



## *Customers or Citizens? The Redefining of Newspaper Readers*

by Ferrel Guillory

*This regular Insight feature focuses on how the news media—newspapers, television, and radio—cover public affairs in North Carolina. In this column, Insight examines whether newspaper readers should be defined as customers or citizens, and what the potential impact of this attempt to redefine readers could be on coverage of public affairs at the state and local levels.*

**H**ow should the readers—and potential readers—of American newspapers be defined? Do they form an audience or an electorate? Are they customers, or are they citizens?

Newspapers are in transition, and the way that newspaper managers define their targeted readership will determine how that transition is played out. The outcome will, in turn, have an influence on the vibrancy of American democracy.

North Carolina newspapers—most notably the major-city dailies facing the task of attracting readers in sprawling suburbs—are not immune to the calls within the industry for a reassessment and repositioning in light of new technologies and shifting demographics. This is a state with a tradition of strong state and local journalism, so a refocusing that diminishes reporting and commentary on public affairs would be felt particularly in state and local politics and government.

“The newspaper can measure governing where the requirements of TV will rarely allow it to touch that subject,” says Bill Green, a former ombudsman at *The Washington Post* and the de-

veloper of the Visiting Journalists Program at Duke University. “If newspapers give up some of their public affairs reporting—their watchdog role—it is not irrational to argue that democracy as we know it may be jeopardized.”

Green, who recently retired after serving three years as a special assistant to U.S. Sen. Terry Sanford (D-N.C.), spent some of his last days as a Senate aide traveling around North Carolina to confer with newspaper editors. Green found newspapers healthy financially, at least in the short-term, and he detected no despair among newspaper people. But, he said, a “shadow” hangs over them as they drift into being “market-driven.”

Newspapers feel pressure stemming from changing lifestyles, developments in technology for collecting and delivering information, and diverse competition for advertising dollars. Still, the notion, widespread several years ago, that newspapers might fade away has given way to a renewed sense of the durability of the printed word. But if survival of newspapers as a medium of mass communication seems less in doubt, there is much uncertainty as to how they will evolve.

Two major lectures in 1989, each by a renowned journalist, illustrate the contrasting visions of newspapering that now vie for ascendancy in newsrooms in North Carolina as well as across the United States. One was delivered by Anthony Lewis, twice a Pulitzer Prize winner and

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a columnist for *The New York Times*. The other was delivered by James K. Batten, a former reporter and executive editor of *The Charlotte Observer* and now president and chief executive officer of Knight-Ridder Inc., a large newspaper chain.

The Lewis lecture took place in Hamilton Hall on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It was the annual Weil Lecture on American Citizenship, and it exemplified the tradition of journalism as servant of the citizens of a democracy.

Lewis examined three major historical developments that had left the United States with a free press to speak out on powerful people and public

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CHAIRMAN AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
KNIGHT-RIDDER, INC.

policy: the rise and fall of the Sedition Act,<sup>1</sup> the landmark *Times v. Sullivan* libel ruling,<sup>2</sup> and the Pentagon Papers lawsuit over government secrets.<sup>3</sup> He warned of what he called the "rise of the national security state" and of the growing power of the presidency.

There is, Lewis said, a reluctance on the part of the courts to stand against these trends. The press itself is hesitant to challenge presidential authority, he said. Still, said Lewis, "The burden of checking the president increasingly falls on the press," and he asked rhetorically, "Do we want less scrutiny from the press?" The United States, said Lewis, "gambled on an open society." And part of that gamble, he said, is to tolerate the "annoyance of the press."

The Batten lecture took place at the University of California at Riverside, one of the long-

running series of lectures sponsored by The Press-Enterprise, a major daily suburban newspaper. Far from celebrating the "annoyance of the press," Batten gave full voice to the school of thought that newspapers need to serve their readers as customers.

"Our newspapers' audience—actual and potential—is changing in ways that put it at odds with our traditional assumptions," he said, "and with our preferred definition of our own mission. Most of the best journalists I know were drawn to their careers by an intense interest in public affairs. They saw newspapers as indispensable instruments of American self-government. And they tended—we tended, to be more precise—to assume that ordinary Americans (all good newspaper readers, of course) shared—or at least should share—our voracious appetite for news of government and politics. That was a little naive. But today, that high-minded assumption is hopelessly inaccurate."

Batten offered the kind of statistics that make newspaper managers anxious not so much about current profitability as about the future: In the 20 years from 1967 to 1987, the percentage of adults saying they read a newspaper every day dropped from 73 percent to 51 percent. Despite population and economic growth, daily newspaper circulation—63 million in 1989—is only a million or so above the level of 1970.

What especially worries newspaper managers is a term of the trade known as "penetration"—which is a measurement of circulation as a proportion of potential subscribers. Since 1970, daily circulation rose only 1 percent, while the number of American households grew by 42 percent. Circulation of Sunday newspapers, which contain all sorts of feature sections, grew by 22 percent.

"We need to develop a new and fierce commitment to publishing newspapers that strain to please and satisfy our customers every day," said Batten. "The days when we could do newspapering *our way*, and tell the world to go to hell if it didn't like the results, are gone forever.... Let's be done with the all-too-common journalistic queasiness about entertaining readers. Too many editors and reporters think there's something demeaning and unworthy—'pandering' is the favorite epithet—about making newspapers entertaining and enjoyable."

If Lewis and Batten were to debate each other face to face, they undoubtedly would find much in each other's lectures with which to agree. Batten surely would subscribe to Lewis' point that news-

papers have rights, responsibilities, and challenges under the First Amendment. And Lewis would have to acknowledge that a newspaper losing—or about to lose—readers crucial to the health of the enterprise would ultimately be sapped of its viability.

As anyone who has read Frank Luther Mott's tome, *American Journalism*, would know, change is a constant in the history of the press in the United States.<sup>4</sup> In recent decades, the definition of news has expanded rapidly, as newspapers dramatically extended their reach into science, business, health, and the arts. Newspapers have long been a mixture of information and entertainment, offering readers crossword puzzles, comic strips, horoscopes, and gossip columns. What's at stake now is the balance within the mix.

It is easy—almost too easy—to attribute certain changes in American daily newspapers to the magnetic pull of *USA Today*, the color-snazzy national newspaper of the Gannett chain. Even though it is much maligned by some journalists for its short, shallow articles, *USA Today* has indeed had an influence on the industry, in terms of color and graphics and in the vivid example it offers of how newspapers can be adapted to the television age. But it is important to note that Batten does not come out of the *USA Today* milieu. Rather, he is the chief executive of a major newspaper chain, Knight-Ridder, which publishes some of the most substantive dailies in the United States—newspapers known for their investigative, national, and international reporting. That Batten would seem to suggest more customer-centered, as distinct from citizen-centered, newspapers is especially noteworthy.

Not only at *USA Today*, but throughout the industry, newspaper publishers, managers, and editors have become eager consumers of readership surveys and focus group studies. And they have discovered what politicians, churches, businessmen, and others dependent upon public approval have learned about late 20th century Americans. This has become a more visual society with a shorter attention span. More and more people look inward, put their own wants and desires above public involvement, live in two-worker families, and thirst for an array of leisure activities. Too many people are nonvoters and nonsubscribers.

Batten urges newspaper people to become "more reader-driven, customer-driven." And *Editor and Publisher* magazine, the newspaper trade journal, reinforces the message. "One of the

most pressing problems facing the nation's newspapers is declining market penetration," says a December 1989 article. "Nationally, just one out of two households receives a daily newspaper."<sup>5</sup> Another article in the same magazine begins, "The world is changing, people are changing, and newspapers had better adapt because their survival depends on it."<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, newspaper managers have begun heeding the message—and in some respects with beneficial results. Circulation departments strive mightily to deliver newspapers on time and dry, regardless of the weather. The drive to make newspapers more visually attractive has led to a renewed appreciation of maps and use of color. And much more emphasis now goes to the organization of the newspaper, so that the same kind of material appears more or less in the same place, day after day.

And yet, the more readers and potential readers are treated as customers, to be served, pleased, and satisfied, the less they may be treated as citizens, to be educated, informed, and even challenged to think about public affairs. At the outset of the 1990s, the gravitational pull toward treating newspapers as customers remains strong.

Small samples of evidence point to larger trends: On the day after Vice President Dan Quayle visited Charlotte in April 1989, *The Charlotte Observer's* first edition carried a picture of Quayle in a schoolroom over a story with the headline, "Vice President Calls Busing a Failure."<sup>7</sup> *The Observer's* final edition, however, had the school picture and the busing story on an inside page, and it had replaced them on the front page with a photo of Quayle jogging and a story with the headline, "Visit Leaves Little Time for Relaxation."<sup>8</sup> (See pages 35-37 for the text of these articles.)

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As part of its redesign in late 1989, *The News and Observer* of Raleigh shifted the "Under the Dome" column, a daily dose of political chatter and insider news about state government, from the front page to the first page of a section called "Local/State," a symbolic move indicating that the *N&O* appears headed toward becoming a more local newspaper. "Who wants to read all this government stuff?" an editor grumbled one day during the 1989 session of the General Assembly when I had budgeted an especially long list of stories. And then just before the Christmas holidays, another editor gave me some wry words of encouragement to continue pressing for news of government and politics. "It's good to have some dinosaurs around," he said.

To be sure, neither Batten nor the newspaper people who subscribe to his analysis call for an abandonment of government and political coverage. Batten's thesis is that newspapers will attract readers to public policy and hard truths by becoming more "warm and caring and funny and insightful and human." And he suggests some changes in the way newspapers approach politics and public debate: joining in an alliance, for instance, with get-out-the-vote programs. Moreover, he proposes that newspapers create their own news events by sponsoring local debates between public figures and experts and then printing stories and texts.

For the foreseeable future, newspapers will almost surely contain a mix of both trends: public policy here, customer-driven features and briefs there. While TV has bypassed newspapers as headline deliverers, newspapers—if they have the will to do so—can retain a franchise as the deliverers of what Walter Lippmann called "explained news."

That means hiring educated journalists who not only write well but know a thing or two about the subjects they are covering. It means less grind-it-out daily coverage of legislative committees, but more updates on unresolved issues, trend stories, personality profiles of public policymakers, and articles about how government works and how government decisions affect the lives of real people.

If newspapers aren't in a drum-roll retreat from public policy, they plainly are seeing their readers more as customers and less as citizens. And, in Bill Green's view, as newspapers tie themselves to the findings of readership surveys, "they are less independent than they used to be."

It is a thought-provoking observation. For

centuries, American newspapers have fought to keep themselves free from government intrusion. Moreover, newspapers—or at least the best of them—have had pride in maintaining their independence from the pressure of big advertisers. Now a diminishing of independence and integrity may come from a too-tight binding to public whims and attitudes of the times.

A repositioning of American newspapers that results in a substantial erosion of their devotion to public affairs would have an impact at all levels of government and politics. But the federal government and presidential campaigns would feel the impact least. This is so because Washington remains a focal point when major events break out and because the newspapers with a national scope, as well as the TV networks, have a competitive stake in maintaining their attention to the government and politics that flow out of the nation's capital.

More likely to fall through the cracks are state and local campaigns, and the debates and decisions that take place in state capitols and in city halls and county courthouses. With some exceptions, state and local candidates tend not to be the sort of celebrities or public figures that attract the public's gaze. Clashes over such issues as taxes and abortion will still draw coverage. But state and local issues tend to be less ideological and more mundane, however important such matters as public schools, poverty, health care, and environmental protection may be.

Newspapers have long used the metaphor of the mirror. They have defined themselves as mirrors held up for their communities to see themselves, warts and all, even to the point of annoyance. Now, the mirror metaphor increasingly may take a different connotation. Newspapers may be drifting toward becoming mere mirrors of a public detached from public affairs and absorbed in private pursuits.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sedition Act of 1798, 1 Stat. 596.

<sup>2</sup> *The New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254 (1964).

<sup>3</sup> The Pentagon Papers case: *The New York Times Co. v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713 (1971).

<sup>4</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism, A History: 1690-1960*, Third Edition, The MacMillan Company, New York, Fifth Printing, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> M.L. Stein, "Adapting to Change," *Editor & Publisher*, Dec. 2, 1989, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> James Clark, "Shop Talk at Thirty," *Editor & Publisher*, Dec. 2, 1989, inside back cover.

<sup>7</sup> *The Charlotte Observer*, April 18, 1989, p. 1A.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* at p. 4A.