



Public Journalism: A Case for Public Scholarship

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PUBLIC JOURNALISM

A Case for Public Scholarship

BY JAY ROSEN



New York University: A Private University in the Public Service”—that’s what my department letterhead says. A few years ago I decided to take those words seriously, particularly the key word “public.” While I’m proud to call myself a professional scholar and consider service to my profession important, what I mean—and what I hope my university means—by “public service” is a little different. Here, the ideal to be served is democracy, understood the way John Dewey understood it: as an entire way of life, rather than a form of government.

What kind of intellectual work best promotes democracy as a way of life? “Public scholarship” is the answer I would offer. By “public scholarship” I mean the quest to know things that can only be known with others in the public arena.

Currently my chosen arena is a movement to change the way the American press does things and sees things. It’s called “public journalism,” or in some cases “civic journalism,” and it is primarily a group of people within the profession who realize that something has gone seriously wrong in journalism lately. What’s gone wrong is suggested by a recent study by the Times Mirror company showing that 71 percent of Americans now think the press “gets in the way of society solving its problems.” Public journalists are people who take that sort of finding seriously, who understand that the press is implicated in the sad state our public life has reached, and who are trying, within the constraints they face, to reform themselves and their colleagues.

I helped coin the term public journalism; I run a foundation-funded project that supports the movement; and I am working directly with journalists who are trying to figure out what this new approach is and how to make it work. That means I spend a lot of time on airplanes, in hotel ballrooms, and in conversation with professionals in the field, many of whom do not yet accept this approach.

I came to this work about five years ago from a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the various identities available to me as a scholar interested in the press and public life. With only a brief career in journalism, I did not feel qualified to pass along the secrets of the craft to young people. Besides, I had come to the conclusion that the craft was dangerously adrift. What it needed was not new practitioners but new practices. That put me in the role of critic, but I was wary of the inward turn that social criticism and media theory had taken in recent years. Much of the best work, while thoroughly sophisticated, had only one location where it was discussed: the campus. That wasn’t public enough for me.

Journalism, I thought, needed a new and stronger public philosophy. But with little sense of intellectual adventure within the profession, and with scant contact between academ-

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ic thinkers and the craft of journalism, there seemed to be no room for the kind of conversations that might lead to reform. What was happening to the press, what was happening to public life, what was happening to democracy, what was happening to citizens, what was happening to work and leisure—all these had to be discussed together, under the premise that they were mutually dependent. But unless such a conversation was linked to reform, it would have no lasting value.

I was still struggling with my approach to this problem when I had one of those “never again” experiences. In 1990, I found myself at a university think tank, in a room with six newspaper editors and six social scientists. The meeting had been called so that the journalists could get the benefit of what the academics knew about political alienation, voter turnout, and related themes. All of the social scientists were people steeped in survey research, and they immediately took over the discussion, exchanging sophisticated interpretations of the polling data as if they were at an academic meeting. I have a PhD and took my mandatory course in statistics, but I had trouble following the discussion, and the editors, of course, were lost. Intimidated by the seeming blunt superiority of academic knowledge, they withdrew into an angry silence.

I found this whole scene embarrassing for the editors and for myself as a scholar, and I’ve been brooding about the episode ever since. What made it possible for the academics to virtually deny the humanity of the editors, people sitting right across the table from them? What left the journalists helpless to speak up for their own way of knowing? How should we have been talking if we wanted to get somewhere by reasoning together? As journalists and scholars, what was our common problem, our common work, our common language? And finally, what was I doing there? I had done a dissertation on the idea of the public and its relationship to the press, and while I thought I knew something about the subject, I too remained lodged in a frustrated silence, listening to the data pour forth.

What I call “public journalism” and some call “civic journalism” is, in a way, an attempt to overcome this scene, to build a conversational space that has not emerged from professional training on the one hand, social science on the other, or the culture of academic critique on a third. Public journalism, then, is a way of studying the press in common with journalists, where they are not the objects of inquiry, or targets of an academic critique, but co-producers of a form of understanding that could not exist without them. This, to me, is the heart of public scholarship—it is reasoning with, rather than knowledge about, others. It has a critical element of solidarity in it. And it is best practiced in public settings, where common languages must be used.

So, what exactly is public journalism? It’s at least three things. First, it’s an argument about the proper task of the press. Second, it’s a set of practices that are slowly spreading through American journalism. Third, it’s a movement of people and institutions.

What the argument says is this: journalism cannot remain valuable unless public life remains viable. If public life is in trouble in the United States, then journalism is in trouble. Therefore, journalists should do what they can to support public life. The press should help citizens participate and take

them seriously when they do. It should nourish or create the sort of public talk that might get us somewhere, what some of us would call a deliberative dialogue. The press should change its focus on the public world so that citizens aren’t reduced to spectators in a drama dominated by professionals and technicians. Most important, perhaps, journalists must learn to see hope as an essential resource that they cannot deplete indefinitely without tremendous costs to us and them.

The argument public journalism makes is derivative of academic theory. It is borrowed from the work of German philosopher Jurgen Habermas on the public sphere, from John Dewey’s great book, *The Public and Its Problems*, and from the writings of James Carey, perhaps the leading journalism educator in the United States. What is distinctive about the argument is not the ideas in it, but the simple fact that journalists are helping to create the argument.

As an example, I offer my working relationship with Davis Merritt, Jr., the editor of the *Wichita Eagle*. Merritt is my partner in crime. I consult with him weekly, we have shared many platforms together, and he is identified with the rise of public journalism to visibility within the profession. He has written a book on the approach and is trying to practice what he preaches. Merritt brings more than 30 years of journalism experience to the table and is persuasive to his colleagues in a way that I could never be. By doing something he’s willing to call “public journalism,” by urging his colleagues to try their own versions, he prevents the idea from becoming merely “academic.”

Public journalism is also a set of practices, most of them experiments by local newspapers trying to connect with citizens in a more useful way. For example, the *Charlotte Observer* in 1992 abandoned the approach to election coverage known as the horse-race angle. Instead it sought to ground its coverage in what it called a “citizen’s agenda,” meaning a list of discussion priorities identified by area residents through the paper’s own research. When candidates gave an important speech during the campaign, the contents were “mapped” against the citizen’s agenda, so that it was easy to tell what was said about those concerns that ranked highest with citizens.

This may seem like a modest reform, but it involved a fundamental shift in the mission of campaign journalism. The master narrative changed from something like, “Candidates maneuver and manipulate in search of votes” to something like, “Citizens of Charlotte demand serious discussion.” The Charlotte approach has become widely known and widely copied because it addresses long-standing frustrations with a campaign dialogue dominated by political professionals and the cynicism they engender.

A second kind of public journalism initiative is under way at the Norfolk *Virginian Pilot*. There, the editors have created something called the “public life team,” which is a group of reporters assigned to cover politics and government in a “more public” way. Previously, these reporters would have been attached to institutions like city hall, and this attachment would have provided them with their lens on politics. The public life team is charged with inventing a more bottom-up orientation to public affairs reporting—one that includes city hall but doesn’t originate there. Among the techniques they employ is the use of small deliberative forums, what they call “community conversations,” not to ask people what they want to read, or to survey their opinions, but to discover how non-profes-


sionals name and frame issues. This then becomes the starting point for the paper's political reporting, replacing the usual sources—the machinations of insiders or the maneuvering of public officials.

In effect, Norfolk is trying to routinize the shift in narrative strategy that the *Charlotte Observer* undertook in its campaign coverage. As the public life team learns how public journalism is done—and they are very much inventing it as they go—they teach what they know to other teams of reporters. This past March, I assisted the editors of the *Virginian Pilot* in a weekend retreat intended to jump-start the process of changing routines. Fifty participants devoted three days to thinking through the shift in consciousness and technique that public journalism demands. The editors and I agreed on a price of admission to this retreat: a rather lengthy reading list of works in democratic theory and press scholarship, including essays by political scientist Robert Putnam of Harvard, along with excerpts from Daniel Yankelovich's important work, *Coming to Public Judgment*, and de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Officials of Landmark Communications, the company that owns the newspaper, chose to attend and they did the reading, too.

This retreat meant creating a public space for intellect within journalism. When 50 working journalists take time out to spend the weekend struggling with the implications of democratic theory and press criticism for their own work, when they do so under the expectation that they will reform their routines accordingly, when the executives within their company are joining them in this adventure, I hope you can see how a new kind of space has been created. As far as I know, nothing like it has been attempted in American journalism. This is public scholarship and public journalism brought together.

Other public journalism practices have involved creating public forums that show citizens engaged in deliberative dialogue. The forums, sponsored by a media partnership in Madison, Wisconsin, model democratic habits of mind and conversation. In several places, like Boulder, Colorado, and Olympia, Washington, newspapers have intervened in a lethargic public climate, bringing together civic leaders, experts, and groups of citizens to chart a long-term vision for a community, which is then published and debated in the newspaper. There have been various efforts to focus political reporting on the search for solutions to public problems; and a variety of measures have been adopted to heighten the visibility of citizens in the news by, for example, telling the story of individuals who get involved and make a difference. There have been campaigns to get people to vote, including some that allowed people to register in the lobby of the newspaper. There also have been other efforts to engage citizens as participants—for example a “Neighborhood Repair Kit” published by the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis, which sought to give residents the information and incentive they needed to improve their neighborhoods.

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The third form public journalism takes is as a movement. In the classic American tradition of public-spirited reform, this movement is trying to recall journalism to its deepest mission of public service. The movement is primarily drawn from professionals within the press, along with a smaller number from the academic world, and several institutional players. I would estimate its core membership at perhaps 200 or so, with several hundred others expressing sympathy with its general aims.

Most (but not all) are daily newspaper journalists, typically from small and medium-sized cities like Charlotte, North Carolina, or Wilmington, Delaware, although we do have a tiny foothold in larger precincts like Boston (the *Boston Globe*). The institutional support comes from projects like mine, funded by the Knight Foundation; from the Pew Center

for Civic Journalism, supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts; from the Poynter Institute for Media Studies; and especially from the Kettering Foundation, a think tank in Dayton, Ohio, which was the incubator of the idea.

As a reform movement, public journalism tries to provoke discussion within the profession, spread the lessons of practice, and put like-minded people in touch with one another. At this stage, it is very much a minority impulse, rooted primarily in the regional press. But it is on the radar screen of the entire press, and has been debated everywhere. The practices that correspond to the argument are not very far advanced; they are experiments at best, and it will be 5-10 years before we know what their real potential is. We are just at the beginning of a long process of cultural change within journalism, and there is every chance that the movement will be marginalized, or defeated by the forces of reaction or by its own failure to grow and mature.

Even within those organizations led by editors committed to the approach, public journalism is resisted in the name of traditional values—especially the imperative of distance and detachment. It is called a fad or gimmick by some who see any attempt to “connect” with citizens as equivalent to a marketing approach, pandering to readers, surrendering professional judgment.

Another kind of objection is more telling. Earlier this year in Philadelphia, I debated public journalism with Leonard Downie, editor of the *Washington Post*, who—not surprisingly—rejected the suggestion that journalists were public actors of any sort. Since they were not actors, they did not need a philosophy of action, which is one thing public journalism is.

Downie was smart to resist on this point, for as soon as journalists see themselves as having a political or public identity, they are at sea professionally. They find themselves bereft of any means of understanding, defending, or sharing that identity with others inside the profession or outside of it. Within the American press, “identity politics” means the vehemently advanced denial that doing journalism has anything to do with doing politics. According to this understanding, journalists are never actors, always observers. They are also exempt from what may be the thorniest problem in 20th-century thought:

how to handle the insight that the knower is incorporated into the known, without falling into a mindless solipsism or retreating into a naive empiricism.

Without saying how they have done it, many in the press seem to consider the problem effectively solved. They stubbornly maintain that their portrait of the public world is not constructed; rather it reflects the world as it is. Journalists, they insist, are not implicated in public life even though they affect it. They are truth-tellers, but not truth-makers. They are also watchdogs, critics of the government, but this to them is not a political identity or a political art. It is a professional role performed in a more or less neutral fashion. Others have agendas; journalists merely ask questions and gather facts.

In my own writings on public journalism, I press hard on this point, which I consider the key point in a whole architecture of professional denial. But the difficulty I have in this endeavor is a measure of the university's failure to transport the discussion of the knower and the known into public arenas where it has daily relevance. Journalists, I have found, rely far too much on the claim to "objectivity," which tends to be ridiculed in the academy as hopelessly naive or deliberately evasive. But ridicule is easy; relationships are hard. Whatever modest progress I've made in persuading some journalists that they are at least implicated in public life is due to the relationships I maintain with them, which allow me to see how they see the problem of the knower and the known.

So here is the accommodation we have come to: to acknowledge a political "identity" as a public journalist is to agree that you have a stake in public life—that you are a member of the community, and not a mechanism outside it. This does not mean that the press can become a partisan or advocate. But neither is it to withdraw into a stance of civic exile, where what's happening to the community somehow isn't happening to you as a professional.

Public journalists see themselves as conveners of public talk, aids to a more active citizenry, modelers of deliberative dialogue, supporters of a healthy public life. They are willing to assume a kind of political identity, but are *not* willing to join the struggles at the heart of left-right-center politics—except the very important struggle for a more vital public sphere, a better conversation, a public life that might earn our respect.

But isn't this the struggle we want the university to be engaged in? In this sense public journalism is very much an academic concern, but what it requires of the academic is to give up the one thing we often defend most vigorously: our claim to expertise. As soon as I become the expert in public journalism, I know I have failed, for public journalism has to be what journalists say it is, what they decide to do with it. I can try to persuade them that the interesting work lies in this or that direction; I can try to offer a vocabulary for their use. But the test of this vocabulary always lies with journalists themselves, and in a deeper sense, with the communities where public journalism is practiced.

What my colleagues in the academic study of the media think is an adequate philosophy or an important critique is relevant only if some journalist somewhere can be persuaded to share it and to employ it in reforming her work. That act of persuasion is at the heart of scholarship as engagement, along with a willingness to be persuaded, in return, by people without PhDs. Indeed, public scholarship begins with a recognition that the most impor-

tant thing you can know is not knowable through your relationships with other scholars. In my case, the thing I most needed to know was: Where are the openings for a stronger public philosophy to emerge in the professional culture of the American press? The only way to answer this question is to experiment with that culture, to become conversant with it, to test where its own resources lie. That's what I'm doing—I think.

So that's a quick sketch of what public journalism is. My own role within this movement is to discover the philosophy lying, as it were, within the practices that also illustrate it; to organize meetings, public spaces, where journalists interested in this approach can mingle and learn together in concert with a few intellectuals; to research the relevant experiments through the project I direct; to get on airplanes and spread the word about public journalism to any journalism group that will hear me; to defend the need for this approach against the criticism it receives and requires; and to think strategically about where the movement can go next. Eventually this work must be turned over to the profession itself, for if public journalism cannot live within the craft and become normalized, then it will have failed.

I want to add a few remarks here about scholarship as engagement. As a professor of journalism, what I "do" is not theory, or research, or criticism. What I do now is *relationships*—and these relationships with journalists are the proving ground for the ideas about democracy that matter to me. To the degree that these relationships work, public journalism lives. To the degree that the relationships falter, the approach is faltering.

Picture the territory that separates intellectuals who think about democracy from journalists who operate within the democracy as it exists "out there." Suppose we imagine this territory—the distance between us and them—as a political space. What makes it so? Well, one thing that makes it so is that we're in this together. Whatever is going to happen to democracy is going to happen to all of us—journalists, scholars, politicians, citizens, exiles, left, right, center, or margin. Another thing we have in common is this: if markets replace publics as the only relevant arena in contemporary society, we're all sunk. What we do won't matter, what they do won't matter. Only the TV ratings will matter.

Many in the academy have profound differences with practicing journalists over a whole range of questions, from the myth of objectivity to competing visions of a just society. Differences are what make for politics, of course, and when they don't—when there's no political space in which to negotiate our differences—we know we have failed somehow in our pretensions as democrats. Public journalism attends to this failure, tries to take it seriously. It worries about the silences, the conversations that don't happen when intellect traps itself too cleverly within an academic frame.

In a sentence I find myself returning to again and again, the political philosopher Michael Sandel writes, "When politics goes well, we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone." Here is the intellectual opportunity afforded by the political challenge I just outlined. What can practicing journalists and critical scholars know in common that they cannot know alone? The only way to answer this question is to try to make the politics between us "go well," to assume that we're

“in this together,” to ask, as the comedian Joan Rivers used to put it, “Can we talk?”

For an academic accustomed to operating within a discipline or “field,” the first challenge is pre-eminently one of language. Keeping the conversation going takes priority over making the conversation go the way you need it to go for your expertise to matter. Maintaining relationships becomes more important than maintaining your position. What you can only know in common with journalists is privileged over the knowledge you have only because you’re a scholar of the press. The public sphere, for this purpose, is not what Habermas or his critics say it is. It is the “field” you can manage to create, in association with others who have very different ideas and very different professional lives. What’s true is what works in maintaining the relationship and moving it forward, which is another way of saying that public journalism is pragmatism in the William James and John Dewey sense. It is also frustrating in the way that democracy is frustrating, risky in the way that democracy is risky.

What are some of the advantages of working in relationships? Well, it immediately changed my view of journalists. I now see them as people struggling to preserve a connection to the public sphere amidst two kinds of pressures. One kind obviously is market pressures coming from the media industry. The other is the pressures that come about from the evaporation of public life, the general disgust with politics, the rising tide of cynicism, the weakening of community ties that also weakens the interest in journalism, the decline of civic capacity, the erosion of literacy and competence.

Trying to understand these pressures as they come to bear on journalists in newsrooms has taught me to distinguish the media from journalism. If we conflate these things we miss the threat to journalism posed by the media. We give up too quickly the rhetoric of public service and First Amendment values that still clings to the journalism profession. The fact is that journalists need our support if we’re serious about creating a workable public sphere. The media threaten them just as much as they dismay some of us.

I also look at media companies in a different way. Some still have room for the values of the public sphere; others are squeezing that space. Their corporate cultures now look like distinct entities, whereas before I might have collapsed them under a category like “global capitalism.” Widening the available space for public interest journalism within these companies is something journalism professors should be helping to do—unless of course we know that there is no such possibility. The only way to know that, I think, is to be in relationship to working journalists and to observe the forms of autonomy they do and do not have.

Another thing I have discovered is the importance of rootedness. The journalists most attracted to public journalism tend to be those who have something to defend beyond their professional status. They have put down roots in the communities where they work. They have tried traditional journalism and found themselves frustrated that problems kept getting

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worse. Those who dismiss public journalism most quickly are journalists passing through on their way to Washington and New York. They romanticize the figure of the journalist as hard-boiled detective, ferreting out lies and corruption and moving on to the next town. Public life doesn’t interest them—exposure does.

Finally, I discovered how far we have to go in reforming journalism education. Two years ago I gave a talk at one of the elite schools of journalism. My visit came in the 12th week of the semester. To my standard speech on public journalism the reaction was 90 percent hostile. The mere suggestion that there was a responsibility to the outcome of public life was enough to turn almost everyone in

the entering graduate class against the idea. This year I returned to the same school and gave the same speech to a new class during its second week in school. This time, the reaction was only 50 percent hostile, with genuine divisions opening up between those who saw in public journalism the reason they had chosen the field, and others who stared at their classmates in disbelief.

What explains the two different reactions? My answer is this: between the second and 12th weeks of the term the professional ideology of the press takes over and students learn that they should have no political identity if they’re going to be serious professionals. In other words, they assimilate the stance of civic exile, and it is the university teaching it to them! The journalism school as it now exists works against public journalism, when it should be the strongest home of the idea. For me, the most immediate result is that I have more support in newsrooms around the country than I do inside my own faculty. But I am hopeful I can change that as my colleagues grapple with what is at stake—the character of journalism as a public profession.

Drawing journalists (and scholars) out of the stance of civic exile, getting them to invest in the fortunes of public life, is a political project for which only one form of politics will do: politics as conversation, mutual persuasion, and as an experiment in public learning. The knowledge uniquely available to this work is the knowledge of possibility: the possible meanings of the public sphere, the possible journalisms that remain, the possible identities journalists can have as citizens, and those that scholars can have outside the university’s walls, but fully within its animating ideal.

I will close by borrowing a line from the philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain, who has written a wise new book called *Democracy on Trial*. In the introduction she remarks on her complex feelings about Richard Nixon on the occasion of his death. Looking back on the past 20 years, she says she’s surprised by how easy it was for her to hate. “I don’t hate anymore,” she writes. “I have joined the ranks of the nervous.” What she means, of course, is that she is nervous about the future of democracy, about our ability to solve the problem of living together, about Rodney King’s profoundly political question, “Can we all get along?”

This, finally, is why I now deal in relationships. With Elshtain, I have joined the ranks of the nervous. □