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The Moral Justification for Journalism

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Journalism seems to come into its own during natural disasters. The sheer drama of such events makes for great storytelling and provides a national showcase for the talents of local reporters. This was illustrated again in 2005 when the great flood caused by Hurricane Katrina overcame the historic city of New Orleans and chased out the staff of the *Times-Picayune*. At first, the paper was unable to put out a print edition and instead published on its affiliated Nola.com web site. HELP US, PLEASE was the headline read by millions around the country and around the world. When the *Picayune* finally was able to produce a print edition, staffers gave it out for free at the Convention Center, where thousands of trapped survivors eagerly sought copies. Summing up the significance of what these journalists did, *Columbia Journalism Review* contributor Douglas McCollam (2005) wrote:

> Living mostly in borrowed houses, often separated
> from friends and family, wearing donated clothes,
> and working with hand-me-down equipment and
> donated office space, the paper managed to

produce coverage of the disaster that serves to remind us all of just how deep is the connection between a city and its newspaper, how much they need each other. (¶4)

There seems to be more to the *Picayune's* actions than the thrill of what-a-story or the calculations of career climbing. Indeed, whether it is Los Angeles during the 1994 earthquake or Grand Forks, N.D., during the 1997 flood, journalists often set aside competitive considerations to help their colleagues and endure extreme personal hardships to give communities the news they need. So what else is going on here? Several years ago, New York University Professor Jay Rosen (1999) asked: "What is Journalism For?" I think he was on to something. His question suggested that the deeper meaning of journalistic work lies in understanding *why* journalism exists as a *normative* practice. I want to pursue this line of reasoning using a communitarian framework rooted in Aristotelian virtue theory. From a "virtue" perspective, an occupation's purpose provides it with moral justification if it can be integrated into a broader conception of the human *telos*, or natural purpose.

Communitarianism will be contrasted with classic liberalism, which grounds First Amendment arguments for defining journalism's mission. Relying on a communitarian account of participatory citizenship and Lorraine Code's (1987) notion of epistemic responsibility, I propose that journalism's

ultimate goal should be to help citizens know well in the public sphere. This conception of journalism's purpose highlights journalism as a virtuous practice[1] that is called to go beyond the watchdog role of warning citizens about abuses of power. That expectation, compatible with a liberal view of the press, is the minimum required by moral obligation. Instead, the communitarian perspective urges journalists to embrace the more morally ambitious goal of helping people flourish as human beings in the context of a political community.

My argument will proceed in four parts. The first section will address the liberal foundations of the First Amendment and how these contribute to moral minimalism in journalism. The second section will discuss different conceptions of citizenship and relate these to the realities of today's information society. The third section will explain how journalism can contribute to the common good by exercising and promoting epistemic responsibility. The essay will conclude by discussing the implications of this argument for the kind of news that journalists are responsible for offering to citizens.

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[1] I am using "practice" in Alasdair MacIntyre's (2007) sense of a cooperative endeavor that gives meaning to moral action (p.187).

Looking Beyond the First Amendment

So let's get back to Rosen's question: What is journalism *for*? Many scholars and journalists who have made statements about the purpose of journalism rely on an interpretation of the First Amendment that gives the press a mandate to promote democratic processes (see, e.g., Adam, Craft & Cohen, 2004; Hodges, 1986; May, 2001). In fact, the First Amendment is practically journalism's sacred scripture (Rosen, 2004a; Watson, 2005). But is the First Amendment enough? I will argue that it provides only a partial normative rationale for American journalism, from a communitarian standpoint, because its liberal assumptions encourage moral minimalism.

Liberalism's Legacy of Individual Rights

Now, when I say "liberal," I'm not trying to draw some contrast with so-called conservatives. I'm talking about classic liberalism, a political philosophy grounded in Enlightenment ideals and reflected in the First Amendment and the rest of the Bill of Rights. Liberalism tends to focus on individual rights, rather than on collective rights. Individual rights (such as life, liberty and property) stress individual independence, individual choice, and individual self-reliance over and above any rights that the community as such might claim. The government is supposed

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to keep its hands off – and so are other individuals who might want to limit someone's prerogatives. Public virtue, in this view, becomes mostly a procedural matter, consisting of respect for individual rights and the means for safeguarding them (such as ensuring free elections). As noted by Lane & Oreskes (2007), this stance marked a significant departure from earlier conceptions of public virtue partially grounded in collective rights attributed to groups and peoples (such as the right to social stability or conservation of natural resources). Collective rights, which are subordinate in liberalism, may require us to set aside our own individual interests when necessary to serve collective ends.

Liberalism has had important implications for how American journalists came to understand their role. At first, the press focused almost exclusively on its own rights (or, more accurately, the rights of press owners). With the 1947 Hutchins Commission report, the press began to accept formal responsibility for advocating the public's so-called right to know (Demers, 1989). Eventually, this rights-based philosophy came to be expressed in America's journalistic tradition as a belief in the power of the press to foster democracy by agitating for government openness and by criticizing officials in the name of the people -- the familiar watchdog role.

The Watchdog Role as a Moral Minimum

No doubt that in a complex society increasingly defined by the power and abundance of information, people are dependent on the media to orient themselves to the world. At the most basic level of human need, we need to "understand the emerging environment" (Barger & Barney, 2004, p. 201) so that we can look out for our safety and general well-being. As individual moral agents, we need to understand our world so that we can exercise autonomous choice. As social beings, we need information about others for "creating community, making human connections" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, p. 21)—a need so intense that news binds people together even in tyrannical societies. In response to this vulnerability, journalism is indeed responsible for meeting the surveillance requirements of citizens.[2] The surveillance function of news consists of monitoring people, events, and things that affect citizens. The

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[2] So far, what I have said is true even of journalism carried out in non-democratic societies. People everywhere have what Kovach & Rosenstiel (2001) call the "Awareness Instinct" (p. 10), which is a need to know what is going on beyond their direct experience so they can feel safe, secure and in control. Of course, other kinds of public communication can serve this function as well—National Weather Service warnings and Web sites alerting people to out-of-state job opportunities are examples. But, if we allow that communities characterized by democratic values are those where human flourishing is most likely to occur, then *journalism-as-practice* inherently presumes, if not a democratic context per se, at least "the aspiration for ... institutions of democratic life," in the words of James W. Carey (1995, ¶6).

practice has further obligated itself to perform this function through explicit and implicit promises in ethics codes and other public statements (see, for example, the codes of the Society of Professional Journalists and the American Society of Newspaper Editors).

The surveillance function seems sufficient as a moral standard for journalism if we construe civic participation in primarily "monitorial" terms. That is, being a good citizen requires monitoring current affairs just enough to avert threats to our personal well-being and to make sure that we can vote and perform other "ordinary civic tasks" (Graber, 2003, p. 151). We might conclude, as political scientist Doris Graber does, that the news media are doing rather well on these terms, considering that they are structured primarily around the profit motive and that most people do not dutifully attend to the news. The media look even better if one does not judge them based on the needs of some idealized citizen who does not exist and probably never will.

In coming to her conclusions, Graber (2003) relied on Michael Schudson's (1998) analysis of American citizenship. Schudson argued that the original model of American citizenship was the deferential citizen of the colonial period, still evident in the Founding Fathers' decision to make the Electoral College decisive in presidential elections. The informed citizen

presupposed by the press did not arise until the Progressive era at the end of the nineteenth century. This notion of citizenship reflected the Progressive movement's faith in knowledge, democracy, and the common man (Altschull, 1990). Although this period has had an enduring influence on journalistic values (Gans, 1980), the rest of the country has moved on. Since the 1950s, according to Schudson, American citizenship has been characterized by the more passive monitorial citizen identified by Graber (2003). And yet, people who wax poetic about journalism as a "democratic art," as Stuart Adam does, (Adam et al., 2004, p. 249), seem to be inspired by the ideal of a participatory democracy, "where politically well-informed citizens play an active role in government" (p. 143).

Civic Participation and the Common Good

The monitorial citizen has successfully expanded individual rights and established a healthy "institutionalized distrust" (p. 301) necessary to avoid state domination; the notion of a "monitorial obligation" (p. 310) is one that should be retained, according to Schudson (1998). However, in key respects, the moral model of the monitorial citizen is minimalist. Liberalism's emphasis on negative rights, or non-interference, mean citizens have the *option* of participating in public life – but are not *responsible* for doing so. As Aristotle (trans.1984) and

later virtue theorists recognized, human beings are inherently social and can flourish only by participating in moral communities defined by a shared conception of the common good. In this view, civic participation is essential for human excellence.

What is the common good? The common good consists of those social conditions that allow both communities and individuals to flourish. Surely, promoting individual fulfillment should be included in any conception of the common good – but that requires paying attention to what all need to *thrive*, not just *survive*. So, besides respecting collective rights, communitarianism urges us to pay more attention to positive rights – that is, entitlements that we can claim for ourselves in our quest to lead fully human lives, such as access to safe housing. What is needed to motivate meaningful civic participation is a deep sense of the link that exists between our own well-being and that of others, based on a strong mutual connection grounded in solidarity over a weak cooperative connection grounded in tolerance. Solidarity makes us willing to give up some personal advantage if needed so that everyone can have the chance to flourish.

However, it does not follow that communitarianism prioritizes the collective over the individual; rather, it claims that individuals cannot be fully realized except as members of

communities. Put another way, social responsibility is not a matter of me versus community, but two different "aspects of our own nature: our self-interest as individuals and our self-interest as members of a community" (Prior, 2001, p. 331). Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre explains, "There is no way of my pursuing my good which is necessarily antagonistic to your pursuing yours because *the* good is neither mine peculiarly nor yours peculiarly – goods are not private property" (p. 213).[3] Individual action is empowered in the communitarian framework – but so are the connections between individuals and the communities of which they are members. There is no denying, of course, that particular conceptions of the good can vary widely among individuals. However, it is not necessarily the case that individual goods are incommensurable. A more helpful view is to think of community as a "social web of relationships," in which competing conceptions of the good can co-exist, suggests philosopher Larry May (1996):

> The challenge of living among diversity is to construe morality in such a way that it is flexible enough to accommodate very diverse circumstances and life-styles, but not yet to give

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[3] MacIntyre (2007) takes pains in the prologue to the third edition of *After Virtue* to renounce the communitarian label. Nevertheless, his views about the common good and the role of communities in helping people lead the best lives they can are broadly compatible with my argument.

up on a vision of a shared conception of the good
life. (p. 104)

Viewed within a communitarian framework, the ideals of
a participatory democracy and informed citizens are no longer
anachronisms, but become essential prerequisites for meaningful
participation in community life and, thus, for human flourishing.
But is this realistic?

The Informed Citizen in an Information Society

The transition to an information society gives reason to
hope that journalists can go beyond the minimum surveillance
function required by moral obligation and instead help people to
know well enough in the public sphere to actually participate in
(and not just casually monitor) civic life. The public sphere is that
"space" outside of government and Big Business where private
individuals come together through various civic institutions to
constitute a "public" that can effectively assert the interests of the
larger political community (Habermas, 1989). The sheer
complexity of the public sphere is the single most relevant
context for news (Rosen, 2004b), more so than any specific
political or economic system. It is this fact that makes knowing
well so challenging – and so relevant to flourishing.

Bovens (2002) describes an information society as one in
which geographical boundaries are becoming less relevant, new

technologies are developing at an unpredictable pace, corporations and governments are being overshadowed by markets and networks, and data processing (p. 320) is becoming the primary mode of production. These conditions, Bovens says, have the potential to bring "the classic republican ideal of politics as a debate between well-informed citizens into the realm of reality" (p. 325). We're not there yet, but new technologies that allow citizens to leverage information have definitely increased their capacity to act collectively and to challenge entrenched power structures. The Internet has made it possible for interested citizens to easily research people, issues and institutions; to communicate their ideas with millions of other interested citizens in an instant; to mount grass-roots movements; to mobilize public opinion; and to even produce their own alternative media messages.

The press has not escaped the scrutiny of this new generation of empowered citizens. In an Internet survey of more than 2,500 wired newspaper readers from around the country, the Associated Press Managing Editors' National Credibility Roundtables Project reported that those who consider blogs especially useful cited the new online journals' willingness to question the mainstream media as a major aspect of their appeal. (Pitts, 2004). Bloggers used this skepticism to great effect in the "Memogate" press scandal of 2004. *60 Minutes Wednesday's*

election-year story about President George W. Bush's National Guard service suggested that Bush had not fulfilled his service commitment during the Vietnam War. It was based partly on documents that CBS said were written by one of Bush's former commanders. The documents said Bush had been ordered to take a medical exam and suggested that one of his commanders felt pressured to take it easy on him. Before the piece had even finished airing, however, bloggers started questioning whether the fonts on the documents could have been made by typewriters typically used by the Texas Air National Guard at that time. Later, it turned out the person who gave star producer Mary Mapes the documents was of questionable reliability and that the documents were not properly authenticated by experts, as claimed (Associated Press, 2005). Dan Rather—who narrated the segment—apologized for the mistakes and announced his retirement from the anchor's desk of the *CBS Evening News* (though he did not directly link his decision to the controversy).

Journalism as Civic Inquiry

As this example illustrates, new technologies complicate the public sphere but also open the door to joint civic inquiry by journalists and citizens. Lorraine Code's (1987) notion of *epistemic responsibility* highlights the moral significance of the investigative processes *both* journalists and citizens use to make

sense of the world. She says moral reasoning typically proceeds "from epistemic to ethical (from what I know to what I do)" [4] and that the epistemic efforts involved in such reasoning can be criticized, *as well as* the ethical action ultimately taken on the basis of those efforts. Thus, the *60 Minutes Wednesday* team that produced the segment on President Bush's National Guard service can be faulted *both* for the shoddy verification processes that undercut the story's reliability, *and* the decision to rush the story to air despite reasons to question the source and authenticity of key documents.

Thomas Cooper (1993) underlines the relevance of epistemic responsibility to journalism:

> If the news were perceived as a type of serialized fiction or daily distraction or entertainment "bait" for the advertisers' hook, then perhaps there need be no discussion of the journalists' epistemic responsibility. However, because most consumers treat news as a direct, even if somewhat distorted, conduit of "knowledge"—about an "outside world," about life's unveiling, about a collective reality—a discussion of epistemic responsibility among journalists becomes paramount. (p. 95)

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[4] Code (1987) notes, however, that sometimes "ethical considerations are permitted to create epistemic constraints" (p. 79). A journalistic example might be a reporting team that stops digging for information that would invade someone's privacy, even though truncating the investigation in this way means they will not arrive at the best possible approximation of the truth.

Code (1987) suggests that we are *all* responsible for using a good-enough process of investigation when we want to know something. Within the constraints of the "nature of the world and of human cognitive capacity," there is much freedom but also a limit to "what kinds of sense can *responsibly* be made of the world" (p. 9). The concept of epistemic responsibility underscores journalism's commitment to truth and the important role that good journalism has to play in an information society. It binds journalists to citizens.

And Now the News

When news meets the demands of epistemic responsibility in our quest for the common good, it empowers citizens to fully participate in community life (rather than just to monitor the public sphere for signs of danger). Non-journalists possessing certain skills and resources also may help citizens achieve this goal. But journalism has the rare ability to promote civic participation in ways that are timely (unlike most scholarship), independent (unlike political parties or special-interest groups), and contemporaneously available to most segments of society (unlike classroom discussions or even weblogs, whose reach is limited by the digital divide). Keeping in mind that communitarianism aims to expand the horizons of liberalism, not supplant it, I suggest that the news be guided by

the following priorities: address communities as well as audiences; avoid false consensus and social injustice; keep the focus on the common good; and create common knowledge that empowers citizens to act.

These priorities are intended in a "both-and" spirit, not an "either-or" spirit. It's not that we *either* support communities *or* criticize them; we support community by being reflective about their values and traditions. It's not that we *either* aim the news at particular groups *or* at the wider political community; news outlets in a diverse media system enrich the public sphere by identifying the differences and connections between the parts and the whole. It's not that we *either* report "facts" *or* state opinions; we make well-grounded interpretations that openly acknowledge the role of values in the construction of civic knowledge while remaining committed to factuality.

Address Communities As Well As Audiences

The media industry tends to address "audiences" rather than communities. "Audiences" are defined by demographic characteristics that predict patterns of private consumption. So the first effect of addressing us as audiences is that we are encouraged to consider happiness only as a private good. The very word "audience," furthermore, implies that we are merely spectators, rather than participants. Excellent news oriented

toward a *telos* of civic participation is *not* information that is primarily directed at audiences defined by individual wants and needs. If I need to find out something that affects only me, I can go find it. I can do a Google search, make a phone call, look through a catalog. "News," on the other hand, is never just about one person. Even human interest stories are properly called "news" only if they shed light on some broader social phenomenon illustrated by an individual case, just as all true art provides insight about the human condition. "News," then is *inherently communal* in nature. Rosen (2004b) notes:

> Philosophers disagree on whether a tree falling in the forest makes a sound, if no one hears it. But it is certain that the tree does not make news. Until it hits a house, and civilization gets involved. Then a public interest is at stake. Now there can be news. (Journalism is done for a public, ¶3)

Part of the reason that the *Picayune's* coverage of Katrina was so compelling is that these journalists did not stand apart from their community, they stood with it. They did not write as outsiders, curiously peering at strangers from the outside. They wrote as members with a felt bond to their neighbors. Communitarian journalism does not require that journalists always identify so fully with the people that they cover. For one thing, excessive emotion may actually interfere with the kind of judgment we expect journalists to exercise. On the other hand,

journalists should strive for empathy so that they do not unwittingly marginalize individuals and the communities to which they belong.

Journalism's tradition has emphasized localism, or geographically bound communities (Altschull, 1990), but news also can be about an ideological community, a community of shared interests, a community of shared beliefs, and so on. What specifically counts as news for each of these communities will depend on what determines membership and how members have prioritized the values that help *all* communities to flourish. This is the realm of niche journalism, which is valuable insofar as it promotes deliberation within the groups that mediate participation in the wider political community.[5] The purpose is for communities to properly examine their separate interests, in addition to interests they may have in common with others in the larger public sphere. This is especially relevant to subordinate communities, which might not have a chance to engage in such deliberation otherwise (Haas and Steiner, 2001).

But is asking journalists to promote community making them shameless boosters? Shouldn't journalism keep its distance to remain objective about such groups? Although objectivity has

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[5] Hendry (2004) points out that identifying strictly with others who are similar (e.g., those who share the same "lifestyle") unduly narrows the moral focus of individuals, compared with the moral demands of "traditional communities of diversity" (p. 170).

much to recommend it, it also suffers from some serious flaws. By basing news decisions on amoral criteria that relieve journalists from passing judgment on the events and people they cover, objectivity actually *precludes* responsibility, in Theodore Glasser's well-known phrase (1988). This kind of studied neutrality about what actually matters in life might be sufficient for a liberal press, but it does not meet the moral demands of a communitarian press focused on jointly discovering and promoting the common good. The particular goods of individuals and of groups are part of the common good, not in opposition to it. To support community is to support all, not to take sides.

Finally, "objective" reporting is not necessarily fair and impartial towards subordinate groups. In fact, subordinate groups have long ago taken journalism into their own hands via the ethnic press and other alternative media to ensure that journalism does their perspectives justice – or even that their perspectives get any coverage whatsoever.

Avoid False Consensus and Social Injustice

Although there is a need to recognize diversity in the public sphere, there *also* is a need to integrate the interests of overlapping communities if they are to engage in meaningful political action and if their members are to live coherent

individual lives. Journalists can help perform this integrative function by gearing the news toward the common good.

Christians, Ferre & Fackler (1993) note that the common good in this sense does not refer to majority opinion or some false consensus, but rather a commitment to transnational human norms that foster good communities, such as truthfulness, justice and empowerment. News should thus attempt to go beyond the particularities of specific communities and generate the possibility for constructive collective action in the public sphere. General news should strive to promote significant overlap in the knowledge possessed by different communities. The goal is not to gloss over differences, but to surface and accommodate differences (Anderson, Dardenne & Killenberg, 1997; Haas & Steiner, 2001), so that it is possible for all citizens to participate meaningfully in the public sphere and to take concerted action in behalf of public concerns.

Thus, communitarian journalism is not a matter of somehow assuming the "agenda" of any given group, but a matter of fully representing the stories of the various interdependent groups that make up the larger political community. Fairness, in this conception, extends beyond the strategic balancing of opposing points of view to demand a deep appreciation for the diverse experiences of individuals and groups in community. "The disenfranchised are given voice; the

elements of their lives are 'named' in a way they agree represents them justly" (Kenney, 2005, p. 17).

To go back to the Katrina example, the "consensus" that was reported by almost all the media about levee safety and evacuation procedures before Katrina was a false one that did not properly account for the different lived experiences of affected subgroups. To make things worse, reporters were guilty of spreading misinformation about rapes and other crimes at the Convention Center and elsewhere in the city, partly because of logistical problems that made getting accurate accounts difficult and partly because of negative stereotypes about poor black people (O'Keefe, 2005). Not exactly epistemically responsible. Worse, perhaps, the "looters" label and other markers of deviance used to describe blacks in many Katrina stories helped to symbolically exclude them from membership in the wider political community. Journalists made things worse, from a communitarian perspective, by reporting on Katrina using a traditional episodic news frame that focuses on individual, rather than societal responsibility:

> Episodic news frames focus on discrete events involving individuals at specific times and in specific places: "Who did what when and where?" or "What happened to whom when and where?" These questions are generally answered through the objective presentation of facts according to a value system of importance, prominence, conflict or controversy, timeliness, and proximity.

Thematic news frames provide a broader context by focusing on general conditions, which gives a "big picture" view of issues. (Kenney, 2005, p. 8)

Excellent news is common knowledge that is inclusive and empowering, rather than coercive and subordinating – a "normative pluralism," in the words of Christians et al. (1993, p. 194). No citizen left behind.

Keep the Focus on the Common Good

Re-casting their democratic role in communitarian terms would mean defining and covering news in ways that reflect the kind of knowledge citizens need to jointly discover and achieve the common good. This would mean no more framing issues in the black-and-white rhetoric of warring interest-group leaders, no more reducing public opinion to the aggregation of fleeting individual preferences via opinion polls (May, 2001; Schudson, 1998). To keep news focused on the common good, journalists should instead help citizens to assess the relative importance and relevance of information to the common good. To help citizens perform this function, excellent news meets high standards of reliability and demonstrates independence. In these regards, traditional journalistic practices of gatekeeping remain relevant.

Excellent performance of this function also entails a commitment to community service backed up by transparency,

self-reflection, self-criticism, and other disciplines rendering journalists accountable for their performance. As far as these standards are concerned, journalism should be more open about how it creates news, providing access to raw interviews, documents, and other sources, and explaining the process of verification. Journalists also need to provide citizens with a wide diversity of viewpoints, opportunities to try out ideas, and help in assessing presuppositions. To achieve these goals, news stories might fruitfully incorporate an interactive component (Matheson, 2004). Kenney (2005) suggests communitarian journalism also can promote these goals by adopting alternative storytelling formats (in addition to the traditional inverted pyramid) that promote conversation and that emphasize context rather than the latest developments: "Such a narrative form in its totality would provide information that builds a community's moral, as well as political, literacy and leads to thoughtful choices" (pp. 22-23).

After the initial aftermath of the Katrina disaster, there were, in fact, numerous stories offering perspective on hurricane planning in the Gulf region and on public policy affecting minorities and the poor in the South and elsewhere (Alterman, 2005). By spelling out the implications of the failure to plan properly for the evacuation and rescue of the city's poorest residents, journalists ultimately highlighted important questions about shared values in the United States. "What's more

American: The public good? Or individual profit? Frankness? Or posturing? A safety net? Or tax cuts? The bloated corpses floating in the toxic New Orleans waters seem to demand an answer" (Gurnett, 2005, ¶2). This would be the rule, rather than the exception, in communitarian journalism.

Create Common Knowledge That Empowers Citizens to Act

The news also should evaluate the *actionability* of specific issues arising in the public sphere; that is, the realistic possibility of citizens influencing them through collective action. To perform this role, journalists must know the system and its players, be familiar with grassroots movements, and be able to ascertain whether there are enough people concerned about a problem to influence policy. Journalists can also help citizens make a reliable assessment of possible approaches and their costs, effectiveness, and durability. They should help citizens to analyze the values at stake in various policy options and to evaluate possible forms of collective action that citizens may undertake.

Right after Katrina, journalists did a remarkable job of helping citizens take action as individuals – whether it was accessing assistance, finding out about volunteering opportunities, or making monetary donations to the American Red Cross and other aid organizations. However, they had a

harder time communicating actionability about the larger, more complex, issues emerging from the Katrina fiasco and the implications for collective action. Brent Cunningham (2005) noted in the *Columbia Journalism Review*:

> Extensive coverage of the rebuilding of New Orleans is certainly something readers and viewers deserve, but they also deserve a form of journalism that has always been difficult for the press in the United States to produce: stories grounded in solid reporting about what is possible, rather than simply what is probable; stories that shatter the official zeitgeist; stories that help set the agenda. (¶3)

Conclusion

I do not think that excellent news as I have outlined it here necessarily requires abandoning journalistic objectivity (although I see no reason why excellent journalism cannot take other forms as well). Nor do I think a communitarian vision for journalism necessarily entails activism on the part of journalists, though a healthy media system could include outlets that champion the causes of particular communities. Advocacy, after all, is also part of the journalistic tradition – think of the muckrakers at the turn of the nineteenth century, for example. Work by journalism historian David Paul Nord (2007) suggests that some communities, in fact, may actually be *constituted* by news media. For example, anti-slavery activists and

sympathizers, though geographically dispersed, formed a national community of interest through the medium of pre-Civil War abolitionist newspapers. Just as diversity is desirable in a political community, so it is in a news media system.

Although I have argued that we need to have a greater appreciation for positive rights, shared goods, and the moral status of communities as such, I am not proposing that we ditch the entire liberal project. Shared conceptions of the common good can (and should) incorporate such core liberal values as individual rights to non-interference. What we're talking about is a matter of emphasis.

Communitarianism articulates a *moral* mission for journalism, as opposed to just a political function or a legal mandate. By linking journalistic excellence to intellectual virtue and civic participation, we can better appreciate journalism's special contribution to human flourishing within the public sphere. This framework also gives us a way to morally evaluate news stories, including the epistemic and ethical efforts that went into generating them. In short, communitarianism offers a more compelling moral justification for journalism than the First Amendment.

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