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Making the Neighborhood Work: The Improbabilities of Public Journalism

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When a new neighbor moves into an established community, a period of collective evaluation often follows. Veteran residents of the neighborhood carefully appraise the impact of the neighbor's arrival, while the new inhabitant ascertains how best to fit in with the community. So it is with public journalism. This recently arrived resident of the long-standing community of U.S. journalists has placed both itself and veteran neighborhood members on a heightened level of awareness. As each side gauges the attributes that resemble and distinguish public journalism from the rest of the journalistic world, the fit between public journalism and the larger journalistic community is being negotiated.

This chapter examines the rhetoric surrounding public journalists' entry into the neighborhood of U.S. journalists. In considering public journalism's claims about itself, it ascertains the degree to which this new mode of journalistic practice is displaying good neighborly relations. Specifically, this chapter questions the frame by which public journalism is being set in place, suggesting that proponents of public journalism may have overstated their role of saving journalism from itself. It argues that its formulators may be moving too quickly for the good of the idea, and it proposes a time-out in which all involved can think more closely about the viability of the concepts being promoted.

Such a time-out would facilitate a natural jelling of the new journalistic neighborhood, helping veteran neighbors to adapt to new practices at the same time as public journalists are figuring out how better to accommodate the larger journalistic community.

The Context for Considering Public Journalism

Since the early 1990s, the topic of public journalism has taken over much of the dead space in public conversations about contemporary news in the United States. Alternately called "civic journalism," "community journalism," and "community-assisted reporting," public journalism surfaces in nearly every current discussion about the state of contemporary news making. No fewer than 15 books now address public journalism in one form or another, most published within the last five years and many issued by foundations devoted to spreading news about this kind of journalism.[1] Professional journals and trade reviews—such as *The Quill, Editor and Publisher, Communicator, Columbia Journalism Review,* and *American Journalism Review*—regularly ponder the negative and positive sides of public journalism, under such titles as "Climbing Down from the Ivory Tower," "The Gospel of Public Journalism," and "Give Me Old-Time Journalism."[2] The media routinely generate their own conversations in articles that tend to vilify the lamentable dimensions of public journalism over its virtues,[3] although certain reporters have offered confessionals of how the idea won them over. Funding institutes such as the Kettering Foundation, the Twentieth Century Fund, the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, the Knight Foundation, and the Pew Charitable Trusts have lauded public journalism, funneling substantial monies, institutional attention, and other resources toward its development.[4] Symposia and workshops on public journalism are now regularly conducted for working journalists, and bibliographies about how to engage in public journalism can be found readily in most libraries.[5] Finally, an inventory of practices associated with doing public journalism has accumulated, as individuals behind early experiments at *The Charlotte Observer* and *The Wichita Eagle* have begun to make those ideas available to others.[6] In fact, some estimates hold that as many as 200 U.S. newspapers now practice some form of public journalism.[7] Calling the movement "the media's new fix," the newsmagazine *U.S. News & World Report* recently observed that "not since the turn of the century . . . has there been such turmoil about the mission and ethics of journalists."[8] There is, then, no dearth of conversation about this new frame for doing journalism.

For many, this new fix is thought to embody the hope and future

of U.S. journalism. According to key advocate Jay Rosen, director of New York University's Project on Public Life and the Press, it provides a way of making journalism public by rendering the public integral to good journalism rather than merely incidental. It metaphorically makes the public into a place that can be "more supportive of the realm of meaningful public discussion," where things of importance can be debated.[9] Conceived as an antidote to ongoing problems surrounding media ethics in the United States, public journalism comes at a point when the general population is said to be despairing over the news media's mission and credibility. This despair, chronicled by such scholars as James Carey and Michael Schudson,[10] undermines the media's ability to function as a cultural and institutional force mandated with providing a public life for its citizenry. This means that public journalism is capable of reactivating what Carey saw as the god-term of contemporary journalism–the public.[11] It is capable of giving journalism back its origin narrative, its impulse for existence, its raison d'être.

This is a weighty responsibility. Yet it is one that public journalism proponents predict they can master. In identifying a fundamental disconnect between contemporary journalism and its public, proponents contend that public journalism can reactivate the public by coaxing its members into a more active participation in public life. In Rosen's view, published over the last few years in four monographs and numerous articles,[12] public journalism stipulates both that people need to participate in political life and that the news media must make their participation viable. By generating journalists' involvement in the process of finding solutions to community problems instead of only reporting them, news organizations become either advocates or moderators for change, implemented by regularly asking readers for feedback on stories that either have been covered or could be covered. Democracy is presumed safer by facilitating such activities as town meetings, community voice pages, neighborhood roundtables, and panels of community leaders who give feedback on stories. The public becomes central, correcting a situation in which a full 71 percent of U.S. citizens contend that the "media stand in the way of America solving its problems."[13] In reorienting itself toward the public, public journalism salvages the very journalistic practices on which it is positioned.

For one who has spent much of her academic life critiquing the world of contemporary journalism, it is difficult not to appreciate public journalism for precisely these reasons. It is no accident that journalistic ethics, and the challenge of doing one's job with integrity, continue to plague the majority of U.S. journalists, to the extent that sessions, discussions, and meetings on media ethics today draw more journalists than discussions of any other aspect of journalistic practice.

Journalism is a land whose practitioners generally act with impunity, without the socially recognized paths of training, education, licensing, and criticism common to other professions. Learning to be part of the journalistic world thus results from a loose "combination of osmosis and fiat,"[14] whose inhabitants generally improvise when attempting to standardize practice.

This means that the professional existence of journalists is shaped largely through situationally determined cues, functioning somewhat like a religion without a minister.[15] In purporting to reconnect journalism with its public and reinvigorate contemporary journalism's mission, public journalism thus responds to the malaise that has resulted in the lack of such a minister. It is no surprise, then, that as an idea public journalism feels right. It renovates the somewhat antiquated notion of social responsibility and promises a newfound sensitivity for those toward whom journalism is supposed to be directed. Conversely, critiquing it resembles pulling the punch out of a celebration before it has hit its high.

Yet there are serious questions surrounding this new gospel of journalistic practice. For despite all the attention, celebration, and ongoing conversation, it is doubtful whether public journalism proponents have produced sufficient articulation, clarification, or even consensus about what public journalism is and should be. Rather, the opposite may be the case, with the proliferation of excessive discourse possibly prohibiting public journalism from growing to maturity. In much the same way as a story requiring excessive coverage has been said to be the one least worth covering, it may be here too that a journalism producing such a large amount of self-generated rhetoric faces problems when it translates that rhetoric into practice.

Journalists as Interpretive Communities

Central to the premise that public journalism may be producing more words than action is the notion that journalists function as an interpretive community, one united by its shared discourse and collective interpretations of the real world.[16] The discourse of interpretive communities helps community members articulate what is important or relevant and offers suggestions about what can help the community continue functioning.

Among reporters, the notion of an interpretive community offers a way to talk about a slew of practices related to journalism but not accounted for when examining the dominant frame of a profession. These include a reliance on constructed realities, informal networking,

and centrality of narrative and storytelling practices, all of which suggest that the work of interpretation is central to shaping journalism. In particular, how journalists develop certain interpretations of events, practices, or, generally phrased, challenges to the status quo helps consolidate the journalistic community. Journalists create collective interpretations of challenges that they routinely and informally circulate to each other, though such channels as informal talks and discourse, professional and trade reviews, professional meetings, autobiographies and memoirs, interviews on talk shows, and media retrospectives.

A key part of journalists' discourse about themselves is the discussion of breaches, changes, or adaptations of standardized journalistic practice. In a way reminiscent of the imagined communities discussed by Benedict Anderson,[17] journalists particularly use their discourse to lend shape to challenges that are thought to upset the status quo of journalism. Much as a renewed emphasis on investigative reporting arose following Watergate or interpretive reporting became an active setting for journalists' practices following the poor journalistic coverage of the McCarthy era, interpretive communities function to stabilize consensus. Sometimes they do so excessively or around inappropriate focal points, as when journalistic conversations about the recent murder of child beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey prompted excessive journalistic navel gazing for lack of a news story.[18] Other times journalists use discourse to establish interpretations over time that reflect more positively on their reporting than evaluations at the time suggested.[19] But in all cases, their discourse establishes and maintains boundaries around the community, allowing its members to consider and ultimately negotiate alterations of practices in accordance with what they deem appropriate or manageable.

At present, the lack of a vigorous public sphere is prompting journalists to look anew at how a change in their practices might alter public involvement. Within the frame of journalists as an interpretive community, discourse about public journalism serves a vital function for those attempting both to uphold and to alter conventional notions of journalistic practice. Journalists' discourse thus becomes relevant not only for what it says but for the role it plays in the act of community formation and maintenance.

The Improbabilities of Public Journalism

The rhetorical posturing of public journalism's key proponents calls to mind a number of questions—or improbabilities—that persist about the shape of public journalism. Each involves what appears to be a certain

level of midlevel messiness in the idea, that public journalism proponents may profit by contemplating. Such improbabilities require reflection, experimentation, and fermentation before any more claims are made about what public journalism *ought* to do.

To begin with, the definition itself of public journalism requires clarification. Is it a movement, a philosophy, or a model of journalism? Its lack of clear definition has had an impact on the idea's implementation, for as discussions have moved from the idea of public journalism—about which there has been considerable discussion—to *acting* on the idea—about which there has been less discussion—the mechanics of the transition have not been made sufficiently clear. Indeed, the rather vast terrain connecting the compelling rhetoric about public journalism with its various pockets of practice makes one wonder whether public journalism advocates have gotten so caught up in what sounds good that they are no longer taking the time to figure out *how* to do what they are preaching.

Not surprisingly, then, the prescriptive domain of public journalism is almost nonexistent. Despite the fact that there are numerous publications about public journalism, no manual or checklist stipulates how one is supposed to engage in it. According to key proponents, the lack of a manual is intentional, for the phenomenon operates in an improvisatory fashion, with journalists and news organizations acting in response to the circumstances they encounter. As advocate Jay Rosen has stated, public journalism involves "a difficult test of professional judgment, for it means entering a territory where there are no clear rules, only broad goals."[20] Public journalism proponents have provided numerous discussions of how public journalism is accomplished at one given newspaper or television station,[21] but their discussions are inevitably accompanied by comments to journalists about tailoring the practices to the needs of their own communities. On a fundamental level, this kind of situational context is familiar to journalists, whose community has long been defined by situational cues in ethics, sourcing, dilemmas of performance, and other domains of journalistic practice. Yet situational cues that differ according to circumstance also cater to what is most problematic about journalism—the lack of standards, even contradictory standards, by which journalists evaluate how they are doing as journalists. The consequent lack of prescriptions that arises from situational posturing thereby may be exacerbating the somewhat obscure character of public journalism and minimizing the ability to clarify it to the rest of the journalistic community.

Four fundamental improbabilities presently cloud the idea of public journalism. Each has to do with the neighborhood of public journalism and the viability of its links to the world around it. Each has to do

with how public journalism joins forces with others—with other agents who are similarly implicated in making journalism public. This is because in the end, public journalism cannot function as a self-contained community in which the proponents preach to the converted. Rather, it needs to develop neighborly practices with all those in its surrounding environment.

The neighborhood of public journalism is composed of four main neighbors, each of whom bears closer consideration by public journalism proponents—history, the journalistic world, the public, and the political system. Each of these neighbors offers different reasons for the neighborhood not yet jelling. Although each is involved in the broader project of making journalism public, each suggests in different ways that despite many compelling ideas, the shape of their neighborly relations (or lack thereof) with public journalism has allowed it to work only *some* of the time. When it does not work, it begins to look suspiciously like that which it is being held responsible for correcting.

Improbability 1: The Historical Neighbor

The most fundamental improbability of public journalism emanates from a historical myopism that many of its proponents display. Public journalism has been situated in a largely ahistorical space, whose proponents have either misread, miscast, or simply missed the historical contingencies that helped generate a point in space and time which is presently amenable to public journalism. Such ahistoricism extends to both the content and the form of journalism's history, rendering the new neighborhood into a community with little understanding or sensitivity of its earlier inhabitants.

In content, public journalism's historical myopism has to do with the degree to which it codifies itself as new and different from other forms of journalistic practice. In much of its self-generated rhetoric, public journalism has set itself as separate and antithetical to the classic mode of neutral, or gatekeeping, journalism.[22] Proponents argue that the journalist's role "has to be restated" because "informing the public is too limited, too narrow."[23] Seen as an antidote to the claims of objectivity behind which traditional journalists have long assumed to hide, public journalists argue that objectivity is the primary causal circumstance for the ills of the press today.

Yet the resonance of reporters as objective, neutral gatekeepers of events, as value-free conduits of information, is only one of numerous models of journalism. As far back as the 1970s, John Johnstone, Edward Slawski, and William Bowman published a groundbreaking study in which they found that working journalists displayed allegiance

to two competing belief systems in journalism—neutral and participant. They argued that more journalists in effect endorsed participant over neutral journalism, even if functions pertaining to both roles were widely accepted.[24] Decades later, David Weaver and Cleveland Wilhoit upheld the simultaneous existence of different belief systems among journalists, arguing that practices associated with neutral reporting were in fact differentially displayed in broader mind-sets about adversarial, interpretive, and disseminator notions of press function.[25] The modern journalist thereby blends "the classical critical role of the journalist . . . with the technical requirements of disseminating great volumes of descriptive information."[26] These studies suggest that journalists are more pluralistic about journalism than the stance of public journalism proponents suggests, and that the invocation of objectivity and neutral journalism resembles a straw man argument. That is, in setting themselves up against the neutrality of traditional journalists, public journalists may be overstating the resonance of the practices of neutral or gatekeeping journalism within the community.

At the same time, however, they may be overstating the differences between their practices and that of a whole panoply of more communally committed journalistic forms—the muckrakers at the turn of the century, the advocacy journalists of the 1960s and 1970s, even the strident investigative journalism of the post-Watergate era. Each argued, in different ways, for a predetermined reportorial presence in the story, and for a reporter committed more to community than to professionally oriented aims. For instance, for as long as journalism has existed, journalistic crusades of one sort or another—the Teapot Dome scandal, battling slumlords and drug lords, Watergate—have sharpened U.S. journalism's collective identity. Although earlier forms of crusade journalists did not use the terminology by which public journalism is now being set in place—employing such terms as "values clarification," "connectivity," and "connectedness," which many traditional journalists dismiss as jargon—the final objective of public involvement and change resembles that of public journalists. Advocacy journalism, in particular, favored activism and community participation over passivity and professional detachment. Thus, even a cursory look back in time raises crucial questions about public journalism's positioning on the continuum of journalistic practices. Rosen argues that "there are limits to the stance of the observer in journalism," and that the press offers "no philosophy that takes over when those limits are reached."[27] It seems that the press has many such philosophies, only perhaps they are not collectively identified in a way that public journalists recognize.

In form, too, public journalism proponents have not paid substantial attention to the history of professional adaptation in journalism.

Regardless of the period examined, rhetoric that insists on a too rapid pace of accommodation, as does that of public journalism, is often accompanied by a more cautious mode of actual adaptation to change. In numerous cases throughout history, journalists have accommodated slowly and tentatively to alterations of their own practices, and the latter part of this century displays many such examples: Calls for more interpretive reporting that were heard as early as the 1930s only substantially gained ground among a large part of the U.S. journalistic population at the beginning of the 1950s, following the Korean War and other events.[28] Similarly, during the 1970s, a newfound journalistic reliance on anonymous sources, related to a post-Watergate fervor over investigative journalism, fell on deaf ears 25 years later when it helped produce scandals as wide-ranging as the Janet Cooke affair or Joe Klein's scripting of *Primary Colors.*[29] And even the practices of New Journalism, hailed by many during the 1960s, were kept marginalized and separate from mainstream journalism, until a broader recognition of news narrative in the late 1980s facilitated their more reputable reintroduction as literary journalism.[30] In failing to admit a tradition of slow change, the rhetoric of public journalism seems out of step with journalism's past, resembling an advanced placement course that is wrongly targeting a community of mediocre students.

To be fair, the critics of public journalism have been similarly myopic about history's lessons. In reducing public journalism to a promotional tactic designed to offset dwindling circulation figures and declining revenues from advertisements, critics have conveniently misread the similarly ignoble beginnings of other kinds of journalism—neutral journalism, New Journalism, and muckraking, to name a few—and their insistence on removing profit tracking from existing discussions of good journalistic practice results in an incomplete picture of journalism.[31] They also ignore the point that positive consequences can and do emerge often from the least promising beginnings.

Historical vignettes are instructive, for they suggest that the ability to accommodate change in any professional milieu is not a certain or easy matter, and this is particularly so with journalism. In adapting, proponents need to make a new practice or set of practices doubly accountable: On the one hand, the practice must be compelling enough that it can convince whole populations, communities, or professions to move in directions at odds with their previous experiences; on the other, it must be sufficiently safe that those same whole populations see linkages between the norm and the deviation. The eclipses of time between the interpretive reporting of the 1930s and the 1950s, between the valorized anonymous sources of the 1970s and the problematic uses of such sources in the 1980s and 1990s, and between the

New Journalism of the 1960s and the more reputable literary journalism of the 1980s are all cases in point, for a temporal lag may be necessary to engender the kind of double accountability in regard to the alterations being proposed. Perhaps that much time was necessary for the proposed innovation to settle into some kind of consensual setting—to be seen either as viable both for those who believed in it and as nonthreatening for those who did not or, alternatively, to be seen as problematic by both its supporters and its challengers.

And so a slew of questions remain about public journalism's historical neighbor, all of which suggest a slower mode of adaptation than is being proposed. There may be a need to respect the slow pace of professional adaptation that journalists have traditionally displayed while recognizing the more rapid pace insisted on by public journalism advocates. Attending to such questions is necessary because it constitutes the core of neighborly relations. For just as one checks out a neighborhood before moving into it, so too might public journalism profit by considering who and what preceded its own arrival.

Improbability 2: The Journalistic Neighbor

Improbability 2 involves the relationship of public journalism to its journalistic neighbors and the degree of viability in forging a connection between the two. Affixing the term "public" to "journalism" is a somewhat problematic linguistic ploy that activates an underlying tension in this neighborhood. Somewhat like talking about *nurturing* parents or *melodic* music, the term "public" journalism requires affixing an adjective that declares the subjunctive state of the activity equivalent to the activity itself. Adding "public" to journalism, then, shows that journalism has been repaired by locating its constitutive feature—the public—in only one of its operative forms.

But such a ploy is somewhat deceptive and not very neighborly. Nor is it reflective about all that journalism tries to be, for many alternatives continue to exist in varying relations around that same constitutive feature. Just like music with jarring notes is still considered music or parents with less nurturing styles seldom lose their parental rights, so too with journalism. Its continuum of alternatives—some better, some worse—assume varying relations with the public, even if they are less articulated than that suggested by the rhetoric surrounding public journalism. In making its own nominal claims to the public, then, public journalism has inadvertently set itself up as the neighborhood's rent lord. Is it any wonder, then, that old-guard loyalists like Michael Gartner have labeled public journalism "a menace"?[32] Inadvertently or not, public journalism appears to have set itself against its journalistic

neighbors, propelling them into a defensive stance over what they see too as their territory.

Such a lack of neighborly friendliness—that in the extreme case constitutes unneighborly imperialism—stems from what seems to be a certain degree of ambiguity surrounding the idea of public journalism. Recently called "an adventure,"[33] public journalism presents itself like a liminal experience, one predicated on a certain degree of separation from the rest of the world. Yet what happens when the worlds meld is not yet clear. What *is* the relationship of public journalism to the rest of the journalistic world? Is it supposed to replace, substitute, merge, or merely complement alternative journalistic styles?

If the least expansive scenario—that of complementing other journalisms—is the preferred vision, then public journalism's claim to the public becomes somewhat bewildering and gives rise to a series of questions. Is it possible for public journalism to maintain a status as one alternative among many if at the same time its own nominal stance neutralizes the claims of its neighbors to their shared territory? What, for instance, is the rest of journalism supposed to be called—nonpublic journalism? Private journalism? What should we make of all those agents of news who do not fit as readily into public journalism's mold as does the press—television, radio, and the Internet?

If, on the other hand, the most expansive scenario—that of replacing other journalisms—is implied, more needs to be said about how it can be accomplished, and whether or not it *should* be accomplished. Are *all* journalists supposed to abandon their belief in professional disinterest and devise new standards of journalistic responsibility? And if not all, which ones are supposed to do so? How much of public journalism's lament is directed at journalism as a whole? Conversely, how much of it has been antagonized by the Washington press corps and inaccurately generalized to all of journalism? For as long as the limits of public journalism are not stated, the idea of expansion remains the unarticulated background behind the practices at hand.

In its present form, public journalism seems to work best in situations in which people know and can act on their public wants and needs, and to this end it is assumed to bring about practices of good citizenship. The best example here might be a political campaign. Campaigns appear to be well suited to discussions of public journalism because they wrap coverage in broader assumptions about our sense of civic self, drawing on subjunctive notions about attending to the news media as the practices of good citizenship. Not surprisingly, then, numerous examples of public journalism have focused on political campaigns, including *The Wichita Eagle*'s "People Project" and *The Charlotte Observer*'s "Citizen's Agenda."[34]

But surely there are other deeper and perhaps murkier sides to political identity and citizenship—less rational, less conscious dimensions for which public journalism does not account. Such practices might not be identified immediately as the material from which good citizenship is made, yet they figure nonetheless in its making. Popular culture, for example, certainly provides one example of an ongoing challenge to journalism's claim to be the primary designer of public life. If existing notions of citizenship are pared down to the kind of articulated, vocalized statement of community that seems necessary to get public journalism moving, then in effect a new kind of tyranny has been created. It is a tyranny that privileges the neighbors who play by certain rules over others who reside nearby but are less vocal and perhaps less conscious about what their proximity means. Such a tyranny threatens to make public journalism doubly complicit because it comes wrapped in the rhetoric of communal concern. This makes public journalism into a rent lord, and an overly self-interested one too.

In addition, other types of journalism are not at all identifiably interested in community, as it is defined by public journalism. What are we to make of the journalisms of gardening, fashion, or perhaps even business? Each type of news manages only an ill-fitting match with the goals of public journalism, yet nowhere in its rhetoric has their place been clarified. This is not to suggest that the newest neighbor need account for the remainder of the neighborhood. But when it comes armed with claims that appear to displace other neighbors—even if only due to inadvertent exclusions—it sets the rest of the neighborhood justifiably on edge.

Improbability 3: The Public Neighbor

Improbability 3 involves the relationship between public journalism and its nonjournalistic neighbors—the public. In a functioning democracy, it is generally assumed that the optimum operation of public journalism depends on its good links with the community. In other words, public journalism depends on a workable neighborhood and on the continued ability to generate and maintain momentum with portions of the public deemed relevant. The idea of a functioning linkage between journalism and its public is rooted in the work of John Dewey, who argued for the creation of conditions by which people could routinely participate in public life.[35]

Such is the shape of what Jay Rosen has called "proper attachment" or "getting the connections right,"[36] an idea that suggests journalists can help publics accomplish civic responsibility by facilitating the discussion and enactment of intelligent decisions about public

affairs. Aside from the fact that this presumes that journalists will know to frame the right questions, and that their questions will affect the answers they receive, numerous additional problems come to light here. For it has not yet been made clear *how* public journalism is to make things public at the same time that it attends to the public's needs. How is "proper attachment" or "getting the connections right" to be achieved and maintained?

To begin with, the connections between journalist and public may be easier to talk about than accomplish. Though Rosen has argued that it invites the participation of citizens who have genuine concerns about their public life,[37] there has been no focused debate about how this is to be determined. At some level the neighborhood is overgrown, and the public is too large to accommodate public journalism in its declared form. It is for this reason that public journalism remains largely a phenomenon of the periphery of U.S. cultural, social, and geographical life, associated with small towns and cities like Wichita, Kansas; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Columbus, Georgia, rather than large metropolitan settings like Washington, DC; New York City; or Boston. This suggests that ultimately, public journalism will *not* be able to include everybody, even on questions that all would agree deserve wide-ranging community attention. Yet there has not been sufficient attention to the contingencies that this necessitates.

Problems surrounding the broadening of public journalism introduce additional questions concerning the idea's implementation. How is the neighborhood to be drawn? Who is to be the community? Which citizens will participate? The public of public journalism could be the people around the corner from the news bureau, those most vocal in community organizations, or those with enough bureaucratic savvy to make themselves visible to journalism. It remains unclear who will choose among them. And will those traditionally marginalized by the media—minority groups, consumer groups, even environmental groups—receive a larger share of the neighborhood or a share equal to that which they have drawn in the past?

Furthermore, how is one to judge concerns as genuine? Who is to make that judgment? When and on what basis will distinctions be made about the self-serving nature of some concerns and its ability to harm the needs of others? At times, as Michael Hoyt of the *Columbia Journalism Review* has observed, the efforts of public journalists are wrongly presented as being in the public interest.[38] Unlike campaigns, where audience interest can be easily turned into the material from which coverage grows, public journalism seems not to have developed contingency plans either for events that fail to draw in communities or for neighbors who simply do not care about, are not interested in, or

are not aware of the so-called public good. What happens when members of the public do not want to be citizens? What does one do when, to paraphrase the ideas of James Carey, communities continue to say that "this has nothing to do with me" even *after* public journalism intervenes? Does that make them no longer neighbors?

Issues such as these—and their lack of answers thus far—suggest that in the project of making journalism public, the neighborhood houses many types of residents, only some of whom can be ultimately accounted for. If public journalism is to work, it will do so most effectively by setting in place decisions made by the few for the many. And thus elitism creeps right back in just like in the old days, as Michael Schudson has suggested[39] and John Pauly argues in this volume. The only difference here is that the new elitism is far more user-friendly—and hence potentially more dangerous—than before.

But the danger does not stop here. For an inverse case generates additional unneighborly practices between public journalism and its public. That danger has to do with breaking the neighborhood down—with fracturing the public even more than it has already been divided. On any given day, lamentations can be heard about the disappearance of the public in the contemporary age. The media are filled with claims that the contemporary age has become a world of hyphenated identities, of agendas that come into play differently in accordance with the roles played at the time of their consideration. Taking issue with items on the public agenda is thereby both unpredictable and idiosyncratic. One never really knows which dimension of the so-called public will motivate an issue, because as the issues in public discourse change, so does the public. And who is to protect against public journalism being used as a mouthpiece for special interests that desire greater media control?

For public journalism, this means that its sense of a neighborhood is unstable. It means that as journalists cater more to audiences in shaping the news, they may end up sliding while looking for a durable anchoring point from which to cover public life. Can a public give cues about what is important and relevant when it no longer agrees on the salience of an issue among its own members? This may leave public journalism groping, searching for ground and more secure footing at the same time it is supposed to be providing the neighborhood in which public discourse can take place.

Equally important, it may also leave journalists doing the opposite of what public journalism hopes to do: further differentiating their messages about public life, often to the point of their complete washout as an index of the public imagination. Indeed, contemporary news is filled with an array of practices that constitute journalism—C-SPAN, the

Weather Channel, even *Inside Edition*—that suggest that news may be better today at capturing the few than uniting the many. In seeking to fit the appropriate shape of today's public discourse, we may hear more talk of many neighborhoods, publics, and a marketplace of communities. Public journalism may thereby produce not a prototype for one optimum neighborhood but its breakdown—to borrow another metaphor, a shopping mall of messages about how public life ought to work.

The shopping mall mentality, however, does not always reflect the best side of a shared communal life. The best testament to its limitations are those nagging questions of morality, where journalism has done a poor job of generating either consensus or community. According to the rhetoric of public journalism, why should the public be necessarily interested in issues like distant atrocities, AIDS care, or unwed pregnancies if they involve only a fraction of the public? In dissipating the very essence of what has been potentially important to large numbers of people, then, public journalism may in effect make a bad situation worse. There is already evidence that suggests this is the case. Although not even half the electorate voted in the 1988 presidential campaign—a circumstance that, by Davis Merritt's view, propelled him to activate his Voter Project and the public journalism initiatives it involved[40]—the 1996 presidential campaign brought similar returns. The only difference is that public journalism had by then already arrived on the scene in many of the locations where residents reported an ongoing sense of disconnection. The real effect of public journalism on publics, then, is yet unclear.

Both situations—that of catering to only part of the public and that of breaking it down—suggest that in its links with the public, public journalism is *in* the neighborhood but not necessarily *of* the neighborhood. That distinction—as here too the name "public journalism" implies—is made less as discussion proliferates more about the ways in which public journalism distinguishes itself from other kinds of newsmaking.

Improbability 4: The Political Neighbor

Improbability 4 brings the discussion back to the broadest neighborhood of all—that of the linkage between journalism and the polity. The praises of public journalism have come to be routinely sung in a highly normative tone in this most general wave of discourse. Public journalism has in many conversations become the model neighborhood, the default case of journalism in democratic settings, the background against which all other journalistic practices are measured in terms of their responsibility to democracy.

The tone of these praises, as John Durham Peters suggests in this volume, has had predictable effect. We hear of journalism as a "makeable truth," a bastion against the death of journalism, a provider of the information and analysis that are the "building blocks of public life."[41] Such comments are touched with the magic of the superlative and the drive to achieve perfection. Yet at some level the subjunctive tone they embody facilitates a slippage of the qualities that in effect constitute public journalism.

In fact, the model state to which public journalism has been elevated has itself produced a certain slippage of terms. Two sets of problems arise here. The first involves a disjunction between what observers know public journalism to be—just by virtue of what has been set in place over the past few years—versus the form its proponents would like it to assume. Often the former is argued on the basis of the latter. Claims are made about what public journalism does on the basis of what it *could* do in a perfect world. Such claims not only make public journalism less sensitive than it could be to its own ideology but also render premature some of the claims that have circulated. They imply that public journalism, in providing what Jay Rosen has called a support system for public life, may in fact become a primary support beam on which democracy rests. If only because of the many questions that linger in the neighborhood of public journalism, this seems risky, reductionistic, and rather naive. By harnessing so much of one's confidence in the future of democracy to public journalism, we may be giving the polity itself the status of a question mark.

A second set of problems is far more fundamental. It raises the question of who the public really expects to watch over its neighborhood. It was said earlier that one's public life is too precious to be left only to journalism. This has particular resonance for the function of news in democracy. When taken to their logical extension, the claims of public journalism advocates imply that public journalism provides one of the backbones of democracy, a mainstay of the polity, a fundamental hope of the republic. This implies that public journalism must rescue democracy from its relentless wash downstream.

Yet the flip side of the question that Jay Rosen asked earlier in this volume—"What are journalists for?"—is not to assume that journalists are alone in their function. Can journalism be tendered the chief vehicle by which democracy survives? Can journalism be held so responsible for that which has gone wrong with political life? Though Walter Lippmann long ago had another solution in mind when he made the claim,[42] even he warned that the press had become the whipping boy of democracy. Is it not wrongheaded now—60 years later—to claim that journalism be made the primary watchdog of the polity? What of the

legal system, the educational system, and even religion, each of which plays a strong role in securing the broadest boundaries of existing neighborhoods? If proponents of public journalism continue to claim journalism's obligation to uphold the integrity of the polity, when journalism may be ill-equipped to do so, it is possible that they will institute a corrective that is certain to fail—a corrective by which journalism will never be able to sustain expectations of it yet will always be the first to blame when something goes wrong with political life.

Making the Neighborhood Work

So what are we to make of the neighborhood into which public journalism has moved? Specifically, how are we to make the neighborhood work in a way that accepts public journalism as a bona fide resident? A personal anecdote comes to mind that illustrates the folly of not taking one's neighborhood seriously.

Not long ago, a new neighbor arrived in the community where I live, a leafy, green Philadelphia suburb whose houses are kept separate and private, often to a fault, by trees of every shape and size imaginable. The neighbors arrived in the midst of summer, when the foliage was overgrown and untamed and, without inquiring about how things looked at other times of the year, cut down scores of 30-foot-tall trees. When the seasons progressed, the untouched foliage thinned and turned barren. As the new neighbors realized that in their zeal to gain sun and air they had left their house (and those of their neighbors) without any natural privacy, they became increasingly crestfallen. The veteran neighbors too, recognizing the inability to repair the damage, became angrier and angrier. Yet on one point both sides agreed: Had the new residents only queried the old inhabitants before changing the landscape, they might have finished their first year in the neighborhood in a more amicable fashion.

To date, public journalism enthusiasts have acted in a manner similar to those neighbors who cut down the trees. Neglecting to query the veteran neighbors of the community, public journalists have forged ahead often without checking for more secure or reasonable footing. Their desire to promote something different and better may have generated the overstatement of a model that is trying too fervently to capture the public imagination without taking the time to figure out how best to do so. This makes me—a willing proponent of the *idea* of public journalism—into an unwilling skeptic about the *mechanics* of public journalism. For what kind of journalism can public journalists possibly offer without a shared neighborhood in which they and all of their

neighbors—history, other journalists, the public, and the polity—can thrive?

How, then, is it possible to correct the unworkable nature of the new journalistic neighborhood in a way that can accommodate public journalism? Ultimately, the unresolved issues surrounding the idea call for more careful deliberation. The neighborhood needs to be left to grow naturally over space and time, with an emphasis more on doing, acting, and experimenting than on talking. The idea of public journalism needs to develop into the practice of public journalism, by settling gradually into its linkages with the history of journalism, other journalists, the public, and the polity. It is for all involved parties to figure out how public journalism will end up differently from the neighbors who cut down the trees—isolated, misunderstood, and conflicted about their own shortsightedness. But that kind of deliberation can result only if the neighborhood is allowed to flourish naturally.

Although the title of this volume suggests otherwise, public journalism is more than an idea already. But if it is to stay more than an idea, it needs to have time and space to ground itself in practice. And like other innovations in journalism, it needs to do so by recognizing the value of its long-term capacity to shape the future as much as its short-term ability to shake up the present. Not long ago, James Carey wrote that "public life refers to an illusion of the possible rather than to something with a given anterior existence."[43] If the visionary quality of this new type of journalism is not grounded more firmly in practice, the adventure of public journalism may end up its improbability. And the notion of community on which it is founded—that of journalists, publics, and journalists and publics together—may end up more imagined than not.

Notes

1. For example, see Arthur Charity, *Doing Public Journalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995); Clifford G. Christians, John P. Ferré, and P. Mark Fackler, *Good News: Social Ethics and the Press* (New York: Oxford, 1993); Davis Merritt, *Public Journalism and Public Life: Why Telling the News Is Not Enough* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1995); Jay Rosen, *Community Connectedness: Passwords for Public Journalism* (St. Petersburg, FL: Poynter Institute for Media Studies, 1993); Jay Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right: Public Journalism and the Troubles in the Press* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1996); Jay Rosen and Paul Taylor, eds., *The New News versus the Old News: The Press and Politics in the 1990s* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1996).

2. Judith Sheppard, "Climbing Down from the Ivory Tower," *American Journalism Review* (May 1995): 18–25; Alicia C. Shepard, "The Gospel of Public

Journalism," *American Journalism Review* (September 1994): 28–35; Michael Gartner, "Give Me Old-Time Journalism," *Quill* (November/December 1995): 66–68.

3. Tony Case, "Public Journalism Denounced," *Editor and Publisher* (November 12, 1994): 14–15; Max Frankel, "Fix-It Journalism," *New York Times Magazine,* May 21, 1995, p. 28; David Remnick, "Scoop," *New Yorker* (January 29, 1996): 38–42.

4. Many of these activities are chronicled in Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt Jr. *Public Journalism: Theory and Practice* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 1994).

5. Edmund Lambeth, "A Bibliographic Essay on Civic/Public Journalism," *National Civic Review,* 85,1 (Winter/Spring 1996): 18–21.

6. Edmund Lambeth and David Craig, "Civic Journalism as Research," *Newspaper Research Journal,* 7 (1995): 149–160; Edward D. Miller, *The Charlotte Project: Helping Citizens Take Back Democracy* (St. Petersburg, FL: Poynter Institute for Media Studies, 1994); Jan Schaffer and Edward Miller, eds., *Civic Journalism: Six Case Studies* (Washington, DC: Pew Center for Civic Journalism and Poynter Institute for Media Studies, July 1995); *The Public Journalism Journey of* The Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, VA: *Virginian-Pilot,* August 1995).

7. Mike Tharp, "The Media's New Fix," *U.S. News & World Report* (March 18, 1996): 74.

8. Tharp, "The Media's New Fix," p. 72.

9. Jay Rosen, "Making Journalism More Public," *Communication,* 12,4 (1991): 267–284.

10. See, for instance, James W. Carey, "The Press and Public Discourse," *Center Magazine* (March/April 1987): 4–16; James W. Carey, "The Press, Public Opinion, and Public Discourse," in *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent,* ed. Theodore L. Glasser and Charles T. Salmon (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), pp. 373–402; James W. Carey, "A Republic, If You Can Keep It: Liberty and Public Life in the Age of *Glasnost,*" pp. 108–128 in *Crucible of Liberty: 2000 Years of the Bill of Rights,* ed. R. Arsenault (New York: Free Press, 1992); Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic, 1978); Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1995).

11. Carey, "The Press and Public Discourse," p. 392.

12. Some of the most comprehensive include Rosen, "Making Journalism More Public"; Rosen, *Community Connectedness*; Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right*; Rosen and Merritt, *Public Journalism*; Rosen and Taylor, *The New News versus the Old News.*

13. A 1994 Times–Mirror survey reported this percentage.

14. Tom Goldstein, *The News at Any Cost* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), p. 165.

15. The limitations of viewing journalists as a professional community are discussed in Barbie Zelizer, "Has Communication Explained Journalism?" *Journal of Communication,* 43 (Autumn 1993): 80–88.

16. This view is developed in Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy*

Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Barbie Zelizer, "Journalists as Interpretive Communities," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication,* 10 (September 1993): 219–237.

17. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso Books, 1983).
18. Barbie Zelizer, "Journalism in the Mirror," *The Nation* (February 17, 1997): 10.
19. Zelizer, "Journalists as Interpretive Communities," pp. 219–237. Also see Zelizer, *Covering the Body.*
20. Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right,* p. 13.
21. Merritt, *Public Journalism and Public Life*; Charity, *Doing Public Journalism.*
22. Morris Janowitz, "Professional Models in Journalism: The Gatekeeper and the Advocate," *Journalism Quarterly* (Winter 1975): 618–626, 662.
23. David Mathews, "Public Journalism and Public Deliberation," *National Civic Review* (Winter/Spring 1996): 39. Also see Deborah Potter, "Redefining the Elements of News," *National Civic Review* (Winter/Spring 1996): 35–38.
24. John W. C. Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski, and William W. Bowman, *The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976).
25. David H. Weaver and G. Clevelane Wilhoit, *The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991 [1986]), pp. 112–124.
26. Weaver and Wilhoit, *The American Journalist,* p. 144.
27. Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right,* p. 2.
28. The most widely cited trajectory of the rise of interpretive reporting can be found in Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, *The Press and America* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), p. 435. But examples that challenge a unilateral adoption of interpretive reporting as late as the mid-1950s are found in C. H. Hamilton, "Call It Objective, Interpretive, or 3-D Reporting," *ASNE Bulletin* (September 1, 1954): 6–7; and F. Christopherson, "Are We Being Objective in Reporting the Cold War?" *ASNE Bulletin* (January 1, 1953): 1.
29. See, for instance, David Eason, "On Journalistic Authority: The Janet Cooke Scandal," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (1986): 429–447; Elaine Dutka, "Reaping New Profits from a Pulitzer Hoax," *Philadelphia Inquirer,* June 4, 1996, p. D3; Chris Satullo, "Journalistic Ethics No Oxymoron," *Philadelphia Inquirer,* July 30, 1996, p. A7.
30. John J. Pauly, "The Politics of the New Journalism," pp. 100–129 in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century,* ed. Norman Sims (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
31. For instance, Schudson, *Discovering the News,* argues that the commodity form of journalism at the time of the penny press had substantial positive effect on journalistic practices of the time.
32. Gartner, "Give Me Old-Time Journalism," p. 66.
33. Jay Rosen, "Public Journalism Is a Challenge to You (Yes, You)," *National Civic Review* (Winter/Spring 1996): 4.

34. Miller, *The Charlotte Project*; Charity, *Doing Public Journalism*.
35. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Holt, 1927).
36. Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right*, p. 81.
37. Rosen, *Getting the Connections Right*, p. 1.
38. Michael Hoyt, "Are You, or Will You Ever Be, a Civic Journalist?" *Columbia Journalism Review* (September/October 1995): 27–33.
39. Schudson, *The Power of News*.
40. Merritt, *Public Journalism and Public Life*.
41. Jay Rosen, "Making Things More Public: On the Political Responsibility of the Media Intellectual," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 11 (1994): 372; Rosen, "Public Journalism Is a Challenge," p. 3; Edward M. Fouhy, "A Sense of Community," *Communicator* (August 1995): 15.
42. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: MacMillan, 1922).
43. Carey, "The Press, Public Opinion, and Public Discourse," p. 373.