

Richard Reeves, *What the People Know: Freedom and the Press*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. 149 pp., index, ISBN: 0-674-61623-5; £7.95 paper.

Jay Rosen, *What Are Journalists For?* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. 352 pp., ISBN: 0-300-07823-4; \$29.95 cloth.

These recent books by Richard Reeves and Jay Rosen describe well two of the strongest reactions of American journalists to the recent changes that permeate journalism: (a) in what ways should journalism change?; (b) journalism is being destroyed by change. The first reaction – soul-searching about how journalism should improve its methods – is embodied in Rosen's *What Are Journalists For?* The book is his report from inside the laboratories of public journalism, the newsroom movement that was center stage at many gatherings of journalists in the early to mid-1990s and that has been the frequent recipient of a barrage of verbal rotten eggs from journalism elites. More importantly, it is a movement that has established a number of experimental projects in newsrooms, some still in progress, to test its ideas. For more than a decade Rosen, a media critic and professor of journalism at New York University, joined journalists in shaping public journalism projects. Rosen's primary job was to observe the projects, provide an intellectual framework for the movement and help the practitioners evaluate what they were doing. The other frequent reaction heard among journalists today, that journalism is being destroyed by change, is at the heart of Richard Reeves's new book *What the People Know: Freedom and the Press*. A former *New York Times* reporter, current syndicated columnist and author of ten books, Reeves has produced a lament – one mixed with occasional eloquence and frequent griping – that seems either not to see, or not to want to search for, a way to keep journalism whole within the current vortex of change in which it finds itself spinning.

While Rosen's book is about searching for solutions to the problems of journalism, the Reeves' book confounds. Reeves glimpses, but he provides little reflection or analysis regarding, the problems. Consequently, the reader who cares about journalism seems to be left with little to do but mourn a lost profession. Though laments have their place, it is unfortunate that when Reeves, a journalist of considerable stature, made journalism itself his subject he did not apply his full impressive skills of observation and analysis. Reeves wisely criticizes the increasing blur between news and entertainment, but he repeatedly focuses his lament on matters that seem to have more to do with the loss of a lifestyle. There's a sweet boyish quality to some of this, as in his discovery in his youth that 'you become a reporter by saying you're a reporter. No qualifications. No license. Almost no training,' and when he observes,

'[t]he cynicism that others see in us, we see as prolonged innocence, or adolescence, and idealism. It's fun being the one shouting that the emperor has no clothes.'

There's nothing wrong with having fun as a journalist. In fact, it's pretty hard not to have fun. But the naïveté described here may be a big part of what led to the condition Reeves now laments. 'Were it a person,' writes Reeves in a statement perhaps more profound than he realizes, 'journalism would be diagnosed as depressed.' Fueled too much by the daily jolt Reeves says he loved as a young reporter – the jolt that comes from focusing on taking an assignment at the beginning of each day, completing it and coming back for the next assignment the next day – journalists easily find themselves becoming co-dependents in the newsrooms. Newsroom culture helped create an environment in which adrenalin flowed freely and reflection about even the individual story, let alone overall coverage or newsroom policies, occurred too seldom. Many journalists became people who recognized the growing destructive forces in their newsrooms, but like the co-dependent partner in a dysfunctional personal relationship, they often were unable to contemplate how to help create a non-dysfunctional situation. They were focused on the daily fix, not on the long-term view of either their own work or the overall work of the newsroom or its policies. Ironically, that quick fix that Reeves adored in his early days as a young street reporter may be the same quick fix that young journalists on the internet (the new form of journalism that Reeves now fears will contribute mightily to its destruction) now experience. In either generation, his or the current one, the same mistake easily occurs: getting one's satisfaction from the boom-boom process rather than from the potential value of the substance of one's work to the public.

Reeves draws attention but brings little insight to important problems. However, his quotations from two eloquent voices – James D. Squires, former editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, and Ted Koppel, host of ABC's *Nightline* program – provide very important windows into the present state of journalism in the US, and perhaps elsewhere. Reeves draws from a book written by Squires after he left the newspaper: 'Under the new order, this news medium is no longer an institution dedicated to the public interest but rather a business run solely in the interest of the highest possible level of profitability.' Koppel's remarks, little remembered despite their importance, were made in 1997 at a dinner for the Committee to Protect Journalists, an organization that aids reporters attacked and jailed around the world. Koppel honored the 27 journalists who had been murdered or killed in 1997 while practising journalism with these words:

We celebrate tonight the men and women whose dedication to collection and distribution of facts threatens their very existence. When they antagonize those with money, political power and guns, they risk their lives. We, on the other hand, tremble at nothing quite so much as the thought of boring our audiences.... The preferred weapons of the rich and powerful here in America are the pollster and the public relations counsel. But they are no threat to the safety of journalists. Our enemies are far more insidious than that. They are declining advertising revenues, the rising costs of newsprint, lower ratings, diversification, and the vertical integration of communication empires. They are breezier, chattier styles insinuating themselves onto the front pages of our more distinguished newspapers. They are the fading lines between television news and entertainment.... It is not death, or torture, or imprisonment that threatens us as American journalists; it is the trivialization of our industry.

Reeves notes that in a decade the percentage of newspaper company revenues that went into news operations dropped from twenty to about seven per cent. Given that and other developments, he reports, it is small wonder that he sees the demise of journalism around the corner. Unfortunately, though, he tosses his hands in the air about these large problems, many of which are caused by the new corporate culture that permeates news organizations. He recommends that journalists 'Yell All About It,' but he says journalists can do little besides truth telling. To find and tell the truth about myriad events, of course, is important, indeed primary. But journalists also need to learn how to participate, even lead, in protecting and reforming their news organizations. Surprisingly, Reeves does not even mention public journalism, the controversial movement that sought to find ways to improve journalism during the decade that provides his focus.

Anyone who wants to understand how public journalism sprouted, grew and then became part of the general culture of some parts of mainstream journalism will get a fairly full picture from Rosen. He is as faithful in documenting criticisms of the movement as he is in documenting its evolving rationale and successes. He was there from the beginning of the movement in 1989 as Davis Merritt, a frustrated Topeka editor, became one of the first editors to try journalism experiments in his newsroom.

Rosen describes a movement of people who wanted to experiment with some new approaches to journalism without damaging the basic values of journalism, including the investigative or watchdog functions. Public journalism, sometimes called civic or community journalism, carved out time for reflection and experimentation in the midst of the daily buzz of journalism. It began when a few editors dared to lift the veil and publicly express deep concern about the state of the profession. Unlike the concerns expressed by Reeves, the concerns expressed by public journalism experimenters were focused first on the state of public life and second on the state of journalism. Their concern about the latter focused nearly entirely on whether it served the public well. Briefly, the founders of public journalism came together because they believed public life was in trouble and, as they looked closely at journalism, including the ways they themselves practised it, they concluded that their own profession shared part of the blame. They thought that journalism, the great defender of democracy, had taken on some habits that were making it an enemy of democracy. The movement's impetus came from editors in small- and medium-sized communities who detected a decline in participation in public life. Some journalists at national publications shared those fears. One of them, Paul Taylor, a political writer at the *Washington Post*, wrote in 1990: 'The political dialogue is failing because the leading actors in the pageant of democracy – the politicians, the press, and the voters – are bringing out the least in one another.'

Used to a public that respected their Watergate accomplishments, many journalists didn't notice when public opinion started shifting against them. By the late 1980s, journalistic pride increasingly was perceived as arrogance, and journalists were seen as another set of big players, alongside politicians and corporate heads, all of whom were viewed as having disregard, if not contempt, for the American public. Journalists saw themselves as protectors of democracy, a high ideal, but had decreasing contact with citizens. People were getting the impression – one Walter Lippmann would

have thought reflected the appropriate minor role of the public – that the democratic process was not democratic, that mere citizens were not expected to participate in the conversation about public life. A growing number of people felt there were few options for citizens in such a scheme except as cynical dropouts from voting and the public conversation.

Some journalists noticed what was happening and simply reported it. Many didn't notice what was happening and simply continued to report the play-by-play of politics without questioning either what was happening or their role in it. But other journalists were losing sleep, worrying about what was happening to democracy and journalism. Some spoke about their fears. They even said journalists needed to do something about what they saw as the tragic state of public life. It was that decision – to do something – that, Rosen reports, would get this loosely structured group that would become known as the public journalism movement into trouble, especially with some elite journalists.

The public journalists asked the question that is Rosen's title: what are journalists for? These experimenters were tentative and searching, not adamant and demanding in their suggestions. Many in journalism were fundamentalists and as such acted as though Moses had delivered all the basic precepts of journalism, including 'thou shalt never be more than an observer,' when he came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, and that none should be questioned. Others – the public journalism proponents – wanted to risk asking questions and trying new practices, ones they thought would not violate the core values of journalism. The result, writes Rosen, was an argument, an experiment, a movement, a debate and an adventure – an 'open-ended quest for another ethic in the press.' Should a news organization help a community get its act together? Or, should it be just a provider of information that people either act on or ignore? If citizens don't act, should journalists take steps that invite the citizens to get involved, to find solutions? Public journalists thought they could take the risk while doing no harm. They felt it should be possible to help engage citizens in public life without violating any of the basic values of journalism that proscribe conflicts of interest. Some journalists looked at such situations and thought they were seeing 'just good journalism,' not something that needed a movement. They thought that identifying potential solutions was something that the best journalists already did when reporting problems. But other journalists thought venturing into reporting solutions was anathema, that it would harm the cherished observer role of the journalist.

The most valuable experiments, perhaps, were those where journalists forced themselves to rethink how they covered conflicts. They tried to stop loving conflict as a narrative device and to look instead for ways to cover conflict that would report differences just as clearly as in the old mode but that would also report more subtle variations that would enable the citizen to develop an understanding of, instead of a distaste for finding solutions to, public problems. Some of the experimenters found that if the mind-set, or frame, for their stories included the desire to serve citizens' needs to get involved – in other words, went beyond their need to know – the stories they wrote would be different: they would still contain hard information, but they would also contain handles that people could grab as citizens, handles that could be used to try to solve conflicts.

Some prominent journalists were not only not interested in the possibility of learning how to practice journalism in new ways; they were also full of scorn and ridicule for the experimenters. In a signed column, Howell Raines, editorial page editor of *The New York Times*, referred to one journalist's respect for public journalism as 'a plan for turning reporters into lackeys.' When it came to election coverage, wrote Raines, it was important for journalists to 'be agnostic as to public policy outcomes, to be dogged in the collection of information for its own sake.' Raines's opinion was in contrast to a major point that public journalism supporters, including some political writers from the *Washington Post*, made about campaign coverage: journalists should force candidates to respond to the public's agenda rather than to the agenda created by the 'political class' of politicians, consultants and journalists. This, of course, meant going out and finding out what the public's agenda was. Perhaps the low point in criticism of public journalism was reached in an unsigned *New York Times* editorial that referred to the damage to the credibility of the press wreaked by 'the fad for intellectually flaccid "civic journalism".' This statement was ironic at the time it was written and is even more so today. American journalism has been plagued in recent years by various acts of journalistic malfeasance that have damaged journalism's credibility. None of those acts resulted from the public journalism experiments; all of them arose from establishment journalism projects that failed old standards.

Two important issues are missing from Rosen's book. Many journalists embraced, or wanted to embrace, a number of public journalism's ideas, but they were troubled by the fact that in numerous cases newsroom experiments in public journalism were supported with funds from private foundations. Unfortunately, Rosen does not discuss this issue. The idea of an outside party financing news coverage should be questioned as a real or perceived conflict of interest that could dilute the independence of journalists. Besides, it is difficult to understand why news organizations, consistently among the US corporations with the highest profit margins, would even consider taking such funds. Not only could doing so place their credibility at stake; most of them are more than capable financially of supporting experiments in their newsrooms. Missing from this book, too, as it has been from the public journalism movement as a whole (as well as from Reeves' book) is any acknowledgement that for twenty-five years before this movement started, other groups of people – organized ethnic minority journalists and women journalists – were raising the questions public journalism practitioners and others would raise much later, particularly ones about the huge gaps in coverage of issues and communities. It is unfortunate that advocates of public journalism have seldom recognized the shoulders on which they stood or sought the wisdom of those who earlier invented some of the same wheels.

Both of these books make a valuable contribution to understanding growing concerns about the future of high quality journalism in the United States. Reeves provides a heartfelt lament that is limited but, nevertheless, enlightening. Rosen analyzes and describes the driving philosophy and methods used by the pioneers in the public journalism movement. Both authors have written works that could stimulate more thought and action on behalf of the protection and reform of American journalism.