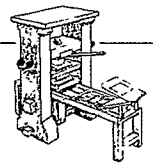


Civic Journalism: Strengthening the Media's Ties With the Public

by Tom Mather

A growing number of newspapers and television stations—in North Carolina and across the country—are trying a different approach to covering the news. The new approach, called civic or public journalism, seeks to stem growing disillusionment with politics and the news media by focusing coverage on the issues that concern people the most. Practitioners hope to present news in more appealing ways, attract more readers and viewers, and better involve the public in the political process. But some critics warn that civic journalism may be pandering to the public's sometimes conflicting and short-sighted desires.

The *Charlotte Observer* turned to an unlikely source—the public—when seeking advice on how to cover the 1992 election campaign. In a groundbreaking media experiment, the paper polled 1,000 Charlotte-area residents about what issues they considered most important for political leaders to address. The *Observer* then used those survey findings to guide its coverage of candidates running for the Governor's Office, the U.S. Senate, and the Presidency.

For example, the paper used its findings to identify key concerns of local residents and to develop questions for its reporters to pose to candidates. Since then, the *Observer* has used a similar approach to guide its coverage of the N.C. General Assembly, local crime issues, and the 1994 elections.

"Our coverage has dramatically changed," says Rick Thames, the *Observer*'s assistant managing editor. "More than anything, this is a change in the way we think about election coverage. It's really voter-driven election coverage, rather than candidate-driven coverage."

The *Observer*'s experiment seemingly flies in the face of typical journalistic practice. Traditionally, newspaper editors and television producers have called the shots when deciding what news is fit to print or broadcast. That has led to a perception, among some readers, that an elite group of editors is telling the public, "You WILL read this!"

In reality, public opinion has always been a factor in news coverage. After all, editors and reporters are people too, and they have friends, relatives, and neighbors among the general public. Ignoring public opinion also can be bad for business. Many people won't buy newspapers or watch TV shows that don't cover the news they consider important or that dwell too much on events they don't care about.

Nevertheless, a growing number of journalists are concluding that they need to do a better job of listening to public concerns about news coverage. Many journalists also feel that they need to find new ways of attracting readers and viewers, presenting news in appealing ways, and involving the public in the political process. Practitioners of this emerging style of news coverage, labeled "civic" or "public" journalism, make use of several methods to better engage the public:

- Identifying what issues people consider most important through opinion polls, interviews, and focus groups;
- Placing more attention on the potential solutions and remedies for problems discussed in news coverage;

Tom Mather is Associate Editor of North Carolina Insight.

■ Clearly noting, when possible, how elected officials stand on the issues most important to voters;

■ Regularly informing readers and viewers how to contact their elected officials, vote in elections, attend public meetings, and otherwise participate in the political process;

■ Organizing public meetings, televised forums, and other ways for people to discuss public policies and the solutions to problems.

By themselves, these techniques are not revolutionary changes in news coverage. What's new about civic journalism is the *systematic use* of such methods in order to involve the public more in news coverage and politics.

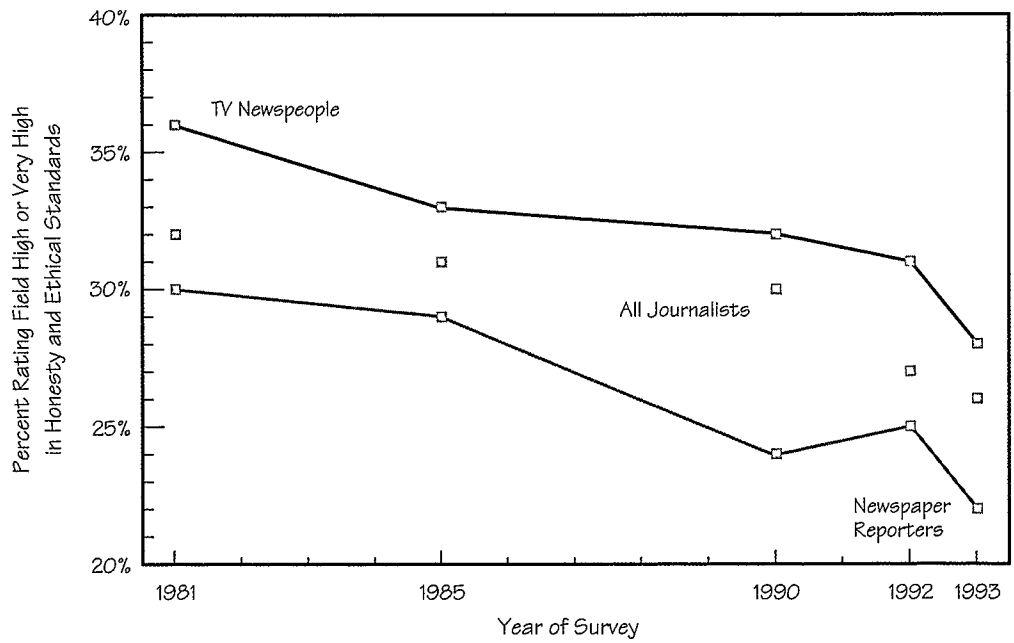
"Civic journalism is a revulsion against the usual election campaign coverage rituals of 'horse race' polling, 'sound-bite' reportage and television attack ads," writes Neal R. Peirce, a nationally syndicated columnist.[1] "One could say the papers' and stations' primary interest in civic journalism is to attract readers and viewers. . . . But civic journalism is arguably more: an opening wedge of papers and broadcasters to 're-engineer' their operations and reinforce the focus they should always have—the needs and concerns of all of us, not just as consumers but as participating citizens."[2]

Reasons for Changing Media Coverage

News media have been re-examining their coverage of issues for several reasons. One of the key concerns is the public's increasing disillusionment with the political process. As Jay Rosen, a professor at New York University and one of the leading proponents of civic journalism, says: "Citizens are frustrated with the political system. Public life is in an advanced state of decay and journalism must do something about it. And because public life is in trouble, journalism is in trouble."[3]

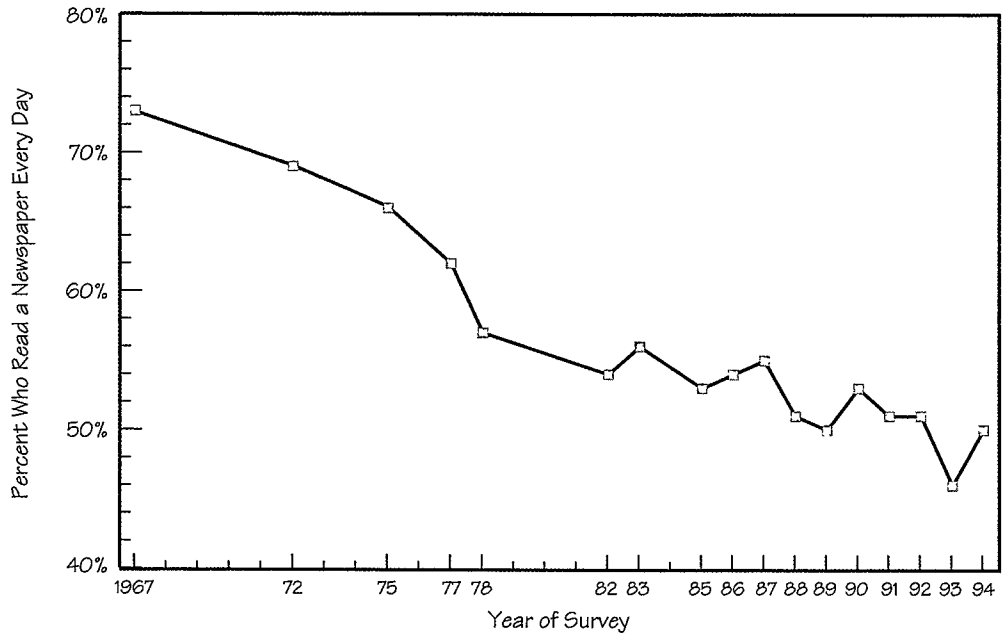
Rosen's contention is supported by growing public skepticism about the accuracy and veracity of the news media. That trend is illustrated by polls showing that the public's regard for journalists has declined steadily over the past decade. (See Figure 1 below.) For example, 30 percent of the respondents to a 1981 Gallup poll rated newspaper reporters as having high or very high honesty and ethical standards. By 1993, that number had declined to 22 percent. Similar declines have occurred in public ratings of all journalists and television reporters. (The silver lining in the Gallup findings is that journalists have consistently ranked higher than many other groups, including lawyers, business executives, senators, congressmen, local and state

Figure 1.
Public Ratings of Journalists' Honesty and Ethics



Source: Gallup Poll

Figure 2.
Newspaper Readership



Source: National Opinion Research Center

office-holders, and the perennial also-rans—car salesmen.)

Perhaps related to the declining esteem of journalists is a long-term decline in newspaper readership. The proportion of adults who read newspapers every day dropped from 73 percent in 1967 to 50 percent in 1994, according to surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. (See Figure 2 above.) A similar, although less dramatic, decline in newspaper readership has occurred in North Carolina since 1979, according to The Carolina Poll conducted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.[4] The Carolina Poll also found that the percentage of people watching television news shows has declined moderately among younger residents (those less than 30 years old) but has increased among older residents (those more than 30 years old).

"U.S. newspapers are not dying; they are committing suicide," says Gene Cryer, editor of the *Sun-Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "They are produced by journalists for other journalists and/or their sources. They are, for the most part, irrelevant to most reader groups."[5]

"Newspapers are keenly aware of a younger generation of non-readers that does not care whether it sees a newspaper in the morning or not, and newspapers are trying to appeal to this generation by writing down to it."

— GARRISON KEILLOR
HUMORIST AND AUTHOR

Such trends have convinced Cryer and other journalists that the news media need to change the way they cover politics and public policy. Instead of focusing on the latest political scandal or squabble, such critics contend that the media need to pay closer attention to what the public wants from news

—*continued from p. 73*

selves in these survey results. And too often, what's been written or broadcast about an important issue and then partially digested by the public is either wrong or misleading."

With some issues, Morin says, media coverage has had a substantial—and misleading—influence on public perceptions. "Consider the current spotlight on crime, which ranks as the top concern of many voters," he says.[13] "But that finding doesn't quite square with reality: that the overall crime rate actually is going down and that the violent crime rate—including the murder rate—is lower now than it was a decade ago.[14] There is strong evidence to suspect that the media have created the current undifferentiated fears about crime by their often careless coverage of the issue."

Such concerns have led political analyst Susan Rasky to describe civic journalism as a "perhaps well intentioned, but ultimately harebrained notion."[15] Using opinion polls to guide reporting, she says, would result in news coverage that "amounts to an expanded version of letters to the editor."

"It is neither fashionable nor polite—let alone politically correct—to suggest that the *vox populi* may not be all it's cracked up to be," Rasky writes. "But the dirty little truth that emerges in voters' 'voices' is well known to political reporters, political scientists and above all to the politicians themselves: Citizens generally want very contradictory things from those who govern."[16]

By focusing news coverage on popular perceptions, Rasky says, journalists are abandoning a key responsibility—to guide public discourse. One of the ways journalists exercise that responsibility, she says, is by gathering and analyzing the views of academics, leaders, experts, and informed sources.

Indeed, surveys and other studies have shown that public opinion often can differ widely from expert opinion.[17] Such differences could support arguments against the wisdom of basing news coverage on popular opinions. Some critics already accuse the media of pandering to popular public interests by de-emphasizing political coverage at the expense of news about celebrities, sports, sensational crimes, and life styles.

Ad-Watch, *continued*

But Do Ad-Watches Work?

The question on many journalists' minds, however, is: Do such ad-watches result in more accurate political ads? The jury is still out on that question. After the 1992 election, many campaign consultants said that ad-watches had affected their advertising strategies. "I think these reality checks made our commercials less effective," says Harold Kaplan, a consultant for the 1992 Bush-Quayle campaign.[4]

Nevertheless, follow-up studies have shown that some television ad-watches have produced effects opposite their intended goals. That is, many viewers of TV ad-watches remember the ads' negative messages, but not the critical analyses. "The implication for my proposal was clear: Ad-watches could amplify, rather than undercut, the influence of deceptive advertising," Jamieson says. To prevent such misconceptions, Jamieson recommends that TV ad-watches run reduced-size images of the ads in question and clearly indicate mistakes or corrections.[5]

Despite such findings, journalists say that ad-watches are here to stay because they add a needed dimension to political news coverage. "I don't think we harbor any illusions that we are countering the effect of the negative ads being analyzed," Denton says. "But, if nothing else, this puts the politicians on notice that they're going to be held accountable for what they say in their ads. Hopefully, the end result will be that politicians and their consultants are more responsible about what they say about their opponents."

—Tom Mather

FOOTNOTES

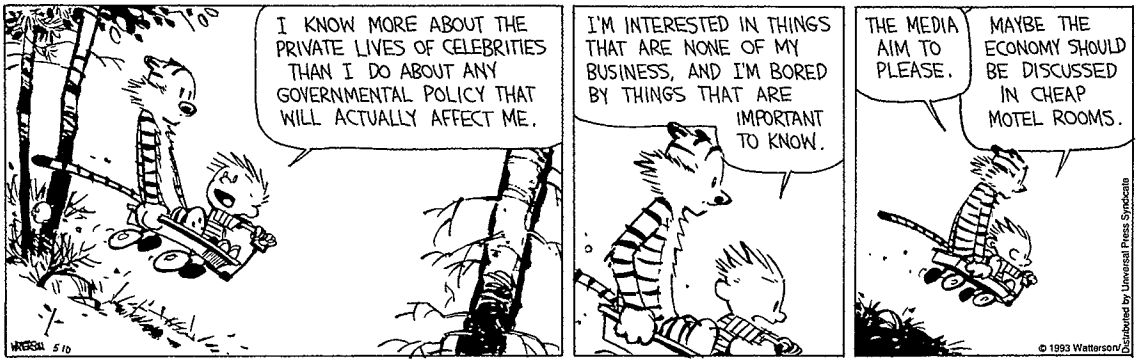
[1] See Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics: Distraction, Deception, and Democracy*, Oxford University Press: New York, 1992, p. 50.

[2] See Ferrel Guillory, "Candidates can't resist the pull 'to go negative,'" *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Oct. 6, 1994, p. 16A.

[3] See Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Political Ads, the Press, and Lessons in Psychology," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sept. 28, 1994, p. A56.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*



CALVIN AND HOBBES ©1993 Watterson. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. All rights reserved.

Humorist and author Garrison Keillor is among those who have criticized newspapers for "dumbing down" their news coverage. "Newspapers are keenly aware of a younger generation of non-readers that does not care whether it sees a newspaper in the morning or not, and newspapers are trying to appeal to this generation by writing down to it," Keillor says. "In the mind of a not very bright 14-year-old, the entire adult world consists of dolts and jerks and meanies, and that is how reporters tend to write about government these days."[18]

Other critics of civic journalism worry about crossing the line between civic responsibility and boosterism. Such critics say that reporters and editors could lose their objectivity by actively urging the public to vote, contact politicians, and become more involved in the political process. "I know newspapers will tell you they are only going out to develop a civic culture, to get people involved," says Howard Schneider, managing editor of *Newsday* in New York. "But inevitably, once a newspaper gets identified as a particular advocate for a position, the dangers are self-evident. Once you lose your credibility and your ability to speak with authoritativeness, you're losing everything."[19]

More Newspapers and TV Stations Trying Civic Journalism

Despite such concerns, some media observers cite civic journalism as the kind of approach that newspapers and television news shows must try in order to attract more readers and viewers. Phil Meyer, a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, says civic journalism could stimulate citizens to become more involved in their communities and in the political process—thus boosting newspaper circulation in the long-run. "There's some risk to it, but that's not a reason not to do it," Meyer says. "I think it's a risk that newspapers ought to take because the loss of community is such a frightening thing."

Jay Rosen, the New York University professor, says critics of civic journalism have exaggerated its reliance on opinion polls. Polls, he says, are just part of a broader effort to involve citizens more in news coverage and public policy. "A lot of places where public journalism is done best, polling isn't being done at all," Rosen says. "The point is for journalists to think about the ways they isolate themselves from citizens—and then try to overcome that. . . . The real thrust of public journalism is how to help make public life work."

Rosen and other proponents of civic journalism appear to be gaining converts, particularly among newspapers. In 1992, only a handful of newspapers were using the civic journalism approach. By 1994, dozens of newspapers across the country were doing so. *Editor & Publisher*, a magazine that covers the news industry, analyzed the civic journalism trend in a recent editorial: "It is an idea that

". . . [T]he dirty little truth that emerges in voters' 'voices' is well known to political reporters, political scientists and above all to the politicians themselves: Citizens generally want very contradictory things from those who govern."

— SUSAN RASKY
POLITICAL ANALYST

is catching on and developing in many ways. It may become a groundswell and sweep the country, in spite of the opposition of some traditionalists who believe trained journalists know better what a newspaper should contain than does the reading public."[20]

Here are some examples of newspapers and television stations that have adopted civic journalism techniques:

■ In Kansas, *The Wichita Eagle* used surveys and extensive interviews to identify problems that local governments seemed unable to solve, including faltering schools, crime, family tensions, and health care. The paper analyzed the problems in special reports, sponsored community forums in which citizens could work on solutions, and used its findings to guide coverage of local elections in 1991.[21]

■ In Ohio, the *Akron Beacon-Journal* examined racial inequities in its community and then sponsored a public forum on racism. The paper even published a pledge card urging readers to vow to fight racism, drawing more than 22,000 responses.[22]

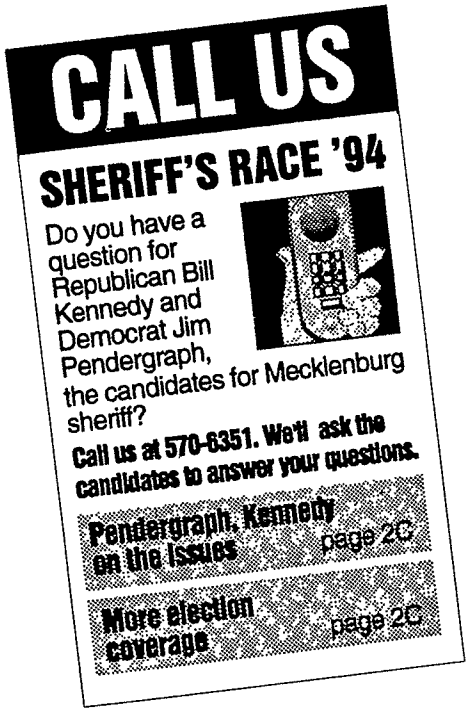
■ In Florida, the Fort Lauderdale *Sun-Sentinel* conducted 130 group discussions with more than 1,400 readers on how to cover the news better. The paper also assigned a senior editor whose full-time job is to talk with readers and "give them a voice in what the paper does."[23]

■ In Washington, the Spokane *Spokesman-Review* encouraged public involvement in community issues by sponsoring "Pizza Papers" meetings. The paper donated $15 worth of pizza to readers who volunteered to host neighborhood discussion groups on issues such as crime, traffic congestion, and city-county consolidation.[24]

■ In Georgia, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published a special voter's guide on the governor's race that included a score sheet for ranking the candidates on major issues. The paper printed candidates' responses to voters' key concerns as identified in a statewide poll; it also co-sponsored with WSB-TV a town meeting in which voters, not reporters, questioned the candidates.[25]

■ Nationally, the CNN cable television network broadcast a series called "The People's Agenda" that examined issues facing American voters at the outset of the 1992 campaign season. The reports, aired over two weeks in February 1992, sought "to present issues as voters see them, not as candidates perceive them."[26]

As part of its civic journalism project, The Charlotte Observer regularly prints graphics such as this showing readers how to contact or direct questions to candidates and public officials.



North Carolina: A Laboratory for Civic Journalism

In 1992, *The Charlotte Observer* became one of the first newspapers—in North Carolina as well as the nation—to embrace civic journalism techniques. The paper's conversion is partly due to its affiliation with the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, which has actively encouraged efforts to make news coverage more relevant to readers. "People with a sense of connection to the places they live are almost twice as likely to be regular readers of our newspapers," says Knight-Ridder Chairman James Batten, a former executive editor of the *Observer*.[27]

Another catalyst for the change was the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, a think tank in St. Petersburg, Fla. In 1991, the institute was seeking a daily newspaper to participate in an experimental civic journalism project, patterned after *The Wichita Eagle*'s groundbreaking coverage of its local elections that year. *Observer* editors heard about the

The Charlotte Observer

Metro Final (4)

Sunday, January 19, 1992

E

FEAR FOR THE FUTURE

Insurance woes: Diane Spargo, a Gastonia widow with twins, Greg (top) and Brian, faces changes insurance carriers. "Everybody should be entitled to health care. It should not cost them the entire money that they get . . ." $800 monthly fees if her late husband's firm

GARY O'BRIEN/Staff

People demand politicians hear them

By DAVID PERLMUTT
And JIM MORRILL
Staff Writers

Listen, candidates, your neighbors are worried

Worried about losing their jobs, their health insurance and even the moral values that glue their communities together.

Worried that taxes — and the cost of a decent life — will go up so much they won't be able to afford a home or send their children to college.

And, as more are touched by the scourge of drug-related crime, they worry about simply going outside their home — or about someone breaking in.

As a new election year unfolds, a Charlotte Observer/WSOC-TV poll of 1,003 Carolinians found people are deeply troubled about the future And nine out of 10 in the 14-county Charlotte region doubt their elected leaders are in touch with the powerful forces tearing at their personal lives.

They want their worries heard. They want them to become the priorities of politicians.

Listen to Carol Horn of Chester, S C., on the faltering economy.

> **"It's a sense of things being out of control . . . people are adjusting their lifestyle to the fact that they may not have a job next week or down the road"**
>
> **— Rev. John Giuliani,** pastor of Divine Saviour Church in York, S.C.

"People don't know around here from one day to the next whether they have a job," Horn said.

Or Mae Rose McMiller of Gastonia about crime.

"I'm afraid to walk out the door," she said "You just don't know what's going to happen with people outside who are using drugs We live in a dangerous and critical situation."

And Bob Mauldin Jr. of Lake Wylie, S.C., about mounting medical bills.

"I don't think anybody should have to go into financial ruination as a result of having to go to the hospital," said Mauldin, who suffered a heart attack and had triple bypass surgery. "I think we have to attack some way to bring the medical costs down and provide equal health care to all . . . "

It's a chain reaction of fears.

If people lose jobs, they lose health insurance. They fear losing their homes and their children not living a prosperous life. Perhaps, mostly, they fear losing their independence — and dreams It's what Tom Smith of Rock Hill calls a fear of "backward mobility."

The fears are unavoidably intermingled

"Our whole economy system and cultural value system are so thoroughly addicted to squandering any kind of resource," said Dave Payne of Charlotte. "Whether it's the environment or the economy, the whole thing moves by using resources as quickly as possible."

For many, optimism has given way to uneasiness.

"It's a sense of things being out of control," said the Rev. John Giuliani, pastor of Divine Saviour Church in York, S.C. "People are adjusting their lifestyle to the fact that they may not have a job next week or down the road. People are very cautious about making commitments "

The top worries

YOUR VOTE IN '92

According to 1,003 Carolinians interviewed in an Observer/ WSOC-TV poll:

The Economy/Taxes
32% are very worried they or someone in their family will lose a job

Crime/Drugs
67% strongly agree handguns are too easy to get

Health Care
60% strongly agree that government should guarantee medical coverage

Education
73% want more taxes spent to improve education

The Environment
62% want more tax money spent to clean the environment

Family/Community
48% strongly agree elected officials are not concerned enough with children's needs

Full report on the poll
Pages 8-9A

NOTE: Citizens were polled Dec. 13-Jan. 6 in Anson, Cabarrus, Catawba, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly and Union counties in North Carolina; and Chester, Lancaster and York counties in South Carolina.

INSIDE

The Charlotte Observer ***kicked off its ground-breaking civic journalism project by publishing the results of its poll showing local residents' key concerns in the 1992 election campaign.***

Poynter plan and offered to participate.

"Rich Oppel, our [former] editor, was very unhappy with the way news coverage had gone during the 1988 elections," says Thames, the *Observer*'s assistant managing editor. "It seemed to focus on a lot of inconsequential issues, such as flag-burning or who could be the most macho." *Observer* editors also were disenchanted with the media's focus on horse-race polling during the 1990 election, in which Republican Sen. Jesse Helms had defeated Democratic challenger Harvey Gantt—even though polls had shown Gantt ahead during the entire campaign.[28]

The *Observer* and the Poynter Institute agreed on several goals for their joint project:[29]

- To let the voters, not the candidates, establish the key issues in the 1992 election campaign.
- To focus news coverage on issues and the solutions to problems, while forcing candidates to deal with voters' concerns.
- To de-emphasize coverage of horse-race polling, inside politics, and political posturing.
- To forge a partnership with a broadcast competitor, WSOC-TV, in order to reach a broader audience.
- To expand the use of innovative graphics in order to make news coverage more accessible and appealing to readers.

The first step in the project was to survey 1,003 residents in the *Observer*'s core readership area, encompassing 14 counties in the Charlotte region. "We began with a baseline poll, in which we tried to establish what the voters thought this election was about," Thames says. "We wanted to test the waters before they were disturbed." That poll identified six core issues of concern to local citizens: the economy and taxes, crime and drugs, health care, education, the environment, and family and community concerns. (See excerpt on p. 79.)

"This was not exactly a surprising agenda; a lot of things you would expect were there," Thames says. "What did surprise us is that we didn't realize to what an extent the economy would be an issue. The poll helped us realize early on that the economy would probably dominate the election—if voters had their way. . . . We did three polls during the campaign. So, we did retest it. Interestingly enough, in this campaign, the key issues were fairly stable."

The *Observer*'s involvement with citizens didn't end with its surveys. It sought public input on issues by regularly publishing phone numbers that readers could call to voice their opinions with newspaper reporters and editors. It published columns written by local citizens or based on interviews with them. It invited readers to submit questions to be used by *Observer* reporters when interviewing candidates. It organized focus groups to evaluate readers' reactions to its news coverage. It ran articles and graphics showing candidates' stands on issues the voters had identified as most important. It printed phone numbers and addresses where citizens could contact candidates and elected officials. It prominently featured information on how and where citizens could register to vote. It sponsored forums where citizens, experts, and politicians could talk about issues and solutions to problems.

Along with its efforts to involve the public, the *Observer* also changed the way its reporters and editors covered the election campaign. It focused its news articles on issues, rather than on campaign strategies and political spats. It downplayed its coverage of campaign polls. It published regular "ad-watches" that examined the accuracy of political advertisements. (See the related article, "Ad-Watches: Seeking Truth in TV Political Advertising," on pp. 74–76.) "We didn't ignore the horse-race polls and inside politics," Thames says. "We just reserved most of our space on page 1A for in-depth reporting on the issues. Other papers were stripping stories on page 1A that ended up as briefs inside our paper."

Does Civic Journalism Make a Difference?

Ferrel Guillory, associate editor of *The News & Observer* in Raleigh, compliments the Charlotte newspaper for its coverage of the 1992 election. But Guillory says that many elements of civic journalism—such as paying close attention to public concerns, reporting candidates' stances on issues, and informing readers how to participate in the political process—are techniques that always have been considered good journalism. "One of the things I do like about civic journalism is that it's more focused on solutions," he says. "Newspapers do need to become more focused on solutions, not just on problems and criticisms."

Nevertheless, Guillory questions whether the *Observer* covered the 1992 campaign better than other newspapers in the state that used more conventional reporting techniques. "The bottom line is, 'Were the readers of *The Charlotte Observer* any better served?'" he asks. "Did the people learn any more about the politics of the state or the candidates they covered? . . . Did they learn more than the readers of other newspapers learned?"

Taking back our neighborhoods

Seversville needs your help

If our city is to curb violence, we must confront it neighborhood by neighborhood. Here are specific needs, big and small, that residents believe could make a significant difference in Seversville's struggle. If you, your business, church, civic organization or neighborhood want to help with any of the items listed below, call this number :

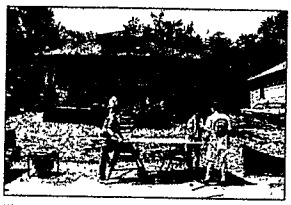
335-1697

HOUSING

Seversville has some of the city's most dilapidated housing Later this year the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing Partnership will begin renovating 20 houses in the neighborhood The Partnership purchased the properties in 1993 and hopes to help stabilize the community by selling the houses to homeowners Habitat for Humanity plans to construct three houses in Seversville The organization uses volunteer labor and donated supplies to help low-income families build their own homes.

DONATIONS NEEDED

■ The Housing Partnership needs materials to renovate houses, including vinyl siding and flooring, paint, drywall, kitchen cabinets, carpet, appliances, carpentry materials, windows and doors, bricks and bathroom accessories.
■ Habitat for Humanity needs businesses and organizations to sponsor houses planned for Seversville



Workers from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing Partnership board up homes to protect against vandalism on Katonah Avenue

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

■ The Housing Partnership needs volunteers to handle landscaping, demolition and other work tied to its renovation of houses.
■ The agency also needs volunteers to host workshops on gardening, home improvements and decorating for the new homeowners.
■ Habitat will need volunteers to help build the three houses. Plumbing, heating, masonry and electrical work is needed.

JOBS

Seversville residents say better-paying jobs would help discourage young people from turning to the drug trade. City and county officials say they have a wide range of job-training programs, but it's hard for residents living on the edge of poverty to stick with the programs, some of which take up to three years to complete.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

■ The Rev. Retoy Gaston is seeking volunteers to help him organize and operate a job bank for the community at Clinton Chapel AME Zion Church

■ Central Piedmont Community College needs volunteer tutors for a program designed to help Seversville area residents learn basic education and job skills Classes are taught at Johnson C. Smith University and the ABLE Center at 3607 Beatties Ford Rd.

OTHER HELP NEEDED

■ Local banks can help by contributing loans and/or lines of credit to the Northwest Corridor Community Development Corp , an organization that seeks to boost economic development in the west Charlotte area that includes Seversville. The corporation also wants new, expanding or relocating businesses to consider coming to the West Trade Street/Beatties Ford Road corridor

CHILDREN

Photos by T. ORTEGA GAINES-Staff

Seversville has no public parks, no recreation center and almost no organized activities for children like 2-year-old Ronald Martin (above). So far, local government has done little to help. The Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department hasn't yet offered recreational activities in the neighborhood. With little to do, some neighborhood kids turn to drugs, guns and other trouble, residents say. The community is trying to find ways to entertain and educate its children. But it needs help.

DONATIONS NEEDED

■ A building and sponsoring agency to help revive an after-school program offering tutoring and organized activities. (A similar church-run program disbanded earlier this year. Nearby Bruns Avenue Elementary School has agreed to accept Seversville children into its after-school program, but it does not offer tutoring.) Also needed for the program: tutors, school supplies and books on black history and other subjects.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

■ Drivers and vehicles to transport children on field trips and to recreation centers outside the neighborhood.

■ At least four adult volunteers to help lead a Girl Scout troop now being organized in Seversville. The troop will meet in the Seversville Apartments community room.

■ At least five adult leaders to help start a Boy Scout troop in Seversville. Meetings will be at the Seversville Apartments community room.

■ Six men to volunteer as Big Brothers to six boys, ages 7 to 15. African-American men are especially needed

■ Ten African-American men to mentor Seversville youngsters on behalf of Save the Seed, a nonprofit group that provides role models for black male youths. The group also needs more churches to join their effort.

■ Volunteers to help the Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation Department begin operating programs for Seversville children.

GOODS and SERVICES NEEDED

■ Uniforms for the "Seversville Steppers," a group of Seversville girls – ages 4 through 12 – who recently began a drill team.

■ Transportation and housing to provide several Seversville children a weekend beach trip this summer

■ Scholarships for summer camps.

■ Complimentary tickets to movies, the zoo and other attractions.

■ A mobile basketball goal for use throughout the neighborhood.

COMMUNITY NEEDS

Seversville residents are working together to meet their neighborhood's needs. They're organizing a neighborhood crime watch. And they're trying to recruit new members to the neighborhood community association.

HELP NEEDED

■ The neighborhood needs land and money for a community center where people could meet and children could play The nonprofit Northwest Corridor Community Development Corp. has agreed to oversee a fund for donations and is willing to help build a center

■ Focus on Leadership, a nonprofit program to enhance leadership skills for neighborhood leaders, will reserve space for up to three Seversville residents at its next series of seminars. Donations are needed to cover the $50-per-person cost.

■ Two programs that provide meals to the elderly and shut-ins have Seversville residents on their waiting lists. Volunteers with their own transportation are needed to deliver meals at lunch and on weekends. The Mecklenburg County Senior Nutrition Program operates out of Gethsemane AME Zion Church. Friendship Trays is based at St. Martin's Episcopal Church

■ There is nothing now to mark Seversville for visitors and passersby. To instill community pride, residents would like to obtain signs and place them at entrances to the neighborhood.

In its "Taking Back Our Neighborhoods" project,
The Charlotte Observer ***has gone beyond reporting the news by showing readers how to get involved in solving community problems, such as crime and violence.***

ISSUES '94

How to fight poverty

This is the latest in a series of questions on issues in the 2nd and 4th congressional district races. Answers are based on interviews with the candidates in the Nov. 8 election.

Q • There are millions of North Carolinians who live in poverty. What should be the federal government's role in helping people climb out of poverty?

2ND CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

REPUBLICAN

David Funderburk

"I think it's government's role to try to provide opportunities for people to educate themselves and be trained so they are better equipped to get a job and to be employed. A lot of this is being offered by the government in terms of job training programs and in terms of community college education and so forth. I don't think it's the government's job to simply extend grants of money to everybody who presently is in poverty to move them into what is not categorized as poverty.

"It's not the government's duty to solve all domestic problems in this country."

DEMOCRAT

Richard Moore

"One of the biggest things the federal government can do is making sure the working poor pays as few taxes as possible. As someone who lives in a very poor part of North Carolina, I see my friends and neighbors who the husband and wife work extremely hard, long hours, and they are just barely making ends meet. They should be rewarded by the federal government for their work instead of comparing themselves to another neighbor who may not work at all and has roughly the same lifestyle.

"I think that is something the federal government has got to focus on — from an earned income tax credit to expanding it even more.than it was expanded last year."

4TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

REPUBLICAN

Fred Heineman

"I think the federal government, as well as state government, or government itself, should make a target of cutting costs by cutting fraud.

"I think we should raise the dropout age to 18. I'd want to keep people in school until 18, hold the family responsible and the kid responsible. At 16, we should give them an option of going to trade school. The federal government would probably have to assist in funding these trade schools.

"We have rules that keep fathers out of housing developments. We need them back there, with the families, being responsible. I don't think we're going to save much money in welfare, and I don't think that should really be our aim."

DEMOCRAT

David Price

"The best poverty program is an expanding economy, the kind of economic growth and development we've seen in the last year, since the five-year budget plan was put in place."

"In my opinion the problem with welfare is not just that we're spending a lot of money without really moving people forward, but we're also spending it, probably, in the wrong ways. We ought to be investing more in education and training programs and job placement efforts.

"We ought to be making a greater effort at child-support enforcement."

— Compiled by staff writers ROB CHRISTENSEN and MARY E. MILLER

The answer to those questions is 'Yes,' according to two separate studies. After the 1992 election, the Poynter Institute commissioned a content analysis which showed that *The Charlotte Observer* substantially changed its news coverage. Compared to the 1988 campaign, the *Observer* published 58 percent more news coverage about the 1992 election. That coverage included nearly three times more text about issues, 25 times more text about voter information, and only one-fifth as much text about candidate polling.[30]

The Charlotte Observer also covered the issues more thoroughly during the 1992 campaign than other major newspapers in North Carolina, according to an independent content analysis by Phil Meyer, the UNC-CH journalism professor.[31] In a study of 13 daily newspapers, Meyer found that the *Observer* devoted the most space on its front page to coverage of policy issues (25 percent)—nearly double the average (13 percent). The *Observer* also devoted the least amount of space to coverage of horse-race polls (2 percent)—less than half the average (5 percent).

"In sum, the editors in Charlotte were right to abandon journalistic passivity to the extent that they resolved to follow through on their reporting, including polling on policy issues, and convene citizens' groups and promote action," Meyer says. "But their rejection of traditional horse race polling may work against them by depriving the audience of one sure-fire generator of excitement and interest."[32]

Poynter researchers also assert that the *Observer*'s coverage stimulated more voters to participate in the 1992 election, but that result is debatable. "We're convinced it did,"

Other newspapers, such as* The News & Observer *of Raleigh, also are using civic journalism techniques, such as this graphic analyzing the views of Congressional candidates in the 1994 election.

says Edward Miller of the Poynter Institute. "Voter turnout in Mecklenburg County (metro Charlotte) was spectacular—up 32 percent (59,000 voters) over the previous record."[33]

Miller's claim isn't fully supported by records from the State Board of Elections. Total turnout in Mecklenburg County in the 1992 presidential election was up 27.7 percent (49,567 voters) from the 1988 election, according to state records. That was better than the statewide voter turnout, which was up 22.4 percent from 1988 to 1992. But Mecklenburg's turnout did not increase as much as some other counties. For instance, voter turnout in Wake County was up 44.6 percent from 1988 to 1992. Looked at another way, 70.0 percent of Mecklenburg County's registered voters participated in 1992 election, compared with 68.4 percent of the registered voters statewide and 74.6 percent of the registered voters in Wake County.

An unexpected result of the *Observer*'s civic journalism project, Thames says, is that the paper got a lot fewer criticisms from readers about its coverage during the 1992 campaign than it did in the 1990 race. "In 1992, the criticisms dropped practically to zero," he says. "We got a lot of calls and letters saying, 'We do appreciate your emphasis on the issues.'"

But aren't newspapers supposed to rile people up? "Sometimes you need to do that," Thames says. "On the other hand, you can't afford to hide behind that. Maybe we ought to do a better job of listening and determining how we might better do our jobs."

Meanwhile, the *Observer*'s editors were so pleased with their 1992 election coverage that they have expanded their use of civic journalism techniques. In 1993, they used surveys and focus groups to identify the public's key concerns among the issues facing the N.C. General Assembly. And in 1994, the paper began a series of reports focusing on crime—one of the key concerns identified in their polls and interviews—while trying to organize local solutions to the problem.[34] (See p. 81.)

Civic journalism also is catching on at other North Carolina newspapers—even at papers like *The News & Observer*, that are wary of using opinion polls to dictate coverage. The Raleigh paper has run regular ad-watches examining candidates' TV

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Newspapers Track Campaign Contributions

Negative advertising and the news media aren't the only culprits blamed for increasing public disillusionment with the political process. Many observers say the current cynicism and apathy dates back to the Watergate scandal that tumbled the presidency of Richard M. Nixon in 1974.

Now, some North Carolina newspapers are using one of the key Watergate-inspired reforms—federal and state laws requiring the disclosure of campaign contributions—to improve their political coverage.[1] *The Charlotte Observer* has used campaign finance reports to compile 10 years of data on contributions collected by state legislators. In Raleigh, *The News & Observer* has used such information to track campaign contributions to candidates for all statewide political offices, including the Governor's office, legislative leadership posts, Council of State positions, and Congressional seats.

Such analyses have been made possible by two factors: (1) the existence of public records showing the amount and sources of campaign contributions; and (2) the increasing availability of computers to compile, sort, and analyze those records.

"Before we had the campaign finance laws, we weren't likely to ever find out who the contributors were to political campaigns," says Van Denton, an editor for *The News & Observer*. "Now, with the computer, we've got a tool that allows us to analyze contributions. We finally have a way to look at the role of money in politics. It can be done now, whereas before it was almost an impossible job."

The Role of Campaign Finance Laws

Current federal and state campaign finance laws are an outgrowth of the Watergate scandal. Investigations by Congress and the news media revealed that wealthy donors had contributed millions of dollars under questionable circum-

—continues

Newspapers, *continued*

quirements by gathering together large numbers of individual contributions—each of which is less than $100 and thus not required to be reported. "There are ways to get around the law," Morrill says. "If they don't put down names, you just don't know."

—Tom Mather

FOOTNOTES

[1] See Kim Kebschull, Marianne Kersey, and Ran Coble, *Campaign Disclosure Laws: An Analysis of Campaign Finance Disclosure in North Carolina and a Comparison of 50 State Campaign Reporting Laws*, North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, 1990, pp. 3–13. Also see Ann McColl and Lori Ann Harris, *Public Financing of State Political Campaigns: How Well Does It Work?*, North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, 1990, 79 pp.

[2] 2 U.S.C. 431 (1982 and 1988).

[3] See John Aldrich, *et al.*, *American Government*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass., pp. 241–243.

[4] N.C.G.S. 163-278.6 to 163-278.40E.

[5] N.C.G.S. 163-278.9A.

[6] In 1990, the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research recommended that the occupations of donors to candidates be included in the state's campaign disclosure requirements. See Kebschull, *et al.*, note 1 above, pp. 46–49. The state Senate passed a bill (S.B. 1563) in 1994 that would have required candidates to list each contributor's occupation, place of employment, and business mailing address on campaign finance reports, but the House did not pass the legislation.

[7] *The Charlotte Observer* has published special reports on campaign finances every two years since 1985. The authors, titles, and dates of lead articles are: Ken Eudy, "In N.C. Legislative Campaigns, Money Speaks With Authority," June 16–20, 1985, p. 1A; Jim Morrill and Tim Funk, "Interest Groups Cast Big Money Shadow," April 5, 1987, p. 1A; Jim Morrill, "Lobbyists Escalate Arms Race," April 9, 1989, p. 1A; Jim Morrill, "Contributions Pave Way for Access to Legislators," May 5, 1991, p. 1A; and Jim Morrill and Ted Mellnik, "Price of Power," June 13, 1993, p. 1A.

[8] Also see Kim Kebschull Otten and Tom Mather, *The Cost of Running for the North Carolina Legislature*, North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, 1993, 84 pp.

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ads. It has published a number of graphics focusing on candidates' stances on particular issues. (See example on p. 82.) And, in special reports, it often tells readers how to contact reporters, editors, and public officials—by telephone and computer networks.

"You can call that civic journalism or not," Guillory says. "We just call it good journalism. Civic journalism has some strengths, but it is not some magic potion. Traditional journalism has its strengths, but periodically it needs to be re-assessed."

The News & Observer also is trying to become more responsive to its readers. For example, prior to the legislature's special crime session in early 1994, the paper organized a focus group to find out citizens' primary concerns. The paper also has expanded its opinion polls to include more frequent and comprehensive assessments of the public's views on issues. But editors are quick to emphasize that *The News & Observer* is not using opinion polls to set the agenda for its news coverage.

"You've got to be in touch with your community," says Mike Yopp, the paper's deputy managing editor. "But you can't just let that dictate your coverage, because obviously there are some things going on that people don't always know about. We still have to use the traditional tools of journalists."

Editors at *The Charlotte Observer* agree that it would be a mistake to base news coverage solely on polls and other ways of gauging public opinion. They say they haven't abandoned traditional reporting techniques, such as interviewing experts, examining government records, and relying on gut instincts. But they say civic journalism techniques have helped them cover the news better, while involving their readers more in the political process.

"If this approach were taken to its extreme, it would be wrong," Thames says. "We didn't throw our instincts out. That would be foolish. . . . The problem is that journalists have done a bad job covering the minimal amount needed for voters to make decisions. I believe that the people who read our newspaper, when they went to the ballot box on election day, knew what they needed to know. That's what I'm most proud of."

FOOTNOTES

[1] See Neal R. Peirce, "Civic journalism's 'extra extra,'" *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., June 26, 1994, p. 16A.

[2] For further discussion of changing trends in news coverage, see Ferrel Guillory, "Customers or Citizens? The Redefining of Newspaper Readers," and related articles, *North Carolina In-*

sight, Vol. 12, No. 4 (September 1990), pp. 30–38. Also see Ellen Hume and John Ellis, "Campaign Lessons for '92," Conference Summary, Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. Hume and Ellis list a number of suggestions for improving press coverage of politics, including: avoiding "manufactured news"; curtailing coverage of horse-race polls and inside campaign strategies; and reassigning senior reporters from covering day-to-day campaigning to doing more in-depth examinations of issues and fact-checking.

[3] As quoted in M.L. Stein, "A Catalyst For Public Awareness?" *Editor & Publisher*, Oct. 15, 1994, p. 11.

[4] See Thad Beyle, "'The Age of Indifference' and the Media in North Carolina," *North Carolina DataNet*, Issue No. 3 (December 1993), pp. 4–5. The Carolina Poll is conducted jointly by the UNC-CH School of Journalism and the Institute for Research in Social Science. The poll found that, between 1979 and 1990, the percentage of people who read newspapers at least 6 days a week declined from 35 percent to 30 percent among younger residents (those less than 30 years old) and from 60 percent to 56 percent among older residents (those more than 30 years old). During the same period, the poll found that the percentage of people who watch television news at least 6 days a week declined from 34 percent to 28 percent among younger residents but increased from 50 percent to 60 percent among older residents.

[5] As quoted in William B. Ketter, "Market-Driven Editorial Content—How Viable?" *Editor & Publisher*, Oct. 15, 1994, p. 13.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] See Arthur Charity, "What Readers Want: A Vote for a Very Different Model," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 1993, pp. 45–47.

[8] See Penny Pagano, "Public Perspectives on the Press," *American Journalism Review*, December 1993, pp. 39–46.

[9] From CBS News polls, as reported in "National Barometer," *The Polling Report*, Jan. 24, 1994, p. 8.

[10] From an ABC News/*Washington Post* survey as reported in "National Barometer," *The Polling Report*, July 18, 1994, p. 8.

[11] From a Harris Poll, as reported in "National Barometer," *The Polling Report*, June 13, 1994, p. 8.

[12] See Richard Morin, "Newspapers ask their readers what's important," *The Charlotte Observer*, Charlotte, N.C., June 16, 1994, p. 13A.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Federal crime statistics can be used to argue that crime rates have gone up *and* down; such discrepancies are largely due to differences in the way data are collected. For instance, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics compiles its National Crime Survey based on incidents reported by citizens in polls. That survey shows that total crime has declined substantially over the past two decades, while violent crime has dropped slightly. For instance, the rate of total crime per 1,000 people declined from 124 in 1973 to 92 in 1991. During that same period, the rate of violent crime per 1,000 people dropped from 33 to 31. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (113th edition), Washington, D.C., 1993, p. 196.

However, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has reached a different conclusion through its Uniform Crime Reporting Program, which is based on reports filed by law enforcement agencies. The FBI data show that total crime and violent crime have increased markedly over the past two decades. For example, the rate of total crime per 100,000 people increased from 4,154 in 1973 to 5,660 in 1992. During the same period, the rate of violent crime per 100,000 people increased from 417 to 758. See Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., 1992, p. 58.

[15] See Susan Rasky, "Voice of the Voter," *California Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (May 1994), p. 15.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Consider the results of two separate surveys aimed at determining the most important public issues in July 1992, during the last presidential campaign. A poll by the Public Agenda Foundation asked some 500 leaders in government, academia, business, criminal justice, religion, and the media to rank 20 issues on their relative importance. By contrast, a Gallup poll asked 755 registered voters nationwide to rank 16 issues on their importance. Although both polls ranked education, the federal budget deficit, and crime in the top five, there were notable differences with regard to other issues. The experts' poll ranked health care as the third most important issue, while the voters' poll ranked it seventh. Likewise, the voters ranked the economy first and unemployment fifth, while experts ranked those issues eighth and tenth, respectively.

[18] See Garrison Keillor, "Shallow news, sorehead nation," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., Oct. 25, 1994, p. 7A. (The article was reprinted from *The New York Times*.)

[19] See Alicia C. Shephard, "The Gospel of Public Journalism," *American Journalism Review*, September 1994, pp. 28–34.

[20] See "Public journalism," *Editor & Publisher*, Oct. 15, 1994, p. 6.

[21] See Peirce, note 1 above. Also see Michael Hoyt, "The Wichita Experiment," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1992, pp. 43–47.

[22] See David E. Brown, "Public journalism: Rebuilding communities through media," *Philanthropy Journal of North Carolina*, Vol. 1, Issue 11 (July–August 1994), pp. 1 and 11.

[23] See Ketter, note 5 above, p. 40.

[24] See Stein, note 3 above, p. 41.

[25] See Charles Walston, "Tell Us The Truth," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Oct. 16, 1994, pp. R1–7.

[26] From a CNN news release titled "The People's Agenda," (undated), Turner Broadcasting System, Atlanta, Ga.

[27] See Hoyt, note 21 above, p. 45.

[28] For a look at the accuracy of political polls, see Paul Luebke, "Newspaper Coverage of the 1986 Senate Race: Reporting the Issues or the Horse Race?" *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (March 1987), pp. 92–95. Also see Adam Hochberg, "Polls Shed Light on Outcomes of Political Races in North Carolina's 1992 Elections," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (January 1994), pp. 48–61.

[29] For a description of *The Charlotte Observer*'s 1992 civic journalism project, see Edward D. Miller, "The Charlotte Project: Helping citizens take back democracy," Poynter Institute for Media Studies, St. Peterburg, Fla., 1994, 93 pp.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66.

[31] See Philip Meyer, "The Media Reformation: Giving the Agenda Back to the People," pp. 89–108, in *The Elections of 1992*, edited by Michael Nelson, CQ Press: Washington, D.C., 1993.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

[33] See Miller, note 29 above, p. 72. For further discussion of issues related to voter turnout, see Jack Betts, "Voting in North Carolina: Can We Make It Easier?" and related articles, *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 1991), pp. 20–53.

[34] See Liz Chandler, "Taking back our neighborhoods," *The Charlotte Observer*, Charlotte, N.C., July 17, 1994, p. 1A.

coverage. "All the editors have to do is listen to their readers," Cryer says. "Not talk. Listen. And keep listening."[6]

Another journalist, Arthur Charity, expressed a similar view in *Columbia Journalism Review*: "[O]rdinary Americans, far from needing lessons from us in serious journalism, understand what it can and ought to be much better than most reporters and editors do. I'm convinced that people have steadily retreated from newspapers and networks until now because what they found there was shrill and shallow. We will not survive if they continue to feel unsatisfied. Our ideals and our bottom lines both point to the same fact—that we stand to gain quite a lot from a little reckless faith in the American people."[7]

"Our coverage has dramatically changed. More than anything, this is a change in the way we think about election coverage. It's really voter-driven election coverage, rather than candidate-driven coverage."

— RICK THAMES
ASSISTANT MANAGING EDITOR
THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

Such concerns prompted the *American Journalism Review* in 1993 to organize a conference in which a cross-section of citizens shared their views of news coverage with a panel of journalists. The magazine summarized the citizens' concerns in the following statements:[8]

- "We don't understand how you operate, especially how you make decisions on story selection and what news to cover."
- "We don't think the news media are held accountable for what they do."
- "We've lost a certain level of trust and confidence in the press. Above all, we question your accuracy."
- "It seems that 'anything goes' to sell newspapers or to compete in today's TV market. News and entertainment have become blurred; sensationalism has replaced substance."
- "Why can't the press be more responsive to the needs of the communities? You're elite and out of touch with the concerns of most people."
- "We are bombarded by so many choices today in obtaining news and are having a hard time sorting through everything."
- "You do a poor job of covering politicians, focusing on their personal lives instead of their jobs."

Civic Journalism Not Without Its Critics

There are drawbacks, however, with some of the techniques central to civic journalism—particularly if taken to an extreme. Critics are most vocal about journalists guiding their coverage of news with opinion polls, focus groups, and other ways of gauging public attitudes. The problem is the fickle nature of public opinion. Surveys show that the public can be notoriously inconsistent in its assessment of the importance of issues. For example, a January 1993 poll identified the economy as the most important issue facing the American public, followed by unemployment, the federal budget deficit, health care, and crime. By January 1994, a similar poll showed almost a complete reversal—with the public ranking the top issues as crime, health care, unemployment, the economy, and the deficit.[9]

The wording of questions in such polls also can have dramatic effects on the results. For example, in a July 1994 poll that asked what was the *single* most important issue for the federal government to address, the top three choices—in rank order—were: crime, the economy, and health care.[10] That was a reversal from a May 1994 poll that asked what were the *two* most important issues for the government to address. In the earlier poll, the top choices by rank were: health care, crime, and employment.[11]

Another problem with polls is a variation of the old riddle: Which came first, the chicken or the egg? That is, do the news media cover an issue because that's what the public is concerned about? Or, does an issue become important to the public because that's what the news media are covering?

"Polls can be a mirror or a window," says Richard Morin, director of polling for *The Washington Post*.[12] "On many issues, survey results merely reflect back what people have superficially absorbed from the media. Instead of peering into the minds of voters, reporters sometimes merely are seeing them-

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