

# Civic Journalism and the Polls

by Edward Fouhy

As journalists have again proved in this election year, their appetite for poll data — always hearty — has become well nigh insatiable. But many journalists are asking how well conventional survey research serves their readers and viewers and some are seeking a new model. The question takes on greater import as the profession of journalism, faced with shrinking circulation, and a public turning away from traditional news sources, but not yet turning up anywhere else, changes some of its traditional practices. That change, in some cases, has led to a new attitude, a willingness to consider the public and the public agenda when editors gather at the table to make their daily news judgments. The attitude change even has a name—civic journalism.

Hardly revolutionary you say? Didn't all of corporate America recently rediscover that the customer is king? Yes, but journalists don't like to think of themselves as having quite so simple a relationship with their viewers and readers. They are in the business of providing information an essential oxygen that allows democracy to thrive. It's a higher calling than buying and selling goods. Their version of the relationship is best described by a variation on the old anthropologist's line, "Me journalist, you reader." In other words, I know what's good for you.

## Professional Imperatives

Journalistic imperatives have nearly always overwhelmed the reader/viewer relationship. Imperatives like the need to be competitive. And, in recent years, to be — in the vernacular of the age — edgy, to be hip, to be an insider, to hold elected officials in thinly veiled contempt, to be quick to judge others. Competition has always been a force that drives journalism, of course; competition to be first on the street or on the air supplies the adrenaline rush on which so many journalists thrive. All the other

attributes, hip, edgy, judgmental, journalists picked up more recently, mostly in the heady post-Watergate days. Journalists felt then, with considerable justification, that their profession was playing at the top of its game.

The game didn't last long. The aforementioned circulation clouds started to form on the horizon back in the early 'eighties. Economic woes followed. The new competition is for people's time.

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Consuming news has always been a leisure time activity, of course. But according to some new studies, Americans now work longer hours, take fewer vacations and holidays than they did as recently as 20 years ago. Both parents work in many homes as they try to maintain a middle class standard in the face of shrinking wages and fewer well paying industrial jobs.

The dinner hour, when the family gathered in the national electronic town hall as Cronkite, Chancellor or Reynolds set the national agenda with their network news broadcasts, has also been effected by changing lifestyles. The most recent news ratings show viewers in about 25.4 million homes still tune in for the national news, still a huge number but down from 33 million only a few years ago. (CNN's daily average is 580,000 homes.)

Meanwhile new information technologies are threatening the news media's traditional delivery methods. Ink on paper, pictures and voices on the airwaves seem old fashioned next to the gushing river of information on demand the Internet and other technologies now make possible. About a third of U.S. homes are currently equipped with computers; roughly half that number have modems.

## Self-Doubts

On top of their other woes, there is a growing sense that journalists are out of touch with the people they say they serve. The title of the well received book by James Fallows, for example, is *Breaking the News: How Journalism is Undermining American Democracy*. No institution in American life has fallen further faster in public esteem than journalism, down from a 50% public confidence ranking as recently as 1988 to 25% five years later, according to the Yankelovich Group's annual survey. Something is clearly awry in the relationship of journalists and citizens and that's bad news, not just for the shareholders in the big news and information companies, but for all of us. News is the WD-40 of democracy, the lubricant that keeps the system running.

## Reform

Enter civic journalism, promising if not a quick fix for circulation woes, a way to rebuild public trust in journalism as an institution. At the heart of civic journalism, its organizing principle, is the idea that there is an ascertainable public agenda. There is a public consensus about the major issues of the day — not on the specifics of legislation but on such larger issues as where our national leaders should be taking the country. Civic journalism serves the public's need for news and information that allows people to behave as responsible citizens of a self-governing society; as

## **Polling America**

men and women called upon to make informed judgments about the issues that arise in public life, as well as about the candidates who vie for their votes.

Survey research, of course, plays a major role in guiding civic journalists to the issues on the public's agenda, but many are finding traditional snapshot polls have limited use. Civic journalists are more interested in people's core values than in their often-transient views based on casual viewing of last night's TV news. They want to know how citizens view the campaign finance system not simply what they think about the spending habits of Steve Forbes. Research on public opinion carried out in the heat of the moment doesn't serve the needs of citizens and may end up confusing both journalists and their readers by portraying public opinion as volatile when it is more likely to be simply unsettled. Civic journalists try to establish what's on the public agenda by listening and by doing old-fashioned shoe leather reporting. They are fighting a trend; computers and data bases make it easy for many reporters to stay in the newsroom, rarely venturing out where the real people are. Tight news budgets and corporate downsizing that hit the

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newsroom years ago, also mean fewer reporters covering more stories.

### **Changing the Way the Press Uses Polls**

For some news organizations polling has become a substitute for reporters doing real reporting. It's cheaper to commission a poll than to hire, train and nurture cantankerous reporters. Conventional polling done for news organizations is designed to play off the day's

headlines. Nothing wrong with that. Done well that kind of poll can help illuminate issues and may help journalists find where citizens are moving, where they may end up on a given question. But it's also the kind of research that serves the needs of journalists not their readers or viewers.

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The so called “disconnect” between journalists and readers is rarely displayed in more vivid terms than in this kind of polling. The tip-off is the number of people in the ‘DK’ column. People often haven't had the time to consider a public policy question before a pollster working for a news organization is on the phone, asking what they think before they have had a chance to think. The result — another respondent who simply doesn't know. This sort of survey research is based on assumptions having far more to do with the needs and priorities of news organizations than of the people being polled, the presumptive consumers of these news organizations' journalism. Too often polling pushes people into corners where an opinion is demanded rather than freely given.

As Andrew Kohut director of the Pew Research Center for People & The Press puts it, “Too much polling simply tests out the conventional wisdom.” By contrast, civic journalists start their reporting from the bottom up rather than from the top down, with the information needs of the public a first rather than a last thought. They search for a deeper,

richer understanding of the state of public opinion. They look for connections among the public's beliefs. Focus groups can be particularly helpful. They allow for the kind of thoughtful probing necessary to establish a public agenda, by definition a far more complex set of the public's beliefs than the superficial po-

sitions established by conventional snapshot polls. Last fall the Pew Center for Civic Journalism commissioned the Harwood Group, a Bethesda, Maryland-based public policy research firm, to find out what was on the minds of voters in four key early primary states - Florida, California, Iowa and New Hampshire. Harwood's answers — jobs and values — was right on the money as the subsequent campaign proved.

The Harwood Group's Richard Harwood thinks journalists' conventional polling often asks the wrong question in an effort to chart definitive movement. He says it's more important to find out how people think rather than what they think on any given public question. His theory calls for sorting through the often conflicting views, the biases, the assumptions people bring to any discussion of public affairs. If that sounds more demanding, tougher, more time consuming than conventional survey research, it is. Connecting the dots representing the values people bring to public policy discussions isn't easy and therefore isn't cheap. Unfortunately, in an era of shrinking newsroom budgets, tighter space for stories and less airtime for serious programming, this sort of

expensive public opinion research is rare. Harwood has been trying to penetrate what he calls "the layers of public life" to find out where and how people get their information and form their opinions. The point of this effort is that journalists don't understand very well the process by which public opinion is formed. As it is now, journalists aren't invited to the party as people's views begin to crystallize. Cameras and notebooks aren't welcome until later when views presumably have jelled. But if there is to be a central, vital, continuing role for newspapers and TV news in the public life of a state or nation, journalists have to find a way to report what's going on at an earlier stage, because that is precisely when their role as information providers is most important.

### **Two Agendas: Journalists' and the Public's**

At the *Charlotte Observer*, one of the first newspapers to adopt civic journalism techniques, Public Editor Rick Thames and his colleagues see their polling as a second step in a multi-part reporting process. They first talk to scores of readers before even beginning to frame a questionnaire. Then editors compare their journalists' agenda with what's on their readers' minds. Only after these steps are taken are they ready to begin discussing a questionnaire. It's at this stage that they exercise their journalistic prerogative to add items they think are important but which the public rarely mentions. Foreign policy, for example, may not be on the public's mind but is clearly important in a presidential election. At the *Observer* they regard even their relatively exhaustive polling as establishing only a minimum public agenda. Even well designed questions raise the old problem of people reading back what they have seen on the evening news. Getting from what people think to how they think about things isn't easy. And the public can be cranky and contradictory no matter how carefully the questionnaire is constructed. Focus groups and more reporting are often essential. They help the staff sift through the views pollsters have gathered, before stories are framed, certainly before they are published.

Is there a way for pollsters and civic journalists to improve the way they work together? Is there new polling hardware or techniques to help sort through the noisy opinion environment that characterizes today's information-rich society? Probably not. No one has yet invented a computer program that will hasten the collection of views people hold once the pollsters' probe is inserted under their protective layer of superficiality. While newspapers like the *Observer* are breaking new ground in their search for a better understanding of public opinion, they are coming smack up against the realities of newsroom economics. There is simply less money to go

around, more demands on fewer resources. Some are solving that problem by forming local partnerships to share polling costs with television and radio stations, much like the long-standing ABC-Washington Post polling alliance. Indeed, local polling partnerships have led to other resource sharing practices and often to better journalism that benefits the

whole community. There is an old saying that nothing so focuses the mind as the instinct to survive. The old models are melting away; young people seem to have lost the newspaper habit altogether. Television news, in its mad scramble to compete, goes further and further down market, dumbing down coverage, heading for the day when only the trailer park crowd will be watching.

All this at a time when the means for distributing information has become available to all. The Internet makes us all publishers. But, the purveyors of the conventional wisdom say, content is king and brand name content is best of all. Those news organizations that hope to survive the technology revolution, will have to do far better in connecting with their readers. That means news organizations with an appetite more insatiable than ever for polling data, but not the same old stuff. The survivors will require data that is both richer and deeper than they have ever needed before.

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