The Citizen Engagement Round Table:
Media and Citizen Engagement - Civic Journalism
September 18, 1996


The roundtable met to discuss the role and function of the civic journalism movement as a force potentially influencing the nature of media and the role of citizens in the political process. Following a short introduction to the subject by Maureen O'Neil, Peter Calamai, Editorial Page Editor of the Ottawa Citizen, presented an analysis and critique of civic journalism. Following his presentation, special guests Peter Kent and Art Charity offered their unique perspectives on the issue. Peter Kent addressed efforts by public and private media in Canada to engage citizens more deeply in public affairs, while Art Charity offered a defense of the civic journalism movement, and a detailed explanation of its purpose and approach. The dialogue which followed centred on the objectives and practices of civic journalism in contrast with those of conventional media. This broadened the scope of discussion, and led the participants to touch on issues of supply and demand for such approaches, some barriers and pitfalls which must be addressed before and during implementation, and overall prospects for such a movement to take deeper root in Canada.

Peter Calamai

The first issue when addressing civic journalism is determining just what the "animal" is. A range of definitions have been used, but the best way to understand it is to view it as culture or approach to information, rather than a way of practicing journalism. Civic journalism proposes to "make it easier for citizens to make decisions about issues in the public sphere, and, in turn, inspire those in public life to act on those decisions". In so doing, it seeks to develop a new approach to journalism by approaching stories from the grassroots or community level, with a direct focus on issues facing the community itself, rather than the political process.

Civic journalism's mandate derives from a belief that mainstream journalism has become obsessed with the political process, to the detriment of substantive presentation of issues. This failure of the media has exacerbated public apathy toward politics and governance in general, reflected in the continuing low rates of voter turnout in the U.S. A complementary argument has been presented
by some that members of the media are similarly disaffected by this state of affairs, which partially explains why little has been done to rectify the problem from an internal source. While the civic journalism movement is largely an American phenomenon, small elements of it can be found in Canada. Canadians, however, should expect it to increase in the coming years, due to growing public apathy toward politics and growing public discontent about media's approach to information.

Mr. Calamai, however, is sceptical about the prospects for civic journalism as a remedy for citizen participation in the political process, for two main reasons. First, its definition is vague, which has often resulted in the capture and misuse of the idea by marketers and advertisers interested in selling more papers than actually pursuing its objectives. This has bred wariness, even cynicism, about the method among media.

Moreover, Mr. Calamai expressed concern over the relationship between media objectivity and civic journalism. Traditional journalism strongly holds a moral belief in detachment, which ensures objectivity. Civic journalism expressly asks that the journalist become close to the issue, individual, or group concerned over a long period of time, which may compromise objectivity. In this way, civic journalism may compromise journalistic integrity, which is a slippery slope toward advocacy.

However, Mr. Calamai was quick to note that the objectives, if not the specific practices civic journalism should be pursued by Canadian media in a much more comprehensive way. In particular, Canadian media needs to focus more directly on the collective problems facing communities, rather than the political processes which may or may not address those problems.

**Art Charity**

Art Charity responded to Mr. Calamai's assertions, challenging both his conceptual framework and his argument. Civic journalism's emergence is the result of a public which is not involved in politics, and a media which is not structured to involve them. Conventional media's approach, which focuses on the "horse race", polarized views, and conflict, helps the public decide what they are against, but not what they are for. This is why apathy toward politics abounds at a time when people are demanding more inclusion in the political process. Moreover, civic journalism is not about advocacy, and it is not about compromising objectivity, he argued. In fact, it holds those objectives to as high a standard as contemporary journalism does.

The public are interested in substantive issues, not the horse race. Although they may not articulate questions and concerns as well as journalists do, the public have an natural ability to codify the problems which face them as individuals. Civic journalism attempts to reflect this perspective, creating pieces which directly address problems through that collective "community" lens.

Beyond attempting to articulate any particular problem at hand and its causes, civic journalism attempts to create a public dialogue which is constructive for democracy. In this way, the media becomes a tool for citizens to place their concerns on the public agenda. Moreover, one of civic journalism's broader goals is to capture and understand the nature of public participation in practice, and its converse, public disengagement from politics. In this way, civic journalism is a learning process as well as an information sharing platform.
Peter Kent

Although not called "civic journalism", efforts by both public and private media to engage citizens more deeply in public dialogue have for the most part failed, both in the U.S. and in Canada. Two examples:

The advent of talk radio in private broadcasting has proven to be incredibly destructive for the enhancement of substantive dialogue and meaningful public contributions to the political process. The biases, half truths and outright lies which dominate talk radio do more to undermine the political process than they do to enhance it.

Civic journalism-like efforts by public broadcasters in Canada make are similarly guilty, but for different reasons. By presenting conflictual, polarizing events like town hall meetings, the public media only reinforce the current normative character of television news and public affairs, which is dominated by opinion rather than considered judgement. According to Mr. Kent, the best example of Canadian media practicing citizen engagement is the "Cross-Canada Checkup" on CBC radio.

Two things are missing from these efforts. First, they are missing a facilitating influence, usually in the form of a moderator, who consciously refrains from exhibiting his/her own biases, and second, they are missing the influence of substantive knowledge - opinions are presented without adequate understanding of facts and competing arguments. In this case, the cure may be worse than the cause.

Thus, practicing civic journalism or other related citizen engagement methods is not simple. Although these types of approaches have not been successful thus far, some media are learning, and they are attempting to do it better. Global news, as it becomes a national network, is going to try to emulate the best characteristics of civic journalism.

Discussion

The participants were interested in probing the sources of the problem which has led to civic journalism's emergence. Of particular focus was the media itself.

Several participants offered impressions on the failures of modern media. The group agreed that the main problems with contemporary media lie in a constant focus on polarized opinions, anecdotal evidence, conflict, crisis, and negativity. Combined, these inhibit media from looking at issues from a moderate, macro level perspective, within an appropriate contextual framework. These problems are exacerbated by the short attention span of modern media, which some of the participants argued contributes directly to a profound lack of substantive information. This not only includes the familiar "soundbyte" focus of television, but also the fact that journalists themselves have very short attention spans. One of the evening's guests argued that these characteristics lead the citizen to grasp only snapshots of issues which in turn leads to a skewed understanding of reality. Moreover, such a structure minimizes the role of rationale and argumentation in political dialogue. The principle of
objectivity was also called into question, as the constant focus on anecdotes and polarized opinions were considered to have the effect of contributing legitimacy to positions which would normally fall outside the belief system of the vast majority of citizens.

These characteristics directly influence the relationship between political leaders and citizens, according to the guests. In terms of public dialogue, the media's focus on leaders often enables the leaders themselves to set political agendas, effectively marginalizing the general public from participating in the agenda-setting process. Civic journalism and other practices like it attempt to overcome this barrier by utilizing the power of media to place the citizens’ agenda directly on the political agenda, turning media into a tool of the citizenry as well as for the citizenry.

**Civic Journalism in Practice**

*Beyond analysis of the emergence of civic journalism and the challenge it poses for conventional media approaches, the participants were interested in gaining an understanding of civic journalism in practice. The group soon found that in fact civic journalism has been long practiced in Canada, under a number of aliases, although with reduced frequency in recent years. In one participant's words, civic journalism is what journalism has always supposed to be.*

As Art Charity pointed out at the beginning of the evening, at its most basic level, civic journalism attempts to place the citizen's agenda on the public agenda for important social and economic issues, utilizing the media, usually newspapers, as its vehicle. Its development has been focused primarily at the community level, where the distance between citizens, media, and politicians is relatively small, where potential solutions to social problems can be devised, implemented, and measured for success. Civic journalism also has pretensions of broader applicability, specifically by placing the citizen's agenda on the national agenda. Beyond potentially bringing leaders closer to the most pressing issues from the perspective of citizens, civic journalism has an underlying objective of improving the state of democracy.

Strong civic journalism movements can be found in several communities across the United States, usually anchored by the efforts of a single newspaper. Some examples are Charlotte, North Carolina, Madison, Wisconsin, and Seattle, Washington. Newspapers in these cities practice civic journalism not only on single issues, but on a range of issues simultaneously, with a much stronger emphasis on analysis of both the problem and potential solutions.

The participants were interested in discussing a case here in Canada which emulated the civic-journalism approach. The Ottawa Citizen's recent coverage of the hospital closure issue was cited by one of the participants. As she noted, the story was followed from beginning to end, its content focused on the implications (fiscal, social and political) of the various options presented, and the backroom wrangling by advisory councils and others was positioned as part of the context (a variable influencing the result) but not at the centre of the discussion. However, as Peter Calamai pointed out, such approaches to stories are the exception, not the rule - civic journalism-style approaches cost more than conventional approaches, and this cost is rarely recouped. The primary mandate of media is to make
money, and if this approach to stories doesn't sell any more papers than other approaches, then it won't get practiced.

Conversely, the group agreed that a case which desperately needed a civic journalism-like influence was the Quebec separation issue during the referendum last fall. The participants agreed that the information presented by Canadian media during that period was focused almost exclusively on political process (the horse race and strategy), and that in the end, slogans and misinformation were the dominant factors which influenced public decisions.

The participants exhibited interest in how political accountability is viewed within the civic journalism model. Concerns were raised about the nature of contemporary media's approach to political accountability (ministerial responsibility) and its frequent symptom, political paralysis. Art Charity explained that although civic journalism's mandate ascribed strongly to political accountability, it did not mirror contemporary media's approach or solution. He argued that polarization and negativity in modern media produce a "disciplinary" approach which minimizes the ability of leaders to explain their actions, but holds them responsible. A civic journalism based media shifts the focus of accountability from culpability to answerability.

**Supply and Demand: Civic Journalism's Driving Forces?**

_In the United States, civic journalism has emerged in pockets, usually the result of a combination of public demand, journalist demand, and management who view it as a way to sell more newspapers. The participants were interested in exploring the causal relationship between these factors in spawning a civic journalism movement._

It appears, based on the cases where civic journalism has developed, that journalists take on key roles in promoting and practicing the approach initially, with tacit support of management intent on selling more newspapers. In turn, public demand is cultivated by these efforts, and a virtuous cycle of demand and supply is established. However, public demand for civic journalism alone may not be enough to bring it to fruition, because the public is so used to what it now receives from media that it may not necessarily be able to articulate such a demand.

The participants discussed citizen responses to civic journalism-like initiatives in Canada. Peter Calamai noted that public demand has inspired the Ottawa Citizen to improve the quality and substantiveness of the editorial page. Art Charity indicated that the best public responses have come about when the outlet (newspaper) sustains the method over an extended period.

Mr. Charity explained that despite substantial improvements in relationships between politicians and citizens (and overall civic activity) in centres where civic journalism has taken root, measurable growth from a market standpoint has not been attained. He attributed the continuing decline in newspaper readership across the U.S. (and Canada) as masking the real, and inhibiting the potential, economic effects of civic journalism. Experience thus far indicates that media management and managing editors must see a demonstrable fiscal reward (ie. more papers sold or a greater market share) for the approach.
to take root and become common practice.

One participant wanted to take the issue of public demand further. He pointed to the fact that civic journalism assumes that there is latent public demand for a more iterative approach to public dialogue. He argued that in fact one must look at the issue of social capital within a given community or city to determine whether such an approach would be embraced. He argued that a minimum level of social capital is required for civic journalism to take root, and that all communities may not meet this precondition. Thus, civic journalism might be limited to being a localized movement.

Another of the participants brought up a caveat about the objectives of media management when launching a civic journalism exercise. The public, ignorant about what this approach entails, may be easily drawn to imitations which present themselves as civic journalism-like but possess few of its attributes. In fact, as Art Charity pointed out to the group, civic journalism has become a flavour of the week for marketers and advertisers interested in using the idea without the content. Several imitations were cited - in particular, the growth of agenda-driven television shows in the United States like American Journal, Dateline, etc., which are attempts to present the ideals of civic journalism but the content of Entertainment Tonight. In Canada, such "synthetic" approaches to civic journalism have not come to television (yet), but talk radio might be a harbinger of things to come, according to Peter Kent.

Prospects and Pitfalls

Although intrigued by the prospects which civic journalism promises for substantive public engagement in the political process, the group spent a significant amount of time looking at the barriers and pitfalls which may inhibit the expansion of civic journalism-style methods. There was a sense among the group that although its objectives were laudable, character flaws were numerous. The group debated many of these points. Advocates were quick to note that the method is not a panacea, but it moves journalism to a place which is much closer to the democratic ideal than the method currently practiced.

Many participants agreed that generating public interest is a central issue which the civic journalism movement must address if the project is going to broaden, and that interest must be both tangible and measurable. Previous experience suggests that journalists need to act as a catalyst for politicians, and once politicians see the benefits of the model for their relationship with citizens, they become active believers in the process. Combined, these actors would play key roles in fostering citizen engagement.

However, the participants identified a fractured trust between politicians and media as a potential roadblock against the growth of civic journalism. In particular, the group pointed toward access to information legislation as a key factor affecting the relationship between politicians and media. The participants agreed that media's use of material obtained through access to information has been exploited and skewed to such a degree that standard processes of research and analysis in government are being undermined. The result is increased tension between the media, public servants, and politicians. Several participants indicated that this issue must be addressed if a positive, mutually beneficial relationship (as civic journalism requires) is going to develop.
Another key barrier to a broadened use of civic journalism is economic. As mentioned above, a civic journalism approach is costlier than conventional approaches to news. Peter Calamai indicated that private media are unlikely to be willing to put forth the capital required for such an effort, especially given the uncertain return on that investment. The CBC was cited as a potential vehicle for such an effort. Some participants, however, wondered how likely this was given the recent round of cuts at CBC.

Some of the most serious questions raised during the discussion about civic journalism revolve around the structure of media. Beyond the obvious economic issues, a more difficult barrier to overcome may lie in the norms and practices which govern how news is produced and presented. These problems extend primarily from the issue of objectivity in media.

For example, a civic journalism movement at a newspaper might entail a closer working relationship between editorial and news staff, potentially a merger between the two. Carrying this out would require a fundamental rethinking of what media objectivity is, and would likely be met with significant resistance from the media community. Peter Calamai expressed a related concern about objectivity. His argument was that if a newspaper pursues a mandate to address a particular issue using a civic journalism approach, future stories on the subject might carry "internal political baggage".

One of the dominant characteristics of civic journalism is a strong community-based focus. Peter Calamai indicated that this is both its greatest strength and its most significant weakness. He noted that community problems are the unchallenged domain of civic journalism, and other media have much to learn from such approaches. He lamented the fact that management of the Ottawa Citizen (and many other papers across Canada) have cut local coverage significantly since the late 1980's, and argued that similar cuts have had a negative impact on the social capital of many communities across Canada. However, he described the civic journalism movement as inherently naive, as it does not (and cannot) adequately address issues which primarily derive from sources outside the community (like unemployment). The group agreed with Mr. Calamai’s overall point - they had difficulty imagining the emergence of a civic journalism movement on based on "national issues".

The discussion then shifted toward prospects for a civic journalism movement in Canada.

Given some of the parallels between Canadian and American media, as well as comparatively high levels of public apathy toward political leaders, it might appear that prospects for a Canadian version of civic journalism might be strong. However, some of the factors discussed above, combined with a low level of competition (among newspapers) in most Canadian cities and apparently low profit margins (especially in smaller centres), augur an unlikely future for civic journalism in Canada. Moreover, it should be noted that philanthropic foundations play an important role in supporting and promoting the expansion of civic journalism in the U.S., a resource which Canadians do not have the luxury of having.

Finally, the group discussed how some of the key characteristics and objectives of civic journalism
might become more entrenched here in Canada.

Because of the costs involved in launching a comprehensive civic journalism exercise, Peter Kent posited that one potential way to broaden the use of such methods and reduce cost is for different media outlets (television, newspapers, radio) to share resources for specific civic journalism-like efforts. Experience has demonstrated that this is a difficult thing to accomplish in practice, because competing interests tend to impede progress. However, if the timing and the subject is right, this approach might have some merit.

One lesson that civic journalism teaches is that building trust between public servants, politicians, and media is not an impossible task, and in fact each can reap benefits from cooperating. Citizens get involved in politics, media generate more interest in their coverage of issues, and politicians get to discuss the complexities and nuances which influence decisions, something which is constantly lamented as impossible in the current environment.