

A CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

ROD AMNER LOOKS AT HOW A SMALL SOUTH AFRICAN NEWSPAPER IS MANAGING TO PUNCH WELL ABOVE ITS WEIGHT

When the public parks in Southernwood, a central area of East London, were given a makeover by the Buffalo City Council in mid-July, the *Daily Dispatch* splashed this merry sliver of sunshine news on its front page.

As *Dispatch* editor Andrew Trench asked in his editorial the following day, “Why glorify this seemingly mundane obligation of the authorities to taxpayers?”

One answer is that this modest example had helped to illuminate new pathways for the newspaper’s journalism.

Earlier in the year, the *Dispatch* had launched a series of community-based meetings and discussions. Through these “town hall” (more like church and borrowed classroom) meetings, Trench says he was trying to find a way to connect his newspaper into the heart of its neighbourhoods and to “try and move from describing problems to try and help solve some of them”.

At a lively, well-attended meeting in Southernwood, a fusillade of complaints over the appalling state of the local parks – which had become a haven for criminals and drunks – were unearthed. The forum was initiated, organised, sponsored and facilitated by the *Dispatch*. The newspaper published

reports on its own meeting – thus destabilising the journalistic canon of “objective reporting”. It subsequently gave over many column inches to investigative reports on the state of open areas in the area. Soon after, the municipality paved parks, installed new lights, cut the grass and instituted visible police patrols.

What made Southernwood’s “extreme makeover” so remarkable, says Trench, was that “it was the direct result of our readers speaking their minds. For once our readers’ voices were heard and something was done ... That surely counts as a success, as small as it may be, in our contemporary times of indifference.”

Municipal spokesperson Samkelo Ngwenya con-

firmed the swift action in the parks had followed concerns raised by the *Dispatch*’s Community Dialogues.

The *Dispatch* is a small newspaper serving one of South Africa’s poorest regions, but it inspires unusual levels of brand loyalty and consistently punches above its weight, winning national awards for its investigative and online journalism. It is now pioneering South Africa’s first full-scale experiment with civic – as distinct from citizens’ – journalism.

To paraphrase American academic Jay Rosen, the two-decade-old “civic journalism” movement has thousands of adherents in all corners of the globe who subscribe to the simple but apparently controversial premise that the press should promote and improve – not merely report on and complain about – the quality of civic life.

In convening its Community Dialogues, the *Dispatch* is helping to “form” as much as “inform” the

public around issues of mutual concern. This process of community formation is tentative and fragile and Trench concedes that “much more than cosmetic amendments are necessary to restore the community fabric of Southernwood”. But, for now, he is happy to celebrate this as “a victory for the people by the people”.

The Dialogues have certainly helped the newspaper share its agenda-setting function by surfacing a “citizens’ agenda”. But, to help sustain a public sphere to which all citizens have access, and in which all topics of concern to citizens can be articulated, deliberated, and critiqued, *Dispatch* journalists will need to engage citizens in an ongoing way as active partners in the news-making process.

One example of how this can be done is Mexico’s *Grupo Reforma*, which has developed a network of “editorial councils” that offers citizens opportunities to formally discuss with journalists topics they would like to see covered, how they would like to see those topics reported, and to evaluate the coverage. Newsrooms have been reconstructed to include multiple teams focusing on topics of concern to citizens.

But, what if citizens are narrow-minded, or worse, racist and sexist? Public journalism scholar Tanni Haas insists journalists should not give up all their editorial power. Journalists need an intelligible and defensible political agenda separate and distinguishable from those of communities (and community values, which are not always the same as “good values”). Without this, journalists would find it difficult to maintain a critical editorial stance in relation to those communities, avoid glossing over community conflicts for fear of upsetting certain community segments, and not succumb to dominant community values.

In South Africa, the most defensible political agenda for journalists is surely to help ensure that the concerns of marginalised social groups are articulated and heard to the same extent as those of dominant social groups?

This implies that news organisations should help organise public deliberations that focus on their particular concerns, advance those concerns through their reporting, and partner with political actors and institutions to ensure that those concerns are promoted in practise. It is possible that citizens themselves could accomplish such goals, but there is ample evidence that this is not happening. By waiting for citizens themselves to organise public deliberation, news organisations risk allowing social groups with the resources necessary to organise such deliberation in the first place to set their news agenda while ignoring those groups arguably in need of public attention.

But, why is so little public deliberation going on in a country that once had an almost hyperactive civil society? Why have we become so disengaged from public life? The truth is that in many surveys citizens say they do want to participate in public life but feel excluded from it by a closed (one-party-dominant) political system. They may be inclined to get involved in civic affairs, but only when they believe that such involvement can bring genuine change.

If this is so, journalists should reorient their news reporting from a focus on elite deliberations and actions to a focus on the problems of concern to citizens while, at the same time, helping to create spaces where citizens can deliberate and act upon those problems.

But, as the *Dispatch* has discovered, this is difficult to achieve in a country with such profound problems and so few opportunities for citizens to express them.

Trench describes a Community Dialogue in a cramped classroom in Nompumelelo, a poor settlement in the heart of East London’s suburban belt, as “popping the cork on a shaken bottle”.

The meeting was explosive from the start, with everyone having something to say. The complaints were endless – from concern about the clinic with only one nurse to rubbish not being collected to the lack of sports fields for children to play in.

“They’d lost all faith in the city to deliver services for them,” says Trench. “It was an incredible process to watch, almost a cathartic release by people who appear to have seldom been asked to talk about such things publicly. I wondered to myself what this says about local leadership. Why were people so eager to talk? Had their leaders never asked them about this stuff before?”

But it was when the meeting turned to gathering possible solutions to these problems that things became extremely heated, descending into chaos as battles between neighbours began to play out. The meeting was closed soon after.

One of the lessons from that meeting, says Trench, is that it is not the forum to get into ideas for solutions. “There is so much people want to get off their chests, that it’s impossible.”

It is clear from this example that while participation in news media-sponsored community forums can be both educational and symbolically satisfying, they cannot necessarily offer a genuine substitute for sustained public engagement with problems.

As Jeremy Iggers suggests, “citizens brought together for news media-sponsored encounters do not constitute a genuine public – they represent a collection of strangers ... who may not see each other again ... and who have not had the opportunity to develop the relationships of trust and understanding that are essential to democratic co-operation”.

Journalists should encourage citizens to continue their deliberations – and act upon their outcomes – within the institutions of the wider civil society (the civic organisations through which citizens can organise themselves for political deliberation and action).

Haas suggest that for problems potentially resolvable by citizens – journalists should support and promote citizens’ own efforts to formulate and enact concrete solutions. For example, they could report on what citizens in other localities have done to address similar problems. They could encourage citizens to join existing or create new civic organisations, and publicise citizens’ applications for resources.

For problems requiring more deep-seated, systemic intervention, journalists should encourage citizens, in consultation with experts, to formulate possible solutions and then to lobby relevant government officials to enact those solutions.

Trench says he has been energised by his newspaper’s fledgling civic journalism experiment. “I am amazed to witness the common purpose that exists ... the incredible goodwill that, if harnessed, would make such an enormous difference to people. We’ll make sure the voices raised at these meetings are heard loud and clear by those in authority. We will also look to these meetings for ideas on how the paper can back community-based campaigns which will result in change for the better. My vision is that the *Dispatch* has a role as a builder of bridges in our community and as a catalyst for constructive discussion about our world.”

References

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