“Why a Revival of Public Journalism Is Inevitable”

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When one thinks of how journalism might contribute to democratic practice, one's mind is immediately drawn to public journalism. This movement was, after all, precisely a call on journalists to "help the political community act upon…its problems" (Rosen, 1999b: p. 22; for overviews of the movement, see Charity, 1995; Glasser, 1999; Haas, 2007; Rosen, 1999a). Public journalism emerged in the late 1980s, mostly in small and mid-sized daily newspapers, but also in a smattering of TV and radio stations. By 2002 it had sprouted more than 600 journalistic experiments in the United States and abroad (Friedland and Nichols, 2002; Mwangi, 2001; Sirianni and Friedland, 2001), a dozen or more books advocating its practice, and more than 70 academic studies investigating its results. It is no wonder that one scholar dubbed public journalism "The most impressive critique of journalistic practice inside journalism in a generation," (Schudson, 1999: p. 118).

If not for the fact that public journalism is now defunct, we might simply end our discussion here. *Question*: might journalism assist the movement toward participatory democracy? *Answer*: public journalism is lighting the way! Unfortunately, today public journalism is, for all intents and purposes, dead (Nip, 2008). It is true that some of its practices have been incorporated into the daily routines of journalism. But many of its most ardent advocates within journalism have left the field. Others have focused their energies on the promotion of "citizen" rather than "civic" journalism. The non-profit foundations that once supported its work have moved on to new endeavors. Journalism itself—especially daily newspapers—faces profound existential threats. With circulation, ad revenues, and stock prices dropping precipitously, it is not surprising that no major public journalism initiative has been launched by mainstream news organizations in the

last several years. Without champions in journalism or elsewhere, the idea, much less the practice of public journalism is now largely absent from mainstream news.

Given this fact, it seems presumptuous, if not downright odd, for me to argue that public journalism will “inevitably” be revived. Nonetheless, that is the argument I wish to make. My reasoning proceeds in four steps.

First, I offer a definition of public journalism. This in itself is difficult, as any definition of what public journalism *was* may or may not be relevant to what it *will be* in an online news context. That being said, it is possible to cull from the writings of public journalists an ideal image of their craft. This image, I think, is anchored to four attributes: transparency, flexibility, interactivity, and finally, public problem solving. My assumption is that these attributes will appear in any form of public journalism. Any journalism, this is to say, that focuses on public problem solving in a transparent, flexible, and interactive manner is, by definition, a form of public journalism, whether it is practiced by bloggers, citizens, or professional reporters in mainstream news organizations.

Second, I argue that, as a network-based communication medium, the Internet “affords” these attributes. I take the concept of “afford” from Wellman et. al.’s (2003) discussion of the social implications of the Internet. Wellman and his colleagues argue that the way in which the Internet is configured makes particular kinds of social arrangements possible. Or, as Benkler (2006) puts it, “different technologies make different kinds of human action and interaction easier or harder to perform” (p. 17). In this vein, I suggest that the Internet makes a transparent, flexible, and interactive form of journalism easier to practice and, as Benkler concludes, all things being equal, “things that are easier to do are more likely to be done” (p. 17).

Third, I argue that the "affordances" offered by the Internet already have begun to reshape the institutional environment of public problem solving in the American public sphere. Once dominated by hierarchical or market-based organizations, today the American public sphere increasingly is populated by organizations seeking to solve public problems in transparent, flexible, collaborative ways. This trend does not represent a wholesale reformation of the American public sphere. But it does introduce a new institutional layer into that sphere that, to my mind, is a harbinger of things to come.

Finally, I link these developments to James Carey's (1989) idea that, historically, journalism always has expressed a form of public life. In this idea, Carey meant to signify the fact that journalism borrows its organizational forms and ideological aspirations from the wider institutional environment of the public sphere (on this point, see also Ryfe, 2006). Other historians have shown this to be true: the nineteenth century American party press took on the organizational form and ideological aspirations of the political parties that dominated American public life at the time. And the modern press of the twentieth century took its cue from the industrial and professional organizations that emerged in the progressive period (Kaplan, 2002; McGerr, 1986; Schudson, 1998). The same likely will be true of networked journalism. As network-based organizations populate the American public sphere, it stands to reason that elements of journalism will adopt their organizational form and cultural logic. More specifically, it is likely that journalistic organizations will become members of these networks, and so become participants in wider efforts to solve public problems in a transparent, flexible, and collaborative manner.

On this logic, the re-emergence of public journalism is all but inevitable.

What *Is* Public Journalism?

In the past, scholars wishing to define public journalism have noted the movement's complexity and sheer unwieldiness (see, for instance, the efforts of Blazier and Lemert, 2000; Grimes, 1999; Nip, 2006). This remains a problem, but looking forward to public journalism's future raises what is perhaps a more difficult dilemma: even if one succeeded in distilling public journalism as it was practiced in the 1990s into a concrete definition, that definition likely will have little relevance to the future of journalism. After all, public journalism emerged in the context of industrial, bureaucratic, hierarchical news organizations. In the networked-environment of the Internet, it is precisely this organizational form that is threatened with extinction. Given this fact, it makes little sense to define public journalism in terms of a set of practices native to an obsolete organizational form.

As a solution to this dilemma, I propose to draw from the writings and activities of public journalists a sketch of the movement's ideal image of its craft.[1] What would journalism look like, I ask, if it adhered to the highest ideals and aspirations of public journalism, as public journalists have described those ideals? A close reading, I think, suggests that journalism in this ideal form would have at least the following four attributes.

Transparency. Many public journalists came to the movement out of a sense that journalism had become too distant, too separated, from the citizens it served. For instance, Steve Smith, a public journalist who was managing editor at the *Wichita Eagle* during its

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[1]To sketch my picture of public journalism, I rely principally on the following texts: Black, 1997; Charity, 1995; Eksterowicz and Roberts, 2000; Glasser, 1999; Haas, 2007; Lambeth, Meyers, and Thorson, 1998; Merritt, 1995; Rosen, 1999a; Sirianni and Friedland, 2001. Where appropriate, I also borrow from other writings.

public journalism days, gave a series of speeches in the early 1990s in which he talked of a "fortress newsroom" as a "walled enclave where journalists practiced their craft…to shield themselves from the consequences of their work" (Smith, 2005: p. 44). And Dave "Buzz" Merritt, one of public journalism's early pioneers, wrote (1995) that journalism's credibility "does not arise from a contrived detachment that sets us apart from other citizens," but rather from "citizens trusting that we and they are broadly aligned in common cause…" (p. 116). To realign themselves with citizens, public journalists sought ways to make newsgathering processes more transparent. Smith, as one example, took to opening his news meetings to the participation of anyone who wished to attend. As editor of the *Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, WA, he went so far as to make live streaming video of these meetings available on his newspaper's website. He also engaged in Q&A sessions with readers in which he explained the decision-making process he and his journalists went through in making their news judgments, and invited citizens to argue for their points of view. Other public journalists used community meetings or focus groups to achieve the same outcome. Whatever form it took, however, the ideal remained the same: to make the process of news production transparent enough so that citizens had some insight into why journalists covered the news in the way that they did. In making their practices transparent, public journalists hoped to close the distance between themselves and citizens, and, in so doing, to regain a sense of trust and common purpose with members of their communities.

Flexibility. Public journalists were also sharply critical of the daily newsgathering process that had been in place in most newsrooms since the 1930s. This process involved such things as the beat system, sourcing patterns, and longstanding narrative news

conventions. Created to make newsgathering efficient and timely, the rigidity of these practices often made them ill-suited to the specific needs of particular communities. After participating in a series of "public listening" exercises, for instance, a reporter at the Norfolk *Virginia-Pilot* marveled that the stories flowing from the daily routines of news were not "the stories…people are talking about" (quoted in Sirianni and Friedland, 2001: p. 202). In response, public journalists sought to make the newsgathering process more flexible and adaptable to their community's needs. Charity (1995) reports, for example, on a Project on Public Life and the Press conference at which a group of editors tried to break apart the traditional narrative formula of who, what, where, when, and rearrange it in public journalism terms (p. 100). Other examples include the Columbia, South Carolina *State*'s efforts to break up its old beat system and reorganize reporters into teams focused on particular community issues (Johnson, 1998). Cole Campbell, editor at the *Virginian-Pilot* and later the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* was perhaps the public journalist most famous for tinkering with his newsroom (he once carried a coffin through the newsroom, ostensibly to "bury" old ideas). In his early days at the *Post-Dispatch*, Campbell reorganized the entire staff into teams, got rid of the position of "editor" (and created a new role, the "team leader,") and charged members of each team to write a mission statement and a set of goals (Shepard [AJR, "End of the Line"], 2000). The impulse behind these reorganization efforts was the same: to align the newsroom in a more flexible relationship to the community.

Interactivity. Perhaps no idea enjoyed more support among public journalists than the notion that journalists ought to engage in conversation with their communities. Friedland and Nichols (2002) report, for instance, that over half of the 600 public journalism experiments conducted since 1988 have included some form of public

deliberation. Examples abound. The Minneapolis *Star Tribune* initiated a series of "Minnesota's Talking" roundtables. In collaboration with Wisconsin Public Radio and TV, the Wisconsin *State Journal* organized a "We the People" project that involved citizens in televised deliberations. And the *Dayton Daily News* organized 300 citizen roundtables in 1994 on the subject of juvenile violence. The point of these exercises not only was to position citizens as actors in, and not merely spectators of, the public sphere, but also to frame journalists as collaborators with citizens in this civic activity.

Over public journalism's career, exactly where to draw the line between journalists and citizens became a matter of some contention. Some public journalists, for example, argued that citizens and journalists ought to collaborate to the extent that distinctions between them blurred: journalists would become political actors and citizens would become journalists. Others argued that journalists ought to retain at least some professional independence from the communities they served (on this disagreement, see Haas, 2007: pp. 31-33; Iggers, 1998; Lichtenberg, 1998). The dispute was never resolved. However, it is fair to say that in the main public journalists preserved the boundaries between journalism and civic activity. This led Schudson (1999) to categorize public journalism as a relatively conservative movement. "Public journalism exhorts journalists to put citizens first," he writes, "to bring new voices into the newspapers, even to share setting the news agenda with individuals and groups in the community—but always authority about what to write and whether to print stays with the professionals" (p. 123). In other words, though public journalism preached interactivity, it tended to practice professionalism. Perhaps. However, it is still true that, whatever its shortcomings as practiced, interactivity was central to public journalism's ideal self-conception.

Public Problem Solving. Thinking about what he had come to believe about journalism after 20 years in the business Cole Campbell (1999) listed as his first belief: "journalism is in the problem-solving business, not the truth business" (p. xiv). Among public journalists, this sentiment was an article of faith. Nearly every summary of public journalism begins with the idea that journalism's overall mission is to recreate a vibrant, participatory democracy. As Rosen (1999b) put it, public journalism was intended to "help the community act upon, rather than just learn about, its problems" (p. 22). This problem-solving orientation stemmed from the movement's philosophical roots in the pragmatic tradition of John Dewey (Perry, 2003; Rosen, 1999a). It also was a natural consequence of public journalism's posture toward the public sphere. If journalists were responsible for stimulating public conversation, the next natural question was, "to what end?" The answer was deceptively simple: to help citizens act on the problems they collectively face. This is, to play off the title of Rosen's book, "what journalism is for." It is this sense of journalism's mission that led public journalists to advocate not just any kind of public conversation, but a deliberative one. "To deliberate," Merritt notes, "is not just to 'talk about' problems. To deliberate means to weigh carefully both the consequences of various options for action and the views of others (quote taken from Nip, 2006, p. 215). And it is this sense of purpose that served as public journalism's central critique of mainstream journalism. Traditional journalists held that journalism fulfilled its purpose when it provided citizens with the information they needed to be free and self-governing (cf. Kovach and Rosenstiel's, 2001, statement of this purpose). Public journalists argued that American public life was broken. In this context, it was not enough for journalists merely to inform the public; journalists also had to catalyze public action. Journalism, they argued, ought to

be judged not by how well it informed citizens, but by how well it helped citizens respond to public problems.

These then, are the planks of public journalism's ideal image: transparency, flexibility, interactivity, and public problem-solving. Different of its advocates might put greater stress on one or another of these attributes. However, taken together these elements compose a fair rendering of the movement's aspirations.

Hierarchies, Markets, and Networks

It is difficult to know why public journalism did not make greater inroads in to the profession. Some argue that its communitarian bent grated against the liberal mindset of the profession (cf. Black, 1997; Merrill, Blevens, and Gade, 2002). Others suggest that commercially-oriented news organizations were never likely to embrace a form of journalism that required more, not fewer, resources than traditional news (Loomis, 1998). It may be, however, that public journalism was simply ahead of its time. For journalists steeped in the canons of the profession, and used to working in hierarchical, bureaucratic newsrooms, public journalism's arguments seemed unworkable and even threatening. And for commercially oriented news organizations, most of which held monopolies in their communities, public journalism's arguments seemed at best irrelevant. Why make such changes when profit margins remained high—much higher than for almost any other industry?

Today, however, journalism is in a state of profound flux. The Internet has swept aside old business models, wiped out thousands of jobs, required changes in definitions of journalism and its practices, and generally wreaked havoc on the industry. In this new context, public journalism's call for greater transparency, flexibility and interactivity seems

less threatening than prescient. As it gravitates to the web, journalism, almost despite itself, is becoming more transparent, flexible, and interactive. Why? Because the Internet is a network-based platform, and, as scholars have detailed, networks "afford" precisely those qualities—transparency, flexibility, and interactivity—favored by public journalism.

Comparing networks to two other common organizational forms—hierarchies and markets—makes this plain. Consider the case of transparency. In markets, relations between sellers and buyers remain relatively anonymous. As a consumer, I know, and can expect to know, little of those who produce the newspaper that appears in my driveway every morning. My relationship with the newspaper is sustained by a legal contract (and perhaps personal habit) and little else. Much the same is true of hierarchical relationships. Think of corporate bureaucracies. Outside of communication necessary for an office worker to do her job, she has no expectation that her boss will share with her much of his work life, much less his personal life. The relationship between manager and employee is defined by formal job descriptions and rules written into company handbooks and work contracts.

The same is not true of network relationships. This is because networks, Polodny and Page (1998) observe, are defined by repeated interactions that "lack a legitimate organizational authority to arbitrate and resolve disputes that may arise during exchange" (p. 59). Due to this lack of legitimate authority, networks depend much more than markets or hierarchies on shared values, or what Dore (1983) calls a "spirit of goodwill" among their members. How is this "spirit of goodwill" created? In part, it is generated through transparency. To generate trust, members of networks must be more open about their motivations than members of hierarchies or markets, and share more information,

especially about the processes through which judgments are made and actions are taken. Again, we should not take this to mean that networks are absolutely transparent. Rather, it is enough to note that, as compared to hierarchies or markets, networks trend toward greater transparency.

Much the same observation can be made about the role of flexibility in networks. Hierarchical organizations of the kind that dominated 20th century American public life favored formal, relatively static relationships: clear department boundaries, lines of authority, and positions (Powell, 1990: p. 317). In comparison, relationships in networked organizations are typically more fluid and flexible. Suppose, for example, there exists a small network consisting of 5 nodes, A-E. Unlike in a hierarchy, each node in this network is connected to every other node, and each node has the capacity to produce, distribute, and consume information. Simply by virtue of this configuration, the network is more flexible and adaptable than a hierarchy. If nodes A and B, for instance, confront a local problem, they have the capacity to resolve it without the need to draw in the other nodes. If an issue arises on which it seems most appropriate for node C to take the lead, and on a subsequent issue it seems most sensible for node D to take charge, the network can easily adapt to each circumstance. Compared with hierarchies, Castells (2004) concludes, "networks [have the capacity to] reconfigure according to changing environments…they [can] go around blocking points in communication channels to find new connections" (p. 6).

Finally, as a communication network (or network of networks), the Internet privileges interactivity to a greater degree than market-based or hierarchical communication platforms. By interactivity I mean a common sense definition of the term: the ability to engage in a recursive interaction with others. The Internet does not

necessarily produce robust interaction, and interactivity in and of itself may not always be positive. Empirically, though, it is simply true that the Internet makes it easier to engage in a back and forth exchange with others compared to other communication platforms. Compare, for instance, the Internet to broadcasting. A one-to-many medium, broadcasting is structured in a hierarchical manner: a few professional communicators produce the vast number of messages that the rest of us consume. Consumers obviously have some capacity to respond in a broadcasting environment, but doing so is relatively hard, especially as compared to the levels of interactivity made possible by the Internet (via such technologies as e-mail, blogging, and hyperlinking). This observation has led scholars of computer-mediated communication to suggest that interactivity is a basic feature of online technology (for reviews of this literature, see Bucy, 2004; Jensen, 1998; Kiousis, 2002; McMillan, 2002). They disagree on the precise nature and locus of this interactivity—is it intrinsic to the technology itself or to users' expectations with respect to the technology, or even, perhaps, to the manner in which documents are created and stored? Further, empirical studies show that the amount of interactivity online is often less than what one might expect. Nevertheless, interactivity appears to be a basic attribute of computer-mediated communication.

The fact that networks allow for greater transparency, flexibility and interactivity in social relations than hierarchies or markets seems indisputable. But it is important not to press the point too far. One finds these qualities even in markets and hierarchies, and networks may at times be less flexible, transparent and/or interactive than one would assume. It is not, in other words, *a fait accompli* that every network will exhibit these traits to the maximal degree. Wellman's (2001) and Wellman et. al. (2003) use of the term

"affordance" helps us to get the point right. Computer-mediated networked communication does not demand or require transparency and the rest; rather, it affords such social interactions, or makes them easier. All things being equal, what it is easier to do will be done more often than what is harder to do (see Benkler 2006: p. 17 on this point).

Guided by this assumption, one expects, for instance, that since it is easier to do, online journalism should be more transparent, flexible, and interactive than traditional print or broadcast journalism. And, indeed it is. Early research by Boczkowski (2005) found that as journalism moved from traditional to online newsrooms, it became more flexible and interactive. More recently, Chung (2007) has observed that, almost despite themselves, online news producers have begun to adopt more transparent, interactive practices. A recent report by the Bivings group (2008), which compares the websites of 100 top American newspapers to similar data gathered in 2006 and 2007, supports this conclusion. Specifically, Bivings finds that these websites increasingly allow users to post their own content, comment on articles, and take advantage of social networking tools. There is, of course, variation around this mean (cf. Tewksbury and Rittenberg, 2009). But the overall trend lines are clear: online journalism is embracing many of the attributes—transparency, flexibility, interactivity—favored by public journalists.

Joshua Marshall's Talkingpointsmemo.com (TPM), one of the most highly trafficked online news sites in the United States, is an excellent illustration of these trends in online journalism. TPM is a small, flexible, networked news organization that also happens to be one of the most highly trafficked news sites in the United States. As with other networked organizations, Marshall's newsroom is small—only 800 square feet—and he employs just a handful of reporters. TPM's influence comes not from its size, but from its intimate

relationship with thousands of readers and other journalists, a network that is both fluid and interdependent. On any given day, he writes blog postings, links to work published on other sites, interviews sources, interacts with readers, and edits copy (Cohen, 2008). This makes his reporting highly interactive. It is also a much more intimate, informal, and transparent kind of reporting than one finds in mainstream media. For example, Glenn (2007) recounts an occasion when Marshall had to decide how to play a series of "weird little details" that had sprung up in one of his reporter's investigations of a land deal by a member of Congress. In a mainstream newsroom, these deliberations would have remained private. Instead, Marshall blogged about the dilemma: "From an editor's perspective," he wrote to his audience, "it was a bit hard to know how to treat [these details]…You don't want to go too far out on a thin reed dealing with what could be mere errors in filling out the form." As Glenn (2007) concludes, "this odd admixture of reporter, columnist, tipster, and ombudsman…is central to TPM's identity."

His work on the U.S. Attorney General scandal is perhaps Marshall's most famous work at TPM (it won him a 2008 George Polk award). In its basics, this reporting illustrates all of the features of networked journalism. The story began when Marshall noticed, and linked to, a series of stories by local newspapers on the dismissals of several U.S. Attorneys. Readers—who Marshall estimates number about 100,000 regular visitors—began to send in links to similar stories happening across the nation. As the scandal unraveled, Marshall sifted through mountains of tips supplied by his readers. But when the Department of Justice released large numbers of documents about the issue, his readers took the lead, helping he and staff review thousands of documents. Over time, Marshall and his network of readers adapted to the needs of the moment: at times

Marshall acted like a traditional reporter, digging up information or covering a Congressional hearing. At other times, one or more of his readers took the lead by reviewing documents or following up on leads. Every day Marshall and his network reconfigured their interactions to suit the purpose of the moment. (for more on TPM's coverage of this scandal, see McDermott, 2007; McLeary, 2007). By leveraging the power of its network, TPM was able to uncover and stay on top of a major political scandal that eluded much larger news organizations.

Public journalists imagined a journalism that was more transparent, flexible and interactive. TPM practices exactly this kind of journalism. It has built a relationship of trust between itself and its community; in its organizational structure it is small, flexible and adaptive to its environment; and it is wildly interactive, engaging in a continuous conversation with its community. In many ways, TPM realizes public journalism's ideal image of the craft.

Networked Public Sphere/Networked Journalism

The astute reader may note that so far I have said little about the public problem-solving dimension of public journalism. How, for instance, does TPM's journalism help its community solve problems its members collectively face? Judged in these terms, TPM seems inclined toward an old journalistic purpose, namely, to hold political elites accountable for their words and actions. While in some ways laudable, this role does little to enable citizens themselves to take action on their shared concerns. This is a common complaint that advocates of public journalism lodge against online journalism (cf. Haas, 2007; Nip, 2006). On this view, online news appears to be more inclusive and interactive, but what, public journalists ask, is the interactivity for? Is it to fulfill the values of

traditional journalism? Is it to stoke consumption? Is it make money? Is it merely to allow people to express themselves? Of course, a case can be made for all of these purposes. None however, necessarily align with the goals of public journalism.

That being said, a slice of online journalism does seem to be moving in the direction of public problem solving. To understand why, it is necessary to view the emergence of networks through a wider lens. In the last two decades, researchers across several disciplines have tracked the rise of networked organizations in and around the American public sphere. Some examples:

- A literature on organizations and collective action argues for the recent emergence of new, postbureaucratic, highly networked political organizations. For example, Bimber (2003) suggests that new informational networks have "changed the structure of elite organizations that dominate political activity" in the United States (p. 17). With examples of political groups working on issues ranging from environmentalism to gun control, he shows that "postbureaucratic organizations," i.e., organizations that are more transparent, flexible, and interactive, have grown up and around the bureaucratic that dominated 20th century politics (for a broader overview, see Bimber, et. al, 2009).

- A literature stretching back 15 years has analyzed the rise of "e-government" (for recent discussions, see Lazer and Mayer-Schonberger, 2007; Fountain, 2009). E-government refers to online initiatives of governmental agencies to make the information they collect and decisions they make more transparent to the public. For example, Congress has created an online site (http://www.govtrack.us/) designed to make it easier for citizens to track congressional legislation. In recent years, agencies also have made government databases available in formats that allow users to search, filter, and aggregate information to suit their own needs.

- A literature on global civic activism and social movements has observed the growth of identity-based, networked movements in the last twenty years (cf. Castells, 1996; Castles and Davison, 2000; Melucci, 1996; Rodgers, 2003). Compared to prior social movements, these networked groups tend to be smaller, more flexible and transparent across their membership, and to be more highly interactive than earlier social movements.

- Public policy analysts have tracked the rise of "networked governance," or the rise of loose affiliations of government and nongovernment agencies dedicated to responding to public issues and delivering public services (cf. Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004; Kamarck and Nye, 1999; Kettl, 2002). At times, this takes the form of multiple government agencies networking (often through new communication technologies) to collaborate on issues of shared concern. At other times, it involves nonprofit and private agencies linking together in response to public issues. The result is more flexible, transparent and interactive forms of public problem solving.

- Communication researchers report a rise in the use of new communication technologies to promote more open, inclusive, and deliberative discourse, both within government and between government and citizens (cf. Shane, 2004; Smith, 2003; Varnelis, 2008). Initiatives in this vein include deliberative efforts by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control; the 2002 "Listening to the City Online" initiative sponsored by the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey; and the use of online deliberative polls by governmental agencies in the United States and elsewhere.

- Scholars of political campaigns have shown a growing use of network tools in the electoral process—by candidates and other political groups seeking to influence election outcomes (cf. Chadwick, 2006; Foot and Schneider, 2006; Howard, 2006). To describe just one example of this process, through his campaign website Barack Obama allowed networked groups of supporters to self-organize at the neighborhood level across the United States.

- Finally, since the 1990s a literature on the sociology of organizations has examined the rise of economic networks, both within corporations and also broader industries (cf. Castells, 1996; Kanter, 1991; Podolny and Page, 1998).

We might explain any one of these developments as an isolated series of events. Together however, they are the makings of a broader transformation of the American public sphere. In and around the public sphere—in government and business, in civic groups and social movements—networks are growing. This means that the public sphere is becoming denser and more complex than in the past, that it is being populated by smaller, more flexible and adaptable organizations whose members engage in more intense and informal forms of

interaction, and that flows of communication within the public sphere increasingly have networked characteristics (for more on this point, see Friedland, et. al., 2006).

An example may clarify this point. In his book on the fourth "information revolution" brought on by the emergence of information networks, Bimber (2003) profiles the work of the Environmental Defense Fund (ED). Created in the 1960s, ED was initially organized along the lines of a traditional, progressive-era interest group. It was populated by experts and, except when it asked them for money, had little contact with its members. In the late 1990s, however, ED's leaders began to embrace the web. And as they did, the focus of the organization changed. "The functional centerpiece of the new ED," Bimber writes, "was data base-driven websites aimed at attracting citizens, collecting information about their environmental interests, and then mobilizing them through calls for political action" (p. 139). Today, the organization targets a variety of issues that attract large numbers of citizens to their website. These people are not ED "members" in the traditional sense of the term. Most do not pay dues, for example. But they are interested in environmental issues and, if given an opportunity, are willing to participate in various kinds of activities. On the site, these citizens are encouraged to leave contact information. This allows ED to contact them when an opportunity arises to take action on an issue. When such an issue arises, ED directs a targeted message to individuals who have an indicated an interest in the issue, and provides them various ways to network with like-minded people. In this way, ED has mobilized hundreds of thousands of people to work on a great variety of environmental issues.

If history is any guide, the emergence of organizations like ED has important implications for journalism. Many scholars have followed Carey (1989) in noting that

journalism expresses the form of public life in which it is situated (cf. Barnhurst and Nerone 2001; Kaplan 2002; Nord 2001; Zelizer 2004. Schudson (1995) perhaps puts the consensus within this literature best when he writes:

> News is not fictional, but it is conventional. Conventions help make messages readable. They do so in ways that "fit" the social world of readers and writers…these conventions help make culturally consonant messages readable and culturally dissonant messages unsayable…they reinforce [prevailing] assumptions about the political world" (p. 55).

Translated, this means that as the public sphere goes, so goes journalism. If people are organizing themselves into networks to solve public problems, then one should find a form of journalism imbued with these assumptions naturally trailing along.

As advocates of public journalism suspect, a canvas of online news makes it clear that, so far, interactive journalism has outpaced public problem-solving journalism in online news. This is to say, a great many sites practice transparent, flexible and interactive forms of journalism. Far fewer infuse a public problem-solving purpose into their journalism (on this point, see Nip, 2006; Ryfe and Mensing, 2008). Of course, it is still very early in the history of online news. Even now, however, a close study shows that a focus on problem solving is beginning to percolate through discussions of online news. For example, Tom Grubisich (2009), a former *Washington Post* reporter and editor, recently reviewed a new *Washington Post* strategy to promote greater "utility, engagement, and convenience" on its website. After applauding the strategy, Grubisich finds himself asking this: "It's great that the *Post* will work ever harder to help its readers and users…But what…does it plan to do about helping to turn them into a community that can make the District of Columbia and its suburbs…better places to live?" In other words, what is engagement for, if not to help citizens solve problems they collectively face? Jane Stevens, a

long-time science reporter and current fellow at the Donald Reynolds Journalism Institute at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, is asking similar questions. Describing what she sees as the future of metro news in a world of online journalism, she writes:

> These sites won't look like the traditional news organizations' sites. The journos will do serial reporting…instead of doing the traditional standalone been-there-done-that story, they follow an issue throughout a day, a week, a month, a year, investigating as they go along, in some cases. *The reporting is solution-oriented*—journos don't tell their communities what to do….they provide their communities with accurate information all the way to their goals — with a LOT of input from the community. So that makes it serial, solution-oriented, collaborative reporting. [italics mine][2]

Like Grubisich, Stevens describes a form of journalism in which reporters work with their communities to identify and resolve collective problems. On my view, this is a natural extension of changes taking place in the public sphere. As Castells (2001) argues, a network only exists so long as it has a program or project. Networks of individuals and organizations in the public sphere are beginning to tackle shared problems. Journalists like Grubisich and Stevens are asking about the role journalism might play in this enterprise. As more and more journalists move in this direction, we should expect a growth of networked journalism in a public problem-solving mode.

J-lab, a self-described "incubator" for online journalism headed by Jan Schaffer, who, not coincidentally, was a leader in the original public journalism movement, profiles many of the best examples of this kind of journalism.[3] For instance, in a recent presentation, Schaffer highlighted the work of Planphilly.com, a website created in 2006 by the School of

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[2]This blog post can be found at: http://rejournalism.wordpress.com/2009/01/26/the-new-metros/. Access January 27, 2009.

[3]Schaffer directed the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, which helped to propel public journalism through the late 1990s. J-lab's website can be found at: http://www.j-lab.org/batten.shtml. Accessed January 26, 2009.

Design at the University of Pennsylvania. Planphilly's self-described mission is to "actively engage Philadelphians in dialogue about the future of this great city. We want it to be a tool that educates and connects citizens, developers, business people and politicians alike in a discussion about what a world-class 21st century city should be." In this mission statement, we see that Planphilly is working the same terrain as ED and other networked organizations in the public sphere. To that end, it offers visitors news and information produced by former-Philadelphia *Inquirer* journalists about Philadelphia development issues. It gives users opportunities to voice their own views, and to engage in both face-to-face and online conversations with business leaders, political representatives and other citizens about the most pressing issues in their own neighborhoods. It lists community events and links users to various ways they might participate—from being journalists themselves to writing letters to attending public meetings. The idea is not only to offer Philadelphians transparent, adaptive, and interactive news; it is to actively engage and mobilize people to participate in solutions to development issues facing their communities. PlanPhilly is one example of journalism in a public problem-solving vein. The J-lab website lists many others.

Of course, these sites represent only a small fraction of online news. But as my theory suggests, they are visible, and growing. In the diverse media ecology that is taking shape on the web, public problem solving journalism may never be a dominant species of journalism. But it is finding its own ecological niche, and as it does, public journalism is naturally reviving. Given its dormant state in traditional news media, this in itself is a remarkable development.

Conclusion

This paper was prompted by the question of what the future holds for journalism's contribution to democratic practice. My response has been that a kind of public journalism necessarily will find a niche amid the increasingly diverse ecology of online journalism. Certainly, the number of transparent, flexible and interactive news sites is growing. Based upon current trends, it appears that these attributes are basic to the craft of online news. The public problem-solving dimension of public journalism is, admittedly, lagging behind. But one finds glimpses even of this kind of journalism. Given the growth of networked political organizations in the public sphere, I suspect that the number of "solutions-oriented" news sites, as Stevens calls them, will grow as well.

Let me conclude with a word about what all of this means for journalistic education. J-schools are in a bit of a bind. Like everyone else, they know that teaching the old forms of journalism is no longer enough. But it is unclear which aspects of the old forms to retain (surely not everything in journalism will change!), and which to jettison. Also, the timing of making such a shift is tricky—after all, our students are still getting jobs in traditional newsrooms. If this weren't bad enough, the contours of the new forms emerging in online journalism have not yet been established. So as teachers we have no clear sense of precisely what to teach our students about the brave new world of online news. In the breach, most J-schools have settled for teaching students a wider variety of tools: "multi-media" and "converged journalism" are the new coin of the realm.

This is clearly not enough. One way of construing the argument I have made is that J-schools ought explicitly to teach public journalism. However, I do not think that this is the right "take-home" message of my study. True, I have argued that public journalism will

inevitably be revived, but my broader argument is that public journalism will occupy one niche within a broader ecology of journalism. Given this ecological diversity, I think J-schools might benefit by returning to the question public journalists posed to their profession—what is journalism for? Unlike in the past, the diverse ecology of online news will allow different journalists to answer this question in different ways. But the freedom to choose is also a burden. Increasingly, young journalists *must* choose the kind of journalism they wish to practice, and the purposes to which they wish to put their skills. To my mind, J-schools might better prepare their students by inviting them to relentlessly focus on this question. Doing so will help them engage in more transparent, flexible, and interactive ways with the communities they will serve—necessary skills in the world of online news. And some of these students, upon reflection, will choose a path toward public journalism. Given the state of things in journalism, that is all that we can do. Given the trends in online news, I think it will be enough.

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