, and, therefore, it was licensed and regulated by the government. Ultimately, the influence of the mass media was demonstrated by the major television networks broadcasting just three signal to millions of Americans during the 1950s and '60s. Today, however, the mass media are experiencing fragmentation of their audiences as citizens use numerous news sources created by the technology of the computer microchip. Recent research in theories of selective influence (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989) indicates that neither information sources nor destinations of messages are homogeneous, and this fact, combined with the availability of numerous new sources of information, seriously undermines any contemporary one-directional model of mass communication.

Yankelovich claims the delivery of information approach to journalism does not help people come to "public judgment," which is public opinion that is "stable, consistent, and responsible (1991: 42)." He contrasts public judgment to opinion that changes easily or opinion that contains internal contradictions. His book contains several examples, drawn from his years as a public opinion and mass media researcher. He describes how the "Culture of Technical Control" devalues all opinion, and he argues that democracy and capitalism depend on value judgments as much as they do on scientific facts.

Communication involves the symbolic representation and interpretation of values as well as objects. In their competitive zeal to be fair to all sides of public issues while regularly being accused of bias, journalists repeatedly have defended themselves by invoking a stance of objectivity (Tuchman 1972), a term borrowed from the natural sciences that requires the observer to remain neutral, dispassionate and detached from a subject. In their professional competition to be the most objective, however, many journalists apparently have objectified their readers, too, even though they are not observing their readers but trying to communicate with them. Journalists have a tradition of overlooking readers' opinions

because they are systematically trained to be concerned only with facts, which they usually associate with professional experts and government agencies.

Objectivity during research minimizes the personal biases of the observer, and this has helped scientists make enormous contributions to technological knowledge; however, even scientists make value judgments about their audiences when they present their research. When they decide to write, they no longer are detached, and they must know their audience well to communicate well. This clearly suggests that objectivity is a good research method, but not a good communication method. There is more than one kind of knowledge, Yankelovich argues, and human communication is influenced by all of them (Tuchman 1972).

Yankelovich devotes two chapters to show that objectivism has been so successful in so many areas of technical culture, there is a tendency for experts to think only in such terms (Tuchman 1972). Because objective detachment works so well for scientific research, for example, reporters often remain in the same mode while writing, even though writing traditionally has been considered an art, not a science. This professional ritual places a barrier between journalists and their audiences, which undermines established theories of audience analysis, symbolic interaction and human communication.

To remain detached from the observed and from the readers, journalists routinely rely on experts, who also tend to objectify the public. Every side of an issue has its own experts, and every side tends to overstate its point of view so that public issues often are presented in the media as polarized battles. This frustrates much of the news audience because many citizens don't identify with either extreme. After partisan journalism faded from colonial America, objective journalism emerged through a widespread desire to attract the most news readers by seeking the middle ideological ground, (Ognianova and Endersby 1996) but, ironically, this type of objectivity led to quoting experts from polarized extremes — not the middle ground (Merritt 1995: 8).

Yankelovich argues that the media are good at making the public aware of information. They are weak, however, at helping the public work through controversies to form public judgments. He offers the following 10 rules for resolution to public leaders :

1. Learn what the public's starting point is and how to address it.
2. Do not depend on experts to present issues.

3. Address the public's preoccupation before going on to any other facet of the issue.
4. Give the public the incentive of knowing someone is listening ... and cares.
5. Limit the number of issues to two or three at a time.
6. Working through is best accomplished when people have choices.
7. Highlight the underlying values of the choices.
8. Note internal contradictions in logic.
9. Compromise to conserve some elements of two conflicting values.
10. Don't force artificial time constraints on issues (Yankelovich 1991: 160-176).

Even journalists who don't consider themselves public leaders can benefit from understanding the stages of how citizens come to public judgments. If these rules represent how citizens make public decisions — and Yankelovich makes a good argument based on first-hand experience and valid logic — then news writers who understand them will be better communicators.

Successful writers are not indifferent to readers. Writers have been wooing readers since the creation of the first symbol (Glasser 1999: XX). One way journalists attract readers is by presenting unusual facts in a context of familiar facts to gain attention while also promoting understanding and retention. This is consistent with cognitive learning theories that show people learn by adding information to existing schema (Neuman, Just and Crigler 1992: 14-15). This suggests effective communication requires some knowledge of what readers know, but reporters often do not have any systematic and reliable way to assess how the public interprets their work, and some apparently aren't even interested (Neuman, Just and Crigler 1992 : 78; Rosen 1999: 42, 122).

Whereas Yankelovich created theory based on research, Neuman, Just and Crigler conducted research based on theory — the social construction model of political communication, which “triangulates media, audience, and issue domains”:

Theory in this tradition focuses on the conditions of effective mass communication. The communication outcome, be it learning, persuasion, resonance, or interest, depends on the character of the communications source (including complex norms of professional journalism and the nature of the news medium itself), the character of the audience (diversely skilled and interested in public affairs), as well as the nature of the public issues in question. This approach em-

phasizes that the growth of common knowledge is gradual, iterative, and interpretive. The central problematics of this research paradigm focus on the connections made, and the connections missed, between the citizen's interests and understandings and the language of public discourse in the news media (Neuman, Just and Crigler 1992: 110).

This description of the constructionist model of political communication is also an expression of the communication triangle as applied to political communication. The authors' research indicates that reporters and readers rely primarily on five conventional, contextual frames to exchange information: conflict, moral values, economics, powerlessness and human impact. The conflict frame focuses attention on competition between two or more sides of an issue. The moral values frame focuses on cultural norms. The economic frame is concerned primarily with bottom-line costs. The powerlessness frame presents people as victims of powerful social forces, and the human impact frame focuses on concrete examples to illustrate abstract public issues.

The authors' comparison of how often each frame is employed by readers as opposed to reporters is interesting because they don't match. Readers, according to the analysis of in-depth interviews, rely most on human impact and moral values while reporters rely more on conflict and powerlessness. Neuman, Just and Crigler have contributed some useful terms for discussion and further research. If reporters agree that even objective journalism involves selecting a contextual frame in order to convey meaning to a particular audience, the concept would be very valuable in teaching, managing, writing and reading news.

Despite these theories and research, media critic Michael Schudson claims the dominant popular and academic paradigm of mass communication remains the one-directional "transmission model," (1995: 40) also known as the mathematical, silver bullet and hypodermic needle theories. He points out that in the 1800s, newspaper readers often wrote articles directed at each other, much like today's electronic bulletin boards and online discussions. Even though newspaper readers can still contribute messages through letters to the editor

....the metropolitan press, as it became a more insistent, self-conscious, and lucrative big business, increased its distance from its readers. As the link between press and party weakened, the newspaper voice no longer presumed even a broad political agreement with its readers. More and more, the voice of the professional

newspaper was separated out from the voice of the readers; where once the two were undifferentiated, they became sharply divided (1995: 50-51).

Newspapers rely heavily on letters to the editor or anonymous phone lines for feedback, but the audience for these messages normally consists of editors and readers — not news writers. Schudson argues that an ideological gulf has developed between reporters and their audiences. This division was a significant finding of readership research in the 1970s (Clark 1979), but the main response of the news media was to make reporters more visible through increased use of their bylines and photos. This may have helped readers know reporters, but it didn't help reporters know their readers. Media critic Lance Strate agrees with Schudson:

Mass media communications are primarily one-way; audience members are rarely able to use the media to send their own messages, and audience feedback is infrequent, indirect, and delayed. Finally, the communicators are physically separated from their audience .... Audience members select and interpret the messages of the mass media and are influenced by them. This capacity to influence has made the mass media the subject of intensive study, criticism, and debate (Strate 1993).

Reporters tend to be isolated from readers because they spend most of their time with news sources and other journalists. This hypothesis suggests reporters know much more about experts and journalists than they do about news audiences:

They cannot see the eyes that glaze over, the attention that wanders, or the look of puzzlement on their "students'" faces. Their feedback comes almost exclusively from other journalists and occasionally from editors or irate readers (Neuman, Just and Crigler: 1992).

Does this writer-reader gap affect the quality of news writing? Schramm's shared experience model, Mead's theory of symbolic interaction and Kinneavy's theory of discourse, which includes the communication triangle model, indicate it does. The research and theory-building of Yankelovich and Neuman, Just and Crigler supported the idea that the public is not getting what it needs from the mass media to make sound judgments and construct meaningful knowledge concerning public affairs.



## Community Conversations

To test the effects of interactive news discussions, reporters at *The Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk, Va., learned to conduct and report community conversations as an alternative to polling citizens about public issues (Campbell 1995: A2). For similar reasons, *The Miami Herald* news staff conducted community conversations as a “systematic way to learn about our readers and to help give our reporters and editors some deeper insight into what truly engages people in the communities we cover (Clifton 1994: 4c).” The editors of these papers said the concept grew out of the Merritt’s public journalism philosophy.

Merritt had written that journalists have a new purpose: “revitalizing a moribund public process (Merritt 1995: 83).” He claimed public life was not going well and that newspapers had a stake in improving it. Without democratic debate of public problems and potential solutions, he argued, there was no need for newspapers<sup>1</sup>. His book urged journalists to make connections to average citizens, and community conversations emerged from that goal:

Citizens are equally moved by stories detailing failures in public education, or health care delivery, or criminal justice. But they need help with the next step. The newspaper that practices public journalism should be able to provide that help, not by dictating a solution, but by facilitating broad, purposeful discourse on the issue, by celebrating victories, by diagnostically noting failures, by encouraging citizen involvement, by outlining and assessing available courses of action (Clifton 1994: 4c).

Even *New York Times Magazine* columnist Max Frankel, who had been an opponent of public journalism, said he saw the need for publishers to foster discourse, which is “value adding” to information. He said he came to understand the “added value” of *The Times* by studying new technology. The Internet will enable readers to access information quickly and use it more easily than ever before, he wrote. Anyone with a home computer and telephone line will have access to information from a wide variety of

<sup>1</sup> Merritt restated these ideas at a Civic Journalism Teach-In sponsored by the Civic Journalism Interest Group of AEJMC and the University of Missouri School of Journalism, 22-23 March 1995. He resisted defining public journalism and called for additional research to determine what it is he and other civic-minded journalists are accomplishing with their new attitudes toward citizens and reporting techniques.

sources: "Shouting the news no longer sells papers; the news is omnipresent. It's what you do with and around information that counts more and more (Frankel: 1996)."

Frankel said he realized this trend during a presentation by Esther Dyson, "a wise and witty entrepreneur who makes a business out of teaching business to prepare itself for life on the Internet." She predicts publishers and distributors of intellectual property will increasingly plan their businesses as if basic content were free because it is so plentiful. "They will look for profit in the values that they contrive to add to content."

An important added value, Dyson says, will be the community that content purveyors can provide — an audience of people who will pay not just for the content being offered but to be part of the group that the content attracts. ... One powerful reason for reading *The Times*, for example, has always been the likelihood that your Wall Street broker, your business competitor, your next dinner partner and the President of the United States were also getting their information from the same source. They became a *Times* community. And their interests subtly but firmly shaped the agenda and tone of the news served up to them. ... Good newspapers were crudely "interactive" before they ever printed that word.

Frankel used an important concept: a community of readers. In the *Times*' case, it's a collection of financial and policy experts who share many of the same status symbols and philosophical meanings. The *Times*' has a community of readers throughout the world just like some World Wide Web sites on the Internet, but cyberspace citizens prefer to call them virtual communities. Literary critic Stanley Fish calls them interpretive communities (Fish 1980). People who share meanings of symbols form communities and perpetuate their communities by creating even more commonly interpreted symbols. According to this theory, a writer who repeatedly assigns meanings to symbols that are not shared by other readers and writers in his or her community will not be publishing long.

Community conversations are more practical than focus groups or resource panels because they are less formal and they can be conducted with little specialized training or expense. The goal of the community conversation is to bring citizens together to discuss public issues that are important to them while the reporters listen. To understand how interactive discussions on the Internet can affect news coverage, it is instructive to study research conducted on community conversations.



## A Case Study

The following case study illustrates how some news reporters have begun to increase interaction with news readers through the use of community conversations. The research project documents a systematic attempt to include the news audience in the news process, and it includes a readership experiment showing that a purposive sample of readers distinguished between the language of civic journalism and the language of traditional journalism.

To test the effects of community conversations, a group of radio, TV and newspaper journalists in Columbia, Mo., worked together to conduct a civic journalism project. With the support of their editors and station managers, as well as the guidance of University of Missouri Journalism Professor Edmund Lambeth, the group planned a week-long series of news stories that would include all three media because Lambeth's research had indicated citizens learn more through the synergy of multimedia presentations (Thorson and Lambeth 1995).

*Columbia Missourian* Managing Editor George Kennedy said the topic was selected by the media managers during a brainstorming session. They settled on religion because it had high relevance to the community and inadequate coverage. He said the goal was to raise the level of public awareness concerning the relationship between religion and public life<sup>2</sup>.

Research began in fall 1995 when five resource panels were conducted. Each resource panel consisted of about five people who were knowledgeable in some aspect of religion and public life. The panels of experts were moderated by the media managers, and the audience consisted of reporters and editors. These panels were used for background information.

Resource panels are comprised of three to five experts. The purpose of panels is to spur audience-panel interaction. Panels tend to be smaller than focus groups, which usually include five to 10 people without an overt audience, though they often are covertly observed through videotape or one-way mirrors. Focus group members usually are paid to participate whereas panelists often volunteer their expertise (Willey 1998).

During the winter, members of the Religion and Public Life project met every Wednesday at noon to coordinate their work in brainstorming sessions. Eight community conversations emerged on the following top-

<sup>2</sup> Columbia Missourian Managing Editor George Kennedy, interview by author, 30 April 1996, University of Missouri, Columbia

ics: public policy, evangelicals, youth, the unchurched, women, ministers, Afro-Americans and Interfaith Council.

Unlike the *Virginian-Pilot* and *Herald* meetings, these community conversations were used only for background information. Participants were told in advance that they would not be quoted in the newspaper or recorded for radio or TV, although minutes of the meetings were recorded and reported to project members by e-mail.

Confidentiality enabled participants to speak more openly and freely, said a reporter who conducted the public policy conversation. Otherwise, the citizen-participants might have been reluctant to be honest and forthright about controversial issues, he said. Reporters who conducted the women's issues conversation and the youth conversation agreed. They all said the conversations were good for generating sources and story ideas, with only one reservation<sup>3</sup>.

One reporter said the time and effort required to organize, conduct and analyze community conversations could be costly in day-to-day reporting. The advantage of using them on a collaborative project, he said, was that several reporters could attend and benefit from one community conversation.

After brainstorming and picking topics for the conversations, each reporter met with leaders within the relevant faith communities. They used this time to explain the project and create a list of possible participants. A meeting was scheduled for five to 10 participants and two to four journalists. At the meeting, the reporter in charge explained the project again, including the community conversation, and acted as a facilitator as the participants discussed religion and public life in relation to their community. Some statements recorded from the community conversations follow:

- *Public Policy*

Public motivations often grow out of religious beliefs, but the news media usually focus on the odd and sensational.

Some religious leaders shy away from making public statements because they fear offending the "religious pocketbook."

The news media should tell stories of ordinary religious people in the community.

Many interesting and successful teenagers are religious, but most popular

<sup>3</sup> Interviews by author, 20 April 1996 and 21 April 1996, University of Missouri, Columbia.

movies portray religious people as undesirable.

“(This) is the most self-consciously secular community I’ve ever lived in.”

- *Youth*

One youth said she weighs everything against how it will affect her relationship with Christ.

A Jewish youth said when she is among Christians, she is afraid to express her religious ideas.

A common base, provided by religion, is important in establishing relationships.

To see young men with “Christ in their hearts” is exciting.

- *Women*

More bridges are needed between faith groups in Columbia.

Muslims are unfairly identified with terrorism.

The media focus on brokenness and despair. The coverage of religion should include more hopefulness.

Several women expressed the desire to look for commonalities among religions instead of differences. “We are one in the spirit,” one said.

The news media concentrate on conflict, but this community conversation is progress.

Women do most of the work of faith groups<sup>4</sup>.

This civic journalism project followed the lead of professional editors. *Herald* Executive Editor Doug Clifton used community conversations as a means to “listen as our fellow citizens explore common problems and their solutions (Clifton 1994: 4c).” Former *Virginian-Pilot* Editor Cole C. Campbell used them because “journalists are learning from these conversations about how citizens connect to public issues and how we might aid that connection rather than impede it with reporting focused too much on who’s winning and who’s losing any given dispute (Campbell: 1995).” The common thread for Clifton and Campbell was understanding the average citizen’s point of view. Community conversations help reporters see community problems and solutions from a citizen’s perspective rather than from a journalist’s or expert’s point of view.

This goal was followed as the Religion and Public Life project mem-

<sup>4</sup>These and subsequent primary research findings on interactive journalism are based on personal notes and tape recordings made by the author between September 1995 and August 1997 at the University of Missouri, Columbia.

bers began to brainstorm story ideas. They began by writing themes from each community conversation on a presentation board for all project members to consider. Eight lists of themes emerged from the discourse:

- *Public Policy*: youth activities, community, politics, after-school activities, religion/sports connection, secularism.
- *Evangelicals*: different world view, religion-based life, church community, love of God, absolute values, abortion as moral issue.
- *Youth*: religion is personal, segregation of faith, ability comes from God, culture of faiths, Christian hegemony, youth groups, teachers.
- *Unchurched*: 80 percent of population, great opportunity for ministers, biblical ignorance, Christian differences, morning services for learning, outreach, music and new technology, secular marketing, salvation is prime concern.
- *Women*: women do bulk of work in churches, seek leadership, roles lose credibility when dominated by women, successful ministers have nurturing qualities, press misses stories about devout youth, diverse beliefs/single mind, lack of common understanding of faiths.
- *Ministers*: lack of knowledge, churches are service oriented, government shifts too much work to the churches, coverage of the poor, reporters should experience each faith, media miss stories of hope, stability in transient culture.
- *Afro-Americans*: health-wellness consortium, youth released from prison, poor police relations, religious left needs attention, caring communities, religion can bring people together (but it doesn't), no coordination of efforts, get racist attitudes out of religion.
- *Interfaith Council*: ecumenical, Fun City, Columbia Youth Group, pulpit exchanges, break down fear and increase knowledge, Food Pantry, Wardrobe, St. Francis House, Loaves and Fishes, Bethlehem House, Salvation Army, Lois Bryant House, Ann Carlson Food Pantry, Volunteers in Action.

From these lists, the cooperating broadcast managers and newspaper editor identified six themes for the day-by-day, week-long, multimedia coverage of religion and public life: public policy, segregation, outreach, youth/future, women's roles and health. One of these themes would be the focus of each day's coverage, and a "portrait of the religious community" would kick off the series of news stories. Project reporters and editors volunteered to serve on the various theme teams, which met several

times over the next month to develop specific story assignments. Meetings also were scheduled with photographers and graphic designers.

The segregation theme team began with the idea of religious segregation, which was mentioned in the youth community conversation report, but one of the reporters said the team members gradually adopted the terms “ecumenical” and “inter-faith relations” to better reflect the approach to their stories. He said he didn’t get story ideas from the conversation he conducted with the Jewish community, but he did get a better understanding of this group. They disagreed on many points of faith, he said, but they generally agreed that Judaism was more of a culture than a faith. He was able to use the insights and contacts he made in the conversation in his regular religion beat reporting, too.

*The Virginian-Pilot* and *The Herald* quoted liberally from their community conversations. The reporters of the Religion and Public Life project chose not to follow that path. After analyzing the community conversations, the reporters were just beginning their interviewing for news stories, though they were bolstered by much off-the-record background material and a wide array of possible sources.

Focusing the dialogue of the community conversations and the deliberation of the project members, who were from three different newsrooms, proved challenging. Reaching well-defined, specific assignments took longer than anticipated, and the project’s publication date was delayed a few weeks<sup>5</sup>. The deadline extension also permitted a survey to be completed, however, and this supported the community conversations with quantitative data. Telephone interviewers reading a six-page questionnaire attempted to contact 160 faith group leaders in the area. The survey questions were derived from the community conversations:

- About how many members does your congregation have?
- About how many members did your congregation have two years ago?
- What is the average age of the members of your congregation?
- About what percentage of your congregation is female?
- About what percentage of your congregation’s annual budget goes to charity?
- How important are the following issues to your congregation?
- Please name up to three issues that the youth of your faith group think are important.

<sup>5</sup>The week-long coverage originally scheduled to begin 14 April 1996 was rescheduled for the week of 26 May 1996



- Please rate on a scale from 1 (least needed) to 7 (most needed) the following areas of possible cooperation among faith groups. ...
- Which of the following service-providers does your faith group support?
- How would you assess the degree of influence on public policy exercised by public officials who apply their faith to their work?
- Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the following statements:
  - Faith groups should provide more of the services the services the government provides now.
  - Local news media usually don't do a good job of covering faith groups.
  - Women often are not represented in leadership positions in faith groups in proportion to their numbers.
  - Members of different faith groups often meet together.
  - Women often do most of the work of faith groups.
  - Strong faith helps people maintain good health.

The survey was designed so each reporter could extract results relevant to her or his story, but the main use of the survey results was to compose the portrait overview story. The reporter who volunteered to write this story said the community conversations would help him keep the survey results in context and the survey would be a reality check on the conversations<sup>6</sup>.

At this point, the reporting seemed to be following conventional patterns of writing, revising and editing. The main contribution of the community conversations appeared to be during the story development phase. This certainly would not surprise Merritt, who has maintained that public journalism is additive. It doesn't replace traditional journalism, it complements it (Merritt: 1995). Knowledge gained during the community conversations was used by the reporters during the revising and editing stages to improve their objective news writing.

### A Pilot Study

To test whether readers could identify differences between traditional journalism and public journalism, Lambeth and other researchers devel-

<sup>6</sup>Interview by author, 20 April 1996, University of Missouri, Columbia.

oped a list of public journalism and traditional news criteria. They were based on literature reviews, journalism workshops and professional experience, and they were modified according to Merritt's suggestions in a memo concerning public journalism research projects:

The objective isn't to quantify things and make a judgment about whether or how much a newspaper is succeeding, though that might be a small side effect. Rather, the objective is to provide a list of traits that we think constitute public journalism and examples to illustrate those traits — and how they differ from traditional practice — as a step toward a working definition that journalists can understand (Merritt 1996).

With this in mind, the lists were merged, and a sample of readers was asked to evaluate news stories, photos and graphics from low to high on a seven-point scale after reading several blocks of news coverage. Some blocks contained traditional news, some public journalism and some were mixed. The following items are the 12 criteria that were rated:

1. Citizen viewpoints: Citizens are identified as contributors in solving a public issue.
2. Impact: Many citizens are likely to be significantly affected by this news.
3. Invitations to action: This news coverage presents ways readers can actively respond.
4. Proximity: This takes place close to readers' homes.
5. Reporter-reader interaction: This coverage indicates reporters have communicated with citizens.
6. Timeliness: This news is based on recent events.
7. Values: The values underlying courses of action are explained.
8. Prominence: This news includes well-known personalities or celebrities.
9. Consequences: Consequences of actual or possible decisions are explained.
10. Novelty: This news is based on the odd or unusual.
11. Stakeholders: Who stands to gain and who stands to lose are clearly identified.
12. Conflict: This news emphasizes opposing sides (Morris 1997).

The experiment was designed to test two hypotheses:

H1: The combined mean of scores for the public journalism conventions would be higher than the combined mean of scores for the traditional journalism conventions for the public journalism news.



H2: The combined mean of scores for the traditional journalism conventions would be higher than the combined mean of scores for the public journalism conventions for the traditional journalism news.

The sample for this pilot study consisted of 12 university students who were enrolled in a media history course. This was not a sample of typical newspaper readers, but the results of this convenience sample could indicate whether to continue research in this area. Each subject was asked to read five to six blocks of news copy and rate each block, which represented part of a newspaper page and included headlines, teasers, photos, captions and other news devices, according to the 12 news criteria.

At least two readers rated each block, and scores for each of the criteria were averaged for each copy block. Then the scores were grouped into a public journalism index (statements 1, 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11 above) and a traditional journalism index (2, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12). Each block received PJ Index and TJ Index scores. The readers gave the public journalism blocks a score of 4.62 for public journalism and only 3.62 for traditional journalism; they gave the traditional journalism a 4.16 for traditional journalism and a 3.67 for public journalism. They had correctly identified the different news styles.

The public journalism index score was a full point above the traditional journalism index score for the blocks that contained the public journalism news. A t-test for statistical significance indicated the first hypothesis was supported by the results ( $p < .0004$ ), but the second difference in means was not statistically significant ( $p < .1506$ ), so the second hypothesis was not supported. The results justify more research in this area.

## Conclusions

Research on the effects of interactive Internet discussion groups on news coverage is scarce, but a preliminary study of interactive community conversations at the University of Missouri showed that interactive discussions affect news by:

- helping reporters see public issues as readers see them.
- providing feedback for accuracy of information.
- complementing — not sacrificing — an objective writing style.
- offering a deeper understanding of issues.
- inspiring frames that would not have been considered.

- providing a news product distinct from traditional journalism (Morris).

These are preliminary results based on one case study and a purposive sample of 12 journalism students, but they justify more research concerning the effects of adding interactivity to objectivity and the value of audience analysis in news writing.

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