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News from Somewhere

Journalistic Frames and the Debate over “Public Journalism”

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Our reporters do not cover stories from their point of view.
They are presenting them from nobody’s point of view.

Richard S. Salant, former president of CBS News

[Journalists] make judgments all the time. . . . I don’t think the kind of bias journalists are usually accused of—ideological bias, personal animus—is generally worrisome. Far more subtle and more dangerous are the conventions of journalism: the ways in which journalists go about dividing the world, framing public life for us, picturing the world of politics. There are values and assumptions hidden in those decisions that are extremely important to name and debate, and I think, at this point, to change.

Jay Rosen, former director of the Project on Public Life and the Press

In July of 1993 a handful of journalism and philanthropy trade publications reported that the Knight and Kettering Foundations, the American Press Institute, and New York University were collaborating on a project called “Public Life and the Press.” The project was described as an “initiative to explore and develop ways for journalists to help strengthen citizenship, improve public debate and revive public life.”¹ At an inaugural meeting of interested journalists at the American Press Institute in November of 1993, Jay Rosen, a professor of journalism at New York University and director of the project, described the purpose of the gathering as not to debate *whether* newspapers should take a more active role in communities but rather to discuss *how* to do so effectively. Key to this endeavor would be finding ways to enable the community to interact with the newspaper, to reground news coverage so that it was based on what matters to citizens, to spark public discussion and action, and to restructure newsroom cultures in ways that were less hierarchical and more connected to the community.²

By the end of 1997, when the Project on Public Life and the

Press officially ended, experiments in “public” or “civic” journalism had been tried by hundreds of newspapers (and many radio and television stations) around the country, with a number of papers rethinking their entire philosophy of news gathering and reporting.³ It had also sparked a major controversy within the journalistic profession, generating hundreds of columns, editorials, and stories both in favor of and, more often, in opposition to this fledgling movement.

My purpose in discussing public journalism and the controversy surrounding it is not to assess the movement itself (though I confess to being sympathetic to its goals and supportive of many of its practices). Rather it is to use it as a way to better understand the role played by journalists in the framing process. Members of the press seldom publicly discuss the premises and practices of their profession as openly, in as much detail, or with as much fervor as was the case in the four-year debate over public journalism. Since much of this debate centered—often explicitly—on what academics would call the framing process, it provides a rare and valuable window through which to view the way journalists see themselves in this process. In turn, this self-examination and the insights it provides serve as a useful platform from which to more fully explore how media frames are constructed.⁴

Journalism and Framing

“At the most general level,” writes Shanto Iyengar (1991, 11), “the concept of framing refers to subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of judgment and choice problems.” A large body of social scientific and cognitive research suggests that such alterations in the way information is presented (e.g., emphasizing certain facts over others, the choice of descriptive adjectives and adverbs, the amount and type of context provided, or the sounds and images included) can “prime” recipients of the information in ways that affect both the issues they attend to (agenda-setting) and the construction of their specific opinions about these issues.⁵

Framing is a particularly useful concept in the study of media, politics, and public opinion. Doris Graber (2002, 173) defines a media frame as “reporting the news from a particular perspective so that some aspects of the situation come into close focus and others fade into the background.” As the major source of information on public officials, candidates for office, political events, and policy debates, the mass media are uniquely positioned to frame the way citizens come to political judgments. In addition, newspapers, magazines, talk shows, television and radio news, and the like all serve as important, even central forums in which political issues are publicly discussed. As such, the media

are more than the *providers* of information to be used in political debate; they are the *places* where much of this debate occurs.

This point is not lost on political elites. Increasingly, battles over the “hearts and minds” of citizens involve attempts to shape the way in which choices are presented and discussed in the media. Indeed, the now common technique of “spin control,” practiced by interest groups, candidates for office, and public officials, is little more than the practical-politics version of framing. The growing importance of media campaign consultants, the increasing use of media strategies by organized interests, the blending of media and policy strategies by policy makers, the growth of an institutionalized communications bureaucracy in government, and even the increasing use of media strategies by foreign governments seeking to influence U.S. policy all signal the important role played by the media in framing the way political choices are presented and thus resolved.⁶

But the media are neither passive providers of information framed by other political actors nor simply the stages on which these battles over spin control are performed. Rather, they are active, albeit unique, players in the ongoing drama over the representation of public affairs. I say unique because unlike other players in this process, whose agendas are intentionally, if not always explicitly, designed to frame issues in ways that are favorable to their particular interests, journalists and reporters operate under norms and procedures intended to resist both their own and others’ biases and to lead to the presentation of information and debates in an objective, fair, and balanced manner. Columnists, editorialists, and news analysts are more explicitly opinionated and so play roles that come closer to those of more avowedly political actors. But even in these cases the roles are not identical, since with few exceptions, the former still speak as members of the journalistic profession and thus are at least somewhat constrained (and privileged) by this vantage point. Members of the journalistic profession are also in a unique position because they serve as gatekeepers, playing the central role in determining both the form and the content of what is seen, heard, and read in the media.

My argument is that while the norms and practices of contemporary journalism deeply affect the specific way members of the press frame political issues, they do not remove them from the framing process. Indeed, I would argue that on any issue of import, it is impossible to talk about an “unframed” media portrayal. Journalistic norms provide guidance regarding specific decisions that must be made by members of the media. But these decisions—what story to cover, what sources to interview, what quotes to include, what descriptive language to include, what order to present information in, what photo or

video to use, what the headline will be, and so forth—remain “subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of judgement and choice problems” and so are, by definition, forms of framing.

The observation that journalists frame the way information is presented to the public is not new.⁷ Truly objective, fair, or balanced presentations are viewed as goals rather than as accurate descriptions of most actual media portrayals. The hypothesized reasons why the media fall short of these goals run from intentional bias, to manipulation by sources, to unconscious belief systems, to inherent limitations in the news-gathering process. While all of these explanations have merit, what I am suggesting is that the norms of contemporary journalism *are themselves journalistic frames* and, like all frames, *necessarily* produce alterations in the presentation of choice problems.

More specifically, I argue that media frames emerge from the interplay of facts; the framing of these facts by competing, authoritative, and/or self-interested sources; and the framing of both the facts and the elite frames by journalists. In turn, the frames used by journalists are determined by: (1) the normative assumptions of contemporary journalism; (2) the practical constraints on the news-making process; (3) the institutional practices of journalism that emerge from the combination of normative assumptions and practical constraints; and (4) the way in which these assumptions, constraints, and practices are internalized as professional norms by journalists.

The Normative, Practical, Institutional, and Professional Roots of Journalistic Frames

As Walter Lippmann (1922, 223) observed: “Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed, in what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, what emphasis each shall have. There are no objective standards here. There are conventions.” Conventions can be powerful, subtle, and often unrecognized influences on the choices made by journalists. The conventions (or norms and practices) of contemporary journalism, while constantly evolving in response to social, technological, and economic changes, remain at heart deeply rooted in normative assumptions about the purpose of the press, assumptions that can be traced back over two hundred years.

The Normative Assumptions of Contemporary Journalism

The central goals of the press have remained relatively unchanged throughout most of U.S. history. Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1974, 74) summarize these goals as: (1) servicing the political system by providing information, discussion, and debate on public affairs; (2) enlightening the public so as to

make it capable of self-government; (3) safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving as a watchdog against government; (4) servicing the economic system, primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising; (5) providing entertainment; and (6) maintaining the press's financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests.

Though these goals have remained stable, the presumptions regarding how best the press may achieve them have not. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the chief mechanism was the market. Given a relatively unfettered opportunity for privately owned presses to develop, and few limits on what they published, it was assumed that an economic free market would produce a parallel marketplace of ideas. This open exchange of ideas would create a "self-righting process" (Milton 1951) in which "a livelier impression of the truth [would be] produced by its collision with error" (Mill 1975, 16). In essence, the civic good described by Siebert and his colleagues would be a by-product of the sixth goal.

While actual practice often fell short of its idealized goals (Emery and Emery 1988), the "libertarian" theory of the press (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1974) dominated until the twentieth century, when economic and technological changes forced a rethinking of how best to preserve the goals of a free and democratically useful mass media. Growing centralization of ownership and decreasing competition in the printed press, coupled with the rise of an inherently centralized and expensive electronic media, led to increasing criticisms of press practices. These criticisms included the beliefs that owners were using the press to propagate their own views and/or those of the business class more generally, that the press was resistant to social change, that it emphasized the sensational over the substantive, that it was unjustly invading the privacy of individuals, and that it was endangering public morals (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1974, 78–79).

Such criticisms had long been aimed at individual stories or publications. However, the growing centralization of ownership and information created an environment in which one could no longer assume a marketplace of ideas or a self-righting process. As a result, one could also no longer assume that the truth would emerge as a by-product of competition among self-interested but diverse publications. The solution to this problem was found in the development of a new theory of the press, a theory that emerged slowly but that was codified in the 1920s and early 1930s by, among others, the Federal Radio and Federal Communications Commissions and by professional associations such as the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the National Association of Broadcasters, and the Newspapers Guild (Emery and Emery 1988). At the

heart of this emerging theory was the growing consensus that journalism was a profession that required a more self-conscious awareness of its social responsibility and a clearer set of professional practices that would be aimed at meeting this social responsibility.

The elements of this “social responsibility” theory of the press (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1974, 87) were most clearly summarized in a 1947 report issued by the privately funded Commission on Freedom of the Press. First, the press should provide “a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning.” Within this requirement were the expectations that the press would be accurate and objective, would distinguish fact from opinion, and would provide balance by presenting competing points of view. While providing competing views, however, the press was also expected to “provide the truth about the fact” by weighing the reliability of various sources and putting facts into some kind of context. Second, the press should serve “as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism,” thus assuring some diversity of opinion. Third, the press should present “a representative picture of the constituent groups in society.” Fourth, the press was responsible for “the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of society.” And finally, the press should provide “full access to the day’s intelligence” (88–91).

Taken as a whole, these requirements represent an attempt to preserve the *ends* of the libertarian theory of the press through different *means*. If the press separated fact from opinion; provided competing facts, opinions, and critiques; fairly represented different groups; presented and clarified societal values; and provided a full range of critical information *in the same publication or broadcast*, competition among numerous and separately owned media voices was no longer vital. But in exchange, media professionals were required to take this new social responsibility seriously and were subject to formal and informal monitoring and regulation by the public, the profession, and, when necessary, the government.

There are several tensions within both the general goals of the press and the specific theories designed to achieve these goals. Regarding the former, the greatest tensions are between the civic goals (providing information, discussion, and debate; enlightening the public; and serving as a watchdog of government) on the one hand and the goals of entertainment and economic self-sufficiency on the other. Put simply, being entertaining and economically successful often can come at the expense of being informative, enlightening, and vigilant (Postman 1985; Bagdikian 1992). This potential problem is exacerbated under the social responsibility theory, since in the world of media con-

glomerates, the economic stakes are greater and the civic impact of the choices made by these media giants more far-reaching.

In addition to this tension among the civic, entertainment, and economic goals of the press, there are also tensions within the specific tenets of the social responsibility theory. Under this theory the same media outlet is expected to be a neutral information provider, a facilitator of debate and discussion, an expert that determines the truthfulness and utility of different facts or opinions, and a watchdog that guards against government corruption and moral decay. Any one of these responsibilities would be difficult, if not impossible, but their combination creates competing identities that can be drawn on (and ultimately internalized) selectively and thus can affect the way in which information is framed.

The libertarian and social responsibility theories of the press provide the underpinnings for much of the current structure and practice of journalism. But to fully understand the impact of normative concerns on structure and practice, it is necessary to also consider the 1920s debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey on the nature of "the public." For Lippmann (1925), the modern public was a "phantom," an artificially constructed collection of individuals who were generally uninformed about and disconnected from politics; who lacked the time, skills, and interest to take a direct role in their own governance; and who were easily swayed by seemingly persuasive arguments of the moment. The contemporary media, from this perspective, could easily become a propaganda tool used to manipulate and misrepresent the public in ways that could threaten the stability and order of society. To avoid this, the press must serve as a vigilant watchdog, guarding against demagogues. The goal of the press was not to provide information that would allow citizens to come to their own conclusions on the substantive issues of the day but to create an environment in which they could choose among competing elites who would be responsible for the real work of democracy and policy making. Since the substance of politics and policy would be determined by experts, the substance of journalism should focus on this expert class. At best, the press could signal citizens when certain elites, experts, or ideas posed a threat to the democratic process.

Dewey (1954), too, saw problems with the modern public but drew different conclusions from these observations. While he acknowledged the existence and importance of experts, Dewey believed that citizens were capable of engaging experts and their ideas and contributing to public deliberation. The nature and quality of public deliberation were not preordained but depended upon the opportunities presented to citizens by the public sphere. Given these opportuni-

ties, Dewey had faith that the public could play a more active, direct, and rational role in its own governance. These opportunities would come from many places, such as the education system and other public institutions. One key institution was the press. The press's responsibility was to provide the kind of information that not only could be used by citizens to understand the issues of the day but that would also provide the context within which to use that information and the skills necessary to do so. In addition, the public required a public sphere that would allow them to openly deliberate about civic issues. Here again the press was critical, as it could serve as a public space for such deliberation. In short, where Lippmann saw citizens necessarily as passive consumers of the news, and saw the press as the place for an exchange of facts, opinions, and ideas among elites and experts (including journalists and columnists), Dewey saw citizens as potentially active participants in this exchange and saw the press as a fundamental part of the social fabric and the place where experts would inform, educate, and engage the public in issues of the day.

Elements of Lippmann and Dewey can be found in the tenets of both the libertarian theory of the press and its reincarnation in the social responsibility theory. However, the specific ways in which these theories are put into practice vary significantly depending on whether Lippmann's or Dewey's views prevail. As has been noted by several students of the press (Carey 1988, 1989; Rosen 1999), by and large Lippmann's view has come to dominate the journalistic profession. At the same time, internal tensions within the social responsibility theory, and the continued if muted impact of both the libertarian theory and Dewey's views, can make for a complicated, inconsistent, and sometimes schizophrenic self-definition within the press. These tensions have been partially resolved (or, more accurately, suppressed) through the development of particular frames. But these frames, while arguably consistent with many of the normative goals of journalism, necessarily privilege certain of these goals over others and so remain open to criticism and, on occasion, evaluation. This can be clearly seen in both the way in which the social responsibility theory of the press has become institutionalized by mainstream journalism and in the critique of this institutionalization by public journalists.

Practical Constraints on the Framing Process

The normative guidelines discussed above must be applied in a world with numerous practical constraints.⁸ These constraints have been well documented (Epstein 1973; Gans 1980; Manoff and Schudson 1986; Jamieson and Campbell 1992) and include the limits imposed by time, space, expertise, technology, and cost. Time is a constraint in several ways. News is defined as information about *recent* events, usually defined as what has happened since the last publi-

cation or broadcast. There are also time constraints (deadlines) for producing a story, established by the news cycle of the particular medium in question. Time is also a relative constraint, in the sense that releasing information before your competitor (the scoop) is valued. And, for electronic media, time is a constraint in that it limits the number and length of stories and thus what can be included as news.

Space is a constraint in several ways as well. It limits the number and length of stories in print media much as time does in the electronic media. Placement of stories within a given space (the page number, the position on the page, the section of the paper or magazine, etc.) signals their import and affects their likelihood of being read. Geographic space can shape the ease with which information can be accessed and thus affects both the likelihood and the way that certain parts of the nation (e.g., urban versus rural, Northeast versus Midwest) or regions of the world (e.g., South America or Africa versus Europe or the Middle East) will be covered. Expertise, or lack thereof, can greatly affect news coverage. A journalist's familiarity with a particular culture or subculture; mastery of a foreign language; knowledge of relevant historical, scientific, or political information; and so forth all influence the way an event or topic is researched, perceived, and thus presented to the public.

Finally, technology and economics set the broader parameters within which the news-gathering process operates. Technological advances can change the impact of time, space, and expertise (Abramson, Arterton, and Orren 1988), as can differential calculations regarding acceptable costs. In addition, and as noted above, economic considerations can shape broader notions of newsworthiness in ways that can conflict with the civic goals of a free press.

The Institutional Practices of Journalism and Their Impact on Framing

The combination of normative expectations and practical constraints problematizes the process of news gathering. To prevent these difficulties from becoming overwhelming, professional journalism has developed routines and practices designed to rationalize the process so as to manufacture a news product in an efficient, timely, and consistent way. These practices include the routinization of the release of news; the structuring of newspapers, magazines, and news broadcasts into identifiable sections or segments; the creation of specific beats for surveillance of the political and social world; the cultivation of reliable, authoritative sources of information; and so forth. They also include the standardization of definitions of newsworthiness so that it becomes easier to sort through the incredible number of possible events and issues one might choose to cover.

What is important about these practices for my purposes is that they repre-

sent ways for the profession to institutionalize the normative underpinnings of journalism while taking the practical constraints of news gathering into consideration. At the same time, however, these practices should be viewed as choices—each is one of several equally rational ways in which the news *might* be constructed (Romano 1986). In turn, these choices affect the way in which other actors in the negotiation over deciding what is news (public officials, interest groups, the public, etc.) interact with the media. In short, institutionalized practices become important, perhaps even central, rules that determine how news is framed.

The Internalization of Institutional Practices: Journalistic Norms

The normative goals, practical constraints, and resulting institutional practices are seldom open to critical rethinking but instead become internalized in journalistic norms. This internalization of norms produces schemas, or “cognitive structure[s] that represent organized knowledge about a given concept or type of stimulus. A schema contains both the attributes of the concept and the relationships among the attributes” (Fiske and Taylor 1984, 140). Schemas serve as filters through which journalists see the world, make professional judgments about it, and thus present it to the rest of us. Further, since schemas include “the relationships among the attributes” of the concept or stimulus in question, they can naturalize what could under other circumstances be problematic (or at least contestable) relationships among the particular ways in which normative goals and practical constraints are combined into institutional practices. Included in these schemas are, of course, attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and so forth that are the result of personal experience and the socializing effects associated with class, gender, ethnicity, and the like. But of central interest here are those that result from the internalization of professional practices.

To illustrate this, consider the journalistic schema of “politics as a strategic game” identified by, among others, Thomas Patterson. According to Patterson (1993, 57–58): “The dominant schema for the reporter is structured around the notion that politics is a strategic game. When journalists encounter new information during an election, they tend to interpret it within a schematic framework according to which candidates compete for advantage. The candidates play the game well or poorly. . . . The core principle of the press’s game schema is that candidates are strategic actors whose every move is significant. . . . The reporter’s first instinct is to look to the game.” Patterson goes on to illustrate, first, how the game schema shapes the specific ways the media report on elections; second, how this schema differs from the schema used by most citizens; and third, how this combination unintentionally results in reporting that ill serves the democratic process of selecting representatives.

Though he does not use this terminology, Patterson is describing the cognitive processes associated with journalistic framing. What is less clear in his and other analyses that describe how journalists cover politics is *why* particular schemas develop. What I am suggesting is that these schemas result from the internalization of institutional practices based on the interplay of normative concerns and practical constraints.⁹ Consider the specific, unexamined attributes that make up the game schema. Least controversial, but most easily missed, is the notion that campaigns and elections *are* news. This is clearly tied to the libertarian theory’s mandate that the press inform and enlighten the public so as to make it capable of self-government. Second, by providing relatively equal coverage of the major candidates for any particular office, journalists arguably satisfy the social responsibility theory’s requisite that the press perform its civic responsibility in a balanced way. The expectation that the press should provide discussion, debate, and diversity of opinion, found in both the libertarian and the social responsibility theories, is also satisfied by giving coverage to the major candidates for office.

At the same time, however, journalists are also expected to be watchdogs of government, to provide forums for comment and criticism, and to provide “the truth behind the fact” by assessing the reliability of sources and putting facts in a context. It is as a result of these expectations, I would argue, that the “game schema” takes on its more controversial characteristics. The goal of the campaign, and thus the overarching context in which stories are written, becomes winning the election. In this context, the truth behind the fact is defined as the strategic reasons for candidate statements and behavior. Criticisms are also situated within this context—evaluations about the reliability of sources are based on the implicit assumption that winning is the underlying motivation for all behavior. In its watchdog role, the press assesses the behavior of candidates with a cynical eye, assuming that platforms, policy statements, promises, and so forth are primarily attempts to win support and thus likely to be self-serving and misleading. Points of disagreement between candidates are evaluated in a similar light. Finally, the near exclusive focus on elites—candidates, campaign consultants, pollsters, and so forth—is the institutionalization and internalization of Lippmann’s view of the proper role of journalism.

The emphases on winning and losing, strategy, elites, and so forth also satisfy the economic incentives of the media, since the inherent drama this schema contains is presumed to attract readers and viewers. That this drama can also be entertaining serves yet another goal of the media. And it helps simplify news reporting, given the practical constraints of time, space, and expertise. This simplification is assisted by the candidates and their surrogates. Candidates, interest groups, even “neutral” experts adjust their behavior to fit journalistic

schemas, thus hoping not only to be covered but to be covered in ways that advantage their own agendas. Defining news about campaigns as a strategic game leads interested parties to become more strategic. In turn, this confirms the essentially strategic nature of campaigns for journalists, thus also confirming the legitimacy of their worldview. Behavior that runs counter to this schema is either ignored or viewed as ineffective or manipulative strategy. The result is what Entman (1989) describes as a dysfunctional interaction that ultimately frustrates journalists, elites, and the public alike, which Cappella and Jamieson (1997) call the “spiral of cynicism.”

In short, the game schema allows journalists to do their job in a way that is arguably consistent with their goals and constraints and to do so without having to constantly revisit these goals and constraints. However, this frame is only one of many that could serve this purpose, with alternative frames producing different emphases and so different reporting. Thus, the choice of the strategic-game frame alters the way in which choices are presented to the public by filtering what is or is not deemed newsworthy and, ultimately, by affecting the actual conduct of campaigns. Further, the centralization of the media and the professionalization of journalistic practices mean that, once developed and internalized, a limited set of frames comes to dominate reporting. This increases their likely impact while also naturalizing them, thus making less visible the fact that they are choices—choices that can have costs as well as benefits associated with them. Ironically, the result of this process can be a failure to meet the very civic responsibilities upon which these frames are at least partially based.

What the Public Journalism Debate Tells Us about Journalistic Framing

The game schema, and its resulting frame, is only one of several employed by the press. What is common across these frames, however, is that they are the internalization of some combination of normative assumptions, practical constraints, and institutionalized practices. This internalization is often so complete as to be invisible to members of the press, with the distinction between the general goals of journalism and the specific ways in which these goals are applied blurred beyond recognition. The first few decades of the twentieth century, when the social responsibility theory of the press emerged, was one of the few periods when journalists openly discussed the relationship between the theory and the practice of their craft. The current debate over public journalism is another.

“By its own admission public journalism is about experimentation, and so is resistant to simple definitions. . . . Nobody, not even me, knows exactly what it is,” says Davis “Buzz” Merritt, former editor of the *Wichita Eagle* and

one of the principal founders of the public journalism movement.¹⁰ At root, both chronologically and philosophically, it is a critique of mainstream press practices. This critique can be traced to several dissatisfactions with the state of both journalism and public life. In the late 1980s journalists and academics alike noted the growing alienation of citizens from politics, as indicated by low voter turnout, as well as by surveys that indicated a general mistrust of and disinterest in politics and politicians. At the same time, citizens seemed increasingly disengaged from and dissatisfied with the media, with polls indicating a low opinion of the press and a willingness to blame the media for much of their frustration with politics. Declining readership of newspapers and viewership of the news provided more tangible evidence for this disconnect among the press, politics, and the public.

These trends coincided with a growing frustration among many journalists and editors that their coverage of important issues had become misguided and superficial. This was especially evident in the 1988 presidential campaign, during which a consensus emerged among journalists, academics, and the public that coverage had overemphasized personality, strategy, and the horse race over substantive policy issues. There was also concern over the excessively negative and image-oriented nature of the campaign. While much of the blame was laid at the feet of the candidates, members of the press were forced to admit they had lost control over their coverage and had been too easily manipulated into covering the campaign in reaction to the strategies of the campaign organizations themselves. At the same time, candidates complained that the media were unwilling to cover them unless their messages were simplified and sensationalized. While campaign coverage was an especially evident example of this problem, it extended far beyond this. Similar concerns were raised regarding coverage of government more generally, of national and local policy issues, and of public officials.

These self-assessments cut to the heart of both the civic and the economic underpinnings of the press, thus forcing a reassessment of journalistic practices. While numerous editorials and columns lamented this state of affairs, what distinguished the public journalism critique was the extent to which it linked together declining civic involvement; declining public trust in and use of the news media; the declining quality of news coverage of government, policy, and politics; and the resulting frustration among members of the press. Further, public journalists much more aggressively located the source of this spiral of cynicism within the press itself. In part this critique was a continuation of criticisms that have existed since the nation's founding. In part it was a continuation of more recent debates emerging from economic and technological changes beginning in the latter part of the twentieth century and complicated

by the development of new information sources. And in part it was a departure from traditional views of the proper role of the press. In each case, however, it involved opening up for discussion the press's role in the framing process. In particular, public journalism exposes and challenges a number of the frames employed by traditional journalism.

Journalists and editors who would become identified with the public journalism movement did more than critique the traditional practices of the press—they acted on their critique. Beginning somewhat idiosyncratically in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and then developing more formally after the creation of the Project on Public Life and the Press in 1993, they experimented with alternative forms of news coverage. While these experiments varied in form and content, they were all motivated by an understanding of the central role played by the press in the framing process. For public journalists there is no pretense that the press is simply a mirror on the world: “Journalism is not now and has never been value-neutral, all protestations to the contrary. . . . The fact, *to which we are blind* but that is obvious to the public, is that we exercise our own values when we choose to, and use the convenient claim of value neutrality when citizens want us to expand our reportorial efforts beyond the traditional targets of investigative reporting. . . . It comes across to citizens as either judgmental arrogance or a lack of civic concern, creating yet another disconnect between us and the people we are trying to reach and inform” (Merritt 1995, 11–12; emphasis added).

This acknowledgment forces public journalists to confront the underlying assumptions of mainstream schemas, asking directly, “From whose perspective should the news be framed?” The answer, for public journalists, is from the perspective of citizens: “The real purpose of objectivity,” according to one newspaper article summarizing the views of Jay Rosen, “is to frame problems in ways that enable society to talk about them.”¹¹ More specifically, this entails: (1) giving citizens a greater role in setting the agenda; (2) covering particular issues and events in a way that is meaningful and useful to citizens; (3) giving the public a greater, more visible voice in the ongoing conversation about public affairs; and (4) seeing the press as a member of the community in which it operates, responsible not only for identifying problems but also for helping find solutions to these problems.

Public journalism, as both a theory and a practice, became a news story in its own right, generating a substantial debate among its supporters, its critics, and those who were curious but ambivalent. At the heart of the debate over public journalism is the issue of how best to perform the civic role expected of the press, given the constraints journalists face. What is important to underscore is that in this debate, both mainstream and public journalists accept the

responsibility of informing the public; providing debate and diversity of opinion; uncovering the truth behind the fact; being objective, accurate, and balanced; and so forth. The disagreement lies in how best to do this. All four of the operating principles of public journalism mentioned above can be tied to the normative assumptions guiding the mainstream press, but all four challenge the particular ways in which the mainstream press has come to codify these principles within their traditional frames. This challenge, and the response to it by mainstream journalists, provides useful insights into both the variety of frames employed by mainstream journalists and the logic underlying these frames.

Who Sets the Agenda? Elite versus Citizen Frames

One of the major dilemmas faced by journalists is determining what to cover, given the overwhelming number of issues and events that might legitimately be considered newsworthy. This agenda-setting function is fundamental to the framing process, as the decision to cover or not cover an issue or event (or how much to cover it) affects the information citizens have available in making judgments. If, for example, the press covers the president’s stand on health care, but not his stand on abortion, the latter is less likely to come into play in citizens’ assessments of the president.

Public journalism openly acknowledges this dilemma, rejecting the notion that story selection is simply an objective or technical process: “Public journalism may be more honest than ‘false objectivity,’ pretending to be neutral, when even choosing subject matter requires personal judgements.”¹² Given the inherent constraints on covering everything of potential import, public journalists argue that citizens themselves, rather than (or in addition to) elites, should set the agenda. This philosophy can be clearly seen in a number of public journalism “experiments.” For example, numerous print and several electronic news organizations covered the 1992 and 1996 campaigns by allowing citizens to play a major role in setting the agenda. Public opinion surveys and focus groups, along with more informal outreaches to the public, were used to determine what issues were most important to citizens. These issues were then used to frame media coverage of the campaigns, with candidates expected—and sometimes required—to address these issues throughout the campaign. Jennie Buckner, editor of the *Charlotte Observer* in North Carolina, described this approach as follows: “From the *Virginia Pilot* of Norfolk, Va., to the *Seattle Times* of Washington, news organizations across the country made citizens, and their concerns, a key part of election coverage. We listened to voters. Then we took voters’ concerns to the candidates, asking them where they stood on the people’s issues” (1997, 65).

This notion of listening to citizens is not limited to campaigns. Public journalism employs this practice in all aspects of its coverage of the social and political world. Indeed, “journalists-as-listeners” becomes a defining characteristic of the journalist, a new schema that helps members of the press reframe issues: “Maybe—*what we are* is listeners—the key here is listening. *It’s a different perspective* of what we are used to doing.”¹³ The goal, according to Walter Isaacson, managing editor of *Time Magazine*, is for journalists to “be a little more sensitive and if we are lucky a little smarter about what interests Americans—about what they feel is news and what they feel is important” (quoted in Germillion 1997, 25).

Key to this approach is the belief that citizens should more regularly serve as authoritative sources in determining what is newsworthy. According to the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, civic or public journalism is “an effort by print and broadcast journalists . . . to listen to how citizens *frame* their problems . . . and then to use that information to enrich their newspaper or broadcast report” (Gartner 1997, 70; emphasis added). Also important is the belief that journalists have traditionally ignored the public’s agenda and depended instead on the views of experts and elites: “Where, in the past, candidates were allowed to dictate their political platforms to a reporter scribbling in his notepad,” says Edward D. Miller, the former editor of the *Morning Call* of Allentown, Pennsylvania, “now they’re being forced to respond to more citizen-identified issues.”¹⁴

The attempt to reframe the news from citizens’ own perspectives is especially illustrative for what it reveals about the frames used by traditional journalists. This becomes clear in considering criticisms leveled against the “citizen frame.” Typical of these reactions were those of Michael Gartner, former president of NBC News and current editor of the *Daily Tribune* in Ames, Iowa. Reacting to a public journalism experiment in coverage of the 1996 U.S. Senate race between Jesse Helms and Harvey Gantt in North Carolina, Gartner argued that efforts to understand and incorporate the public’s agenda, while well-meaning and broadly consistent with the goals of traditional journalism, ultimately “cede editorial judgement to pollsters or, worse, to readers and viewers in focus groups who have no particular knowledge of a state, of politics or of politicians. . . . What *isn’t* being covered? What *isn’t* being said? The ‘community involvement’ takes up time and resources of newsrooms. What would reporters and editors be doing if they weren’t involved in this ‘civic’ effort? What rocks would get turned over? What issues would be explored that didn’t turn up in polling data?” (1997, 73). Gartner also raised concerns that the voices of candidates themselves are lost in this process: “You had to read through more than a foot of copy on the Helms-Gantt views on education be-

fore you found Gantt [being quoted]. You had to go 19 paragraphs into a budget story before you found a quote from either gubernatorial candidate” (1997, 72).

The reaction of mainstream journalists is illustrative of both the frames they employ and the connection of these frames to institutional practices, practical constraints, and normative assumptions. From this perspective journalists are professionals who are ultimately responsible for deciding what information is most valuable for citizens. They do this in an environment of limited time, space, and resources. Elites (in this case candidates for office, but the point can be extended to other elites) are both the subject of the news and the authoritative sources who set the agenda. It is the journalist’s responsibility to both report on the actions and statements of elites and to question or challenge those actions and statements (to serve as a watchdog, provide context, and find the truth behind the fact). This admittedly involves choices, but these choices are best made through the exchange between elites and journalists. The goal of this process is to inform the public, but the public should and can play only a marginal role in this process. The public’s role begins *after* the journalist’s ends. “After all,” writes one *New York Times* critic of public journalism, “the big issues are no secret, and if journalism schools have not been producing professionals who can sort out substance from sensation without polls and panels, that’s a good subject [for future discussion].”¹⁵

While mainstream journalists view public journalism as ceding too much of its own power to citizens, they also argue, somewhat paradoxically, that it gives too much power to journalists. According to one critique of public journalism’s coverage of the 1996 Helms-Gantt Senate race:

The fraud was the notion that a self-selected group of reporters and editors somehow could or should determine the fit subjects for debate in an election. The journalists, of course, pointed to their polls to claim that it was the voters who had defined the issues, but that claim falls apart at the slightest examination. First of all, the universe of choices for those polled was limited to a list of issues that the consortium [of North Carolina newspapers and radio and television stations] had already selected. And those polled in July identified not four issues on which it was “very important” for them to know how the candidates would act but eight. . . . In fact, the issue of Families and Values was considered “very important” by seventy-nine percent of those polled, one point more than Taxes and Spending. But the consortium selected Taxes and Spending over Families and Values as one of the four big issues to put before the voters in the Gantt-Helms race. This was an extraordinary decision.¹⁶

This criticism is instructive for both what is said and what is presumed. The criticism—that journalists are powerful gatekeepers who in attempting to frame news from citizens’ perspectives inevitably make choices that can distort

that perspective—is a valid one. What is missed, however, is the realization that while one can always dispute particular choices, this is as true for the choices made by mainstream journalists as it is for those made by public journalists. The difference is in the choice of frame: elite or citizen. Here we see how deeply embedded the norms of mainstream journalism are, so much so that the choices found in traditional practices can become invisible—even as they are being debated. While the decision made by the consortium could legitimately be questioned, it was *not* “an extraordinary decision.” It is the kind of decision that journalists of all stripes are constantly making by the very nature of their job.

What Constitutes “Usable” Information? Strategic versus Issue, and Conflict versus Consensus Frames

The disagreement between mainstream and public journalists goes beyond the question of *what* issues and events to cover. It also involves differences regarding *how* to cover these issues and events. Two specific and related concerns consistently emerge from the public journalism critique of mainstream issue framing: the emphasis of strategy over policy and the emphasis of conflict over consensus. Both of these frames follow “naturally” from the elite frame used by mainstream journalists.

For public journalists, the news is too dominated by the “strategic-game” frame discussed earlier. By emphasizing strategy over substance, and winning and losing over issues, politics “becomes something to watch, like a sporting event, instead of something [citizens] can join.”¹⁷ According to Davis Merritt, more appropriate coverage of public affairs would “focus on how well each party was addressing the nation’s problems . . . rather than on how each party was addressing tactical problems as defined by politicians and journalists.”¹⁸

Changing the way public affairs are covered requires changing the worldview—the schema—of journalists, a point that is not lost on public journalists: “Campaign reporters need to change *the basic premise* of coverage from an emphasis on who’s winning and how the other candidates hope to catch up, to an emphasis on what problems citizens want the government to address and how the candidates propose to address those issues.”¹⁹ In describing a public journalism effort in Charlotte, North Carolina, Jennie Buckner acknowledges how deeply ingrained mainstream frames are: “We focused less on the inside stuff of strategy. Some of us *even tried to kick the political junkies’ toughest addiction* and placed less emphasis on weekly horse-race polls” (1997, 65; emphasis added). Or, as Tom Fiedler, the *Miami Herald*’s political editor put it, “We had to question our own culture.”²⁰

Again, the response to this criticism of the strategic-game frame by main-

stream journalists is illustrative. While rare, direct defenses of horse-race journalism could be found in these responses. One such defense is provided by David Hawpe, editor of the *Courier-Journal*: “The civic journalists and ‘good government’ types want to push passions out of a system that is designed to accommodate base passions. In this country we get to reconcile our base passions on the campaign trail, instead of in street warfare. That’s what Jefferson and Madison had in mind. When we do stories about the tactics and strategy of politics, we are describing how passions and interests have engaged each other in a campaign. Among other things, in the much-vilified ‘horserace’ polls, we show how each candidate’s choices are moving the electorate—how voters, the ultimate decision-makers, are reacting to the contest of passions, interests, ideas, values, and personalities.”²¹ Others defended the strategic-game frame less directly, by suggesting that this frame has substantive concerns contained within it—for example, several critics of public journalism noted that the issue of campaign finance reform, an issue that is generally quite low on the public’s radar screen, emerged from coverage of the strategic game.²²

More common were acknowledgments of the weaknesses of the strategic-game frame, a point that further demonstrates that, once open for discussion, journalistic practices are measured by *all* journalists against the normative assumptions discussed earlier. Indeed, Howard Kurtz, a *Washington Post* reporter and media critic, admits both the shortcomings of the strategic-game frame and how deeply ingrained it is in journalistic norms: “The biggest critics of press coverage of campaigns are in the press themselves. . . . It’s interesting that we rarely act on that hammering and self-flagellation. . . . We have an awfully hard time weaning ourselves from the same sort of coverage we’re used to” (quoted in Buckner 1997, 65).

Even in acknowledging the limitations of this frame, supporters of mainstream journalism nonetheless found fault with public journalists’ solution to this problem. “It is true,” wrote William E. Jackson Jr., an unsuccessful candidate for the House of Representatives, “that campaign coverage has often been reduced to horse-race analysis, but this cure is worse than the disease.”²³ The specific concerns raised by critics of public journalism centered on several issues. First, as discussed above, by allowing the public to determine what issues are central to them, many important issues may be ignored or downplayed: “If journalists had polled Americans about the issues that were facing the nation in 1950, the scourge of Appalachian poverty would not have been on that list. Only when the dissident voices of inspired journalists spoke to the issue did mountain poverty begin to move onto the national agenda.”²⁴ Or as Jackson put it, “I quickly discovered that it didn’t matter what a House candidate did or said. Even debates received minimal attention. . . . The major newspapers

decided to concentrate on issues that did well in their surveys. . . . What about other issues like the economy and the environment? What about race?”²⁵ Here again we see the tension between the elite and citizen frames, with supporters of traditional journalism—à la Lippmann—opting for the former even if it means an overemphasis on strategy.

Second, and revealing of the ongoing interplay of the civic, economic, and entertainment functions of the press, emphasizing issues over the horse race was accused of producing “boring” coverage: “You would expect [a Gantt-Helms] rematch to be pretty hot stuff—the candidates slinging mud and raw meat, the press egging them on, the happily appalled public thronging to witness the ugliness of it all. Instead, there are the scenes of last week—the candidates muted, the press disengaged, the public looking elsewhere for its entertainment.”²⁶ Michael Gartner concurs, arguing that public journalism stories “tend to read like a civics textbook” (1997, 72).

Finally, several critics noted that certain candidates were able to use public journalism to their strategic advantage. For example, a *Washington Post* op-ed noted that a newspaper engaged in public journalism perpetuated the “fiction that Helms was running on other issues by printing blank spaces for Helms’s positions—although he has a 24-year public record on the issues being debated.”²⁷ Similarly, the campaign manager for Harvey Gantt argued that public journalism “encouraged precisely the sort of race the do-gooders wished to avoid—a repeat of the Gantt-Helms race of 1990, which was dominated by harshly negative television commercials. By not declaring ‘race relations’ and ‘values’ official issues . . . the consortium has discouraged the candidates from openly discussing issues like affirmative action. The result: a muted Helms and a careful Gantt on display, with both campaigns blanketing television with demagogue attack ads.”²⁸

Here, again, we see the interplay of the normative and practical concerns that make up mainstream journalism’s worldview. Yes, say mainstream journalists, campaign coverage tends to overemphasize strategic issues, though this kind of coverage serves some useful democratic functions. Further, breaking out of this frame is difficult for journalists, given how deeply embedded it is as a way of viewing politics and the costs involved in reframing the news-gathering process. And even if journalists could wean themselves from traditional practices, the cure is worse than the disease. Not only would it fail to better achieve the normative goals of an informed public, but it would limit and distort public debate, since the public is ill prepared to make judgments on newsworthiness and because candidates are either disadvantaged by citizen frames or quickly learn to use them to their strategic advantage. Beyond this,

public journalism produces boring, dry coverage that will fail to hold readers' and viewers' attention, sending them to seek their entertainment elsewhere. In the end, the strategic-game frame, while admittedly flawed, serves its normative, practical, and institutional purposes well enough. It provides an efficient, familiar routine that allows journalists to cover public affairs in an arguably balanced, informative way. It also allows the press to serve its watchdog function in a way that requires professional judgments but that keeps journalists from appearing biased, since issues of strategy are less ideologically loaded than are those of policy. And it provides drama, thus fulfilling the press's entertainment (and economic) functions.

A second and related concern raised by public journalists regarding how issues are covered is the excessive emphasis on conflict over consensus: “Conflict is the highest coin in the journalistic realm.”²⁹ Mainstream journalism is viewed as overly concerned with “rancorous debate, point-counterpoint, and mean-spirited partisanship.”³⁰ This emphasis on conflict, like the other frames discussed, is part and parcel of a journalist's worldview: “A generation of journalists,” writes Jon Shure, have been “taught to make their mark through cynical questioning and confrontational tactics.”³¹ Inherent to an emphasis on conflict is excessive attention to the negative aspects of public affairs: “Excessive negative coverage of government, for example, can breed cynicism that makes people unwilling to serve or even vote. The news-is-conflict model can overemphasize differences.”³²

The roots of the conflict frame can be traced in part to the watchdog function of the press: “In the modern era, *watchdog* has become synonymous with *adversary or opponent*” (Steffans 1993, 3). But again, it is the interaction of this normative goal with other goals, as well as with specific practices, that determines how specific frames are constructed. As Cole Campbell, former executive editor of the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, notes: “Conventional journalism too often emphasizes conflict and polarization rather than search for common ground. It exalts experts and public opinion over citizens and public judgement.”³³ In the mainstream interpretation of the watchdog role, “journalists tend to think of themselves as the heroic antagonists to government power.”³⁴ The conflict frame is also tied to the journalistic commitment to objectivity, a commitment that public journalists view as often becoming a frame in and of itself: “Many critics now worry about a *politically neutral bias* that shapes news coverage by declaring that all public officials, indeed all people in the news, are suspect. In this version of journalism, all politicians are manipulative, all business people are venal, and all proposals have ulterior motives.”³⁵

The solution, from the public journalism perspective, is to reframe news so

as to accentuate areas of consensus and shared values: “Is it any wonder most Americans don’t find their values and voices represented in the current process? The fact is, many of us on many issues are somewhere in the middle, but that messy, uncertain middle doesn’t show up in polarized diatribes couched in extremes.”³⁶ This approach does not mean ignoring genuine differences of opinion but rather suggests showing these differences in a way that makes them understandable. Ellen Hume describes one example of this approach, involving coverage of growing racial tensions because of the closing of a local park that was used by black youths: “Editors learned of police concerns that a race riot was brewing. . . . Many local news organizations would see this as a great story, full of controversy and drama. However, instead of inflaming the situation by deliberately seeking the most incendiary quotes from polarized sides, the newspaper tried something different. . . . Reporters sought thoughtful suggestions from all sides, including people in area neighborhoods, the [black] youths whose behavior was under question, and the white families. . . . These diverse views were presented with respect and authority” (1995, 9). Needless to say, this “consensus” frame raises red flags among mainstream journalists. In part this reaction is based on the belief that people have good reason to be cynical. Reacting to the argument that journalists are the cause of the public’s alienation from politics, Paul Greenberg, editorial page editor of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, responds: “Unlike, say, the presidential campaign just drearily concluded? Or the scare tactics that dominated it? Or the loaded statistics that candidates at all levels threw around, or the wild accusations they made? The reason people are cynical about politicians—skeptical might be a more accurate term—is that they have reason to be.”³⁷ From this perspective, journalists report conflict and bad news because the world is full of conflict and bad news. At worst, journalists are guilty of being “pathological truth-tellers,” to use Maureen Dowd’s phrase.³⁸ According to Jack Fuller, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, “A newspaper that fails to reflect its community deeply will not succeed. But a newspaper that does not challenge its community’s values and preconceptions will lose respect.”³⁹

What is telling in these exchanges is how they reveal the complexities of the normative underpinnings of journalism, the need to simplify these complexities into manageable standard operating procedures, and the internalization of these practices in journalists’ worldviews. For public journalists, citizens are capable of knowing their own interests: “There is a certain wisdom that resides within a community . . . that may never come from experts or reporters or official sources or any other people journalists routinely talk to.”⁴⁰ Further, unlike journalists, citizens are presumed to be more interested in substantive issues than strategic games. And while citizens may have conflicting opinions

(both across different issues and across different groups), ultimately these opinions reflect core values and goals that are identifiable and shared. The journalist’s job is to frame issues in a way that gives voice to these public concerns, provides information that will assist citizens in better understanding the issues that matter to them, and clarifies where elites and their fellow citizens stand on these issues. Given this goal, traditional beats and standard operating procedures need to be restructured away from centers of elite power, opening up new channels of communication between citizens and the press. While the press should still interact with elites, journalists should come to this exchange as representatives of the public. “If you are a reporter,” says Lisa Austin, former research director of the Project on Public Life and the Press, “your whole culture and reward system is tied to the experts on the issues. . . . We’re trying to help reporters and editors be the translator between experts and the public” (quoted in D. Brown 1994, 11).

For mainstream journalists, the public interest is best determined through competing elites, since elites are best positioned to know the issues. This competition often reflects deep-seated differences in values, so journalism is about presenting these competing views in as stark a manner as possible. Since the clash of competing values inevitably involves winners and losers, mainstream journalists are “naturally” led to an emphasis on strategy and conflict. At the same time, however, elites are presumed to be less than forthright in their words and actions, so journalists, in their watchdog function, must deconstruct the “real” motives behind these words and actions. The journalist’s job is to represent elites to the public, but to do so from a position that is removed from both.

Who Speaks for the Public? Information versus Conversation Frames

As noted earlier, the press is presumed to both provide information about public affairs and be a place where public affairs are deliberated. But who participates in this public deliberation? Not surprisingly, public journalists argue that citizens themselves should be at the heart of this civic conversation. Letting citizens help determine the press’s agenda, and then providing information that is relevant to this agenda, begins to bring the public more centrally into the news-gathering process. Public journalists take this a logical step further, however, by not only listening to citizens but also allowing them to more regularly speak for themselves. Cole Campbell describes this as marrying two traditional journalistic practices, investigative reporting and storytelling, with a third, new one: “We came to call the model the three-legged stool: All three legs are needed to keep superior journalism upright. . . . The third [leg]—the new one—is a conversational model. . . . This approach looks at readers as actors—

people who have a stake in the news, who want to see the possibilities behind often-troubling developments, who want to participate in solving shared problems.”⁴¹

Publishing readers’ comments is traditionally done in the “Letters to the Editor” section of papers or through listeners’ and viewers’ comments in the electronic press. In this new approach, however, “journalists . . . should regard readers—and non-readers—as a ‘public capable of action.’ . . . This process . . . should be achieved not only on the editorial pages but throughout the newspaper.”⁴² For example, in covering a 1995 congressional debate over funding for the arts, Dennis Royalty, the Arts and Entertainment editor for the *Indianapolis Star*, incorporated the views of congresspersons, artists, and local citizens. Royalty explained this approach to his readers as follows:

A good newspaper should stimulate thought and discussion of important issues. On the editorial pages, or in signed opinion columns, it is appropriate for a writer to take a stand. But not in news coverage. For that reason, we’ve done our best to cover this story like we would other news stories, as objectively as possible. We’ve reported how tax dollars for the arts are distributed, and we’ve written about what federal cuts to the arts and public broadcasting mean in terms of program cuts. But we’ve also made the decision in this case to go a step further. We’re using what is labeled in our business as “public journalism.” We decided to make the reader a more active partner in discussing an important issue.⁴³

Public journalism articles are often peppered with direct quotes from citizens, sometimes intermixed with views of elites and experts, sometimes in separate articles or columns. In each case, journalists and editors explain this approach—to their own readers and to critics of public journalism—in terms of a new way to approach the traditional goals of journalism: “As I think of it, the traditional conduct of public affairs has meant an apathetic or alienated public versus an isolated elite of public officials, with an aloof professional press more or less lecturing, or preaching, to both of them. The new model has the public and its leadership continuously interacting—talking and listening—with the latter ultimately reflecting the will of the former. Our role as news media (literally ‘channels of communications’ in the dictionary) is to inform and facilitate discussion. . . . [Public journalism] assumes that some of the best truth, and wisdom, can come from the people, if only they can be brought, or allowed, into the public debate.”⁴⁴

Mainstream journalists acknowledge the importance of giving the public a voice but see this voice as generally limited to either the editorial page or to public opinion polls. This view emerges from the elite frame discussed above: “In a gesture to the ‘public journalism’ movement, which is getting tiresome even as it launches itself, *CNN* kept jumping to its ‘heartland’ focus group,

than whom there have been few more ill-informed bunches, for reaction to convention rhetoric.”⁴⁵ If the public is viewed as generally ill informed and only modestly interested in public affairs, then how can citizens serve as authoritative sources? The journalist’s role is to provide “news and information that will help citizens understand issues,”⁴⁶ not to bring them directly into the debate: “Public journalism, as opposed to the real kind, blurs a lot of essential and useful distinctions between news and opinion, and between people and the press.”⁴⁷ Max Frankel defends this “information frame” in his review of James Fallows’s book *Breaking the News*: “By allowing a choice only between *entertain and engage*, Fallows leaves no room for the customary journalistic ambition to *inform and instruct*. . . . The [latter] aims to depict and explain, the [former] to win over—a difference worth preserving.”⁴⁸

What Is the Press’s Relationship to the Community? Outsider versus Member and Problem-Identification versus Problem-Solving Frames

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of public journalism is its “belief that newspapers and communities succeed or fail together” and thus that the press is part of the community that it covers.⁴⁹ This view is succinctly captured in the closing lines of a *Dayton Daily News* editorial on teen violence: “None of *us* has the luxury to sit this one out. The solution must come from *us* all. *We’re community*.”⁵⁰ While editorials and columns urging citizens to act are not new, public journalism goes a giant step further by not only identifying the press as part of the community but also seeing the press as responsible for facilitating public action. As such, the press has a stake (both economic and civic) in not only identifying problems but helping to solve them. According to Jonathan Krim, an assistant managing editor at the *San Jose Mercury News*, public journalism is “experimenting with a non-traditional role for the media, one that goes beyond simply putting out information to the community. . . . In this role, we also facilitate public discussion and help people get involved in addressing the issues that face them. As a community institution, we think we’re uniquely qualified to play such a role in a non-partisan way.”⁵¹ From this perspective, traditional journalism “illuminates the problems, [but] ignores the solutions.”⁵² Public journalism, on the other hand, “encourages journalists to recognize the impact of their work on public life and to adopt as a general concern whether public life goes well. It is . . . concerned with whether communities solve problems, and whether citizens ‘get involved.’”⁵³

Helping to solve problems and facilitate public action means more than simply listening to the public and giving it a greater voice in the press, though this is part of it. It means changing journalistic practices. In part this involves changes in the way individual stories are written, so that once a problem is

identified, potential solutions are also offered: “options for action that are presented in the paper [are] recalibrated around how various options affect what is valuable both pro and con—there would always be more than two options—and each option would have both some attractive and unattractive things about it.”⁵⁴ It also means sticking with an issue beyond its traditional journalistic life cycle. For very specific problems this means continuing to cover an issue until a solution is reached. For more structural or complex problems (e.g., crime or race relations) it means rethinking standard operating procedures so that the issue becomes a regular part of coverage and doesn’t simply reappear in the press when a particularly dramatic event occurs: “In one sense, we are breaking out of the traditional format . . . like putting in new kinds of pages in our paper, new kinds of information pages.”⁵⁵

Finally, it means taking an active role in *creating* public debate and action when none exists. Many experiments in public journalism have involved the media in not only covering a story but setting up public forums; bringing community leaders, public officials, and citizens together in face-to-face meetings; and the like. The following call to action is typical of this approach:

Beginning on January 23, along with the Maine Council of Churches, [the *Maine Sunday Telegram*] will sponsor a program of “Reader Roundtables” over four successive weeks. We hope to gather small groups of readers in informal settings to exchange experiences and ideas on the issue of education in Maine: What should public education accomplish, and what needs to change? . . . *The Telegram* will publish background information and viewpoints to support the roundtables. We also will stay abreast of the discussions and report the opinions of people who participate. . . . Reader Roundtables is an attempt to use the good offices of our newspaper . . . to create public spaces to encourage discussion of an important public endeavor, education, and to help revive the lost art of public discourse. We hope you will join in the conversation.⁵⁶

Similar efforts on a wide range of local and national issues have been made by newspapers and by radio and television stations around the country, often with different media outlets working in cooperation with each other.

Neither the libertarian nor the social responsibility theory *directly* calls on the press to play the role of community leader or problem solver, though it could be argued that the full range of civic responsibilities articulated in those theories implies these roles—much like the Supreme Court found the right to privacy in the penumbras emanating from more directly stated civil liberties. Certainly they are consistent with John Dewey’s vision of public life and the press. At the same time, they highlight the tension between the notion of the press as a facilitator of public debate, on one hand, and the notion of the press as an objective presenter of information, on the other. For public journalists, this tension is resolved by seeing themselves as facilitators of the democratic

process rather than as partisans for any particular substantive interest or outcome. As such, public journalists distinguish themselves from both the libertarian press, which was avowedly ideological, and the traditional interpretation of a socially responsible press, which is studiously uncommitted.

But traditional journalists see great problems with this approach, again revealing their own worldviews in the process. Some of these critiques draw on practical concerns: “It is more costly and time-consuming to keep close connections with readers.”⁵⁷ “Newsrooms have limited resources and . . . devoting large amounts of attention and money to big ticket public journalism activities could shortchange (or further shortchange) basic news gathering.”⁵⁸ Others go further, arguing that public journalism itself is simply a ploy to attract new readers and viewers: “It’s sometimes difficult to tell the difference between public journalism, which may be motivated by noble aims, and marketing schemes intended to pander to readers.”⁵⁹ However, most concerns focus on the fear that becoming problem solvers and actively mobilizing public debate violate the central tenets of journalism—objectivity and neutrality. In turn, this defense of traditional journalism reveals its own “journalist-as-outsider” and “journalist-as-problem identifier” frames: “No matter how strongly I feel about something that’s going on out there, my job is not to try to influence the outcome. I just don’t want to cross that line, no matter how well-meaning the reasoning may be for crossing it.”⁶⁰ Or: “We grew up in an age when detachment was the byword for a good reporter. . . . Many journalists feel that our role is to cover and report the news, not set the agenda. . . . Put simply, [public journalists] like to see members of the press remove their self-imposed, artificial constraints and become an active player in this world around us. It’s going to take a lot of digesting to embrace this feel-good, service oriented journalism role. The fear is that in the process we might lose some of the fairness and objectivity that we worked so hard to achieve for so many years.”⁶¹ Summarizing the views of different journalists, one article provided the following opinions: “‘We must stay out of the community power structure if the newspaper is to sustain credibility,’ [one journalist] responded. Another more pointed opinion: ‘I’m a journalist, damn it, and journalists don’t get involved. . . .’ [Yet another journalist wrote:] ‘It’s easy to get accused of boosterism. We don’t want to fall into that trap. . . .’ ‘We don’t have to lead the parade to report on the parade,’ [said another]” (Albers 1994, 28). And according to an editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “Traditional rules about the distance and impartiality of reporters from their subjects are a key source of our strength. . . . It is crazy to break those rules, and there is no reason to break these rules.”⁶²

The ultimate fear is that by attempting to facilitate public discussion and problem solving, journalists unwittingly will become mouthpieces for *particu-*

lar points of view. This can mean pandering to those in government: “In public journalism, the newspaper becomes part of the administration creating propaganda, and no voice remains for those opposing public policy” (Witters 1994, 5). It can mean pandering to the business community: “Readers may think it worthwhile that the *Wilmington News Journal* teamed up with a Chamber of Commerce sponsored think tank to hold a summit on the state’s economic problems. But how would you assess the paper’s coverage of the chamber and the businesses it represents?”⁶³ It can mean pandering to liberal elites in the media and journalism schools: “National surveys have indicated a ratio of more than three liberal journalists for every conservative. And among students at Columbia’s J-school, prep school to many Big Media elitists, liberals outnumber conservatives 8 to 1. . . . Suppose Public Journalism becomes the New Paradigm? With the objective of settling the outcome, there would be every reason for readers to suspect a deliberate tilt to the left.”⁶⁴ It can even mean pandering to the foundations that have sponsored many of the experiments in public journalism: “Many critics such as William Woo, former editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, believe the press risks its independence and credibility by aligning itself and becoming financially beholden to foundations with a very ideological view of America, a very definite view of the road America should take.”⁶⁵

Reframing Journalism

The debate over public journalism reveals several different frames used by traditional journalists: the elite, strategic-game, conflict, information, outsider, and problem-identification frames. While each of these frames has a somewhat different emphasis, one could argue that, taken together, they reflect a single “metaframe.” This frame is built upon six underlying but connected beliefs. First, public affairs is about the struggle between competing elites over the allocation of scarce resources. Second, this competition is based on fundamental differences in values and ideologies that necessarily involve winners and losers. Third, what political actors say and do is motivated by a desire to win—often at any cost—but this motivation is hidden. Fourth, citizens are uninformed, disinterested in public affairs, and fickle in their views. Fifth, the role of the journalist is to inform the public about the ongoing struggles between competing elites, revealing the underlying strategies and pointing out who is winning and who is losing, both among elites and within the public. And sixth, the credibility of journalistic reporting depends upon maintaining objectivity, with objectivity defined as the neutral presentation of facts coupled with a balanced portrayal of “both” sides of an issue, told from the perspective of an uninvolved, uncommitted, but somewhat skeptical—even cynical—outsider.

It is important to note that these beliefs are all defensible: much of politics *is* about the allocation of scarce resources by political elites; differences in opinion *are* often rooted in irreconcilable values; political actors are partially motivated by winning and *do* behave strategically; citizens *are* often disinterested, uninformed, and inconsistent; it *is* important for citizens to be kept abreast of the struggles occurring among political decision makers and how their actions affect who gets what; and it *is* necessary for journalists to remain removed enough from the fray so as to report on public affairs in a way that does not privilege some views over others. It is also true that these beliefs, and the frames they produce, allow the press to perform its civic responsibility (inform the public, provide a range of viewpoints, and serve as a watchdog), while still being entertaining and profitable—and to do so in a way that addresses the numerous practical constraints that complicate and constrain the news-gathering process.

This being said, it is also true that framing is by definition a subtle alteration in how choices are presented, and so the domination of any one frame (or set of related frames) necessarily means the subordination of others and thus the influencing of how elites and the public think and act. The frames recommended by public journalists—citizen, issue, consensus, conversation, member, and problem-solving—could also be combined into a metaframe. This frame, too, is based on six related beliefs. First, public affairs is about the formation and expression of the public will and the allocation of public resources (by government and citizens) in a way that is consistent with this public will. Second, this process, while often involving competing opinions and real trade-offs, is based on fundamental values that are often shared and, if not shared, can be understood and respected. Thus, decisions can be reached by consensus rather than by compromise or through clear-cut winners and losers. Third, what political actors say and do depends in part on what journalists and citizens say and do. Given the opportunity and the incentive, political actors are able and willing to address issues in a way that is more substantive, less conflictual, and more clearly tied to the public’s agenda. Fourth, citizens, given the opportunity, are capable of reasoned, informed, and fair-minded deliberation about public affairs. Fifth, the role of the journalist is to understand, cultivate, and express the public’s voice and to facilitate and illuminate public conversations about timely issues among citizens and elites. And sixth, the credibility of journalistic reporting depends upon the press acting as a member of the community, albeit a member with a special responsibility to help encourage civic life and to facilitate problem solving without advocating particular solutions.

As with the beliefs underlying mainstream frames, these six beliefs are also defensible: politics *is* about responding to the public will; many problems *can*

be resolved through consensus; political actors *are* willing and able to address public concerns seriously, civilly, and substantively; citizens *are* capable of reasoned, informed deliberation; journalists *should* understand, facilitate, and express citizens' concerns; and the press *is* a unique member of the community with a responsibility to help maintain its civic, social, and economic vitality. Like mainstream beliefs and their resulting frames, public journalists' beliefs and frames allow the press to perform its civic responsibility (inform the public, provide a range of viewpoints, and serve as a watchdog). There is some debate over whether the press can achieve this while still being entertaining and profitable, and the rethinking of journalistic routines and standard operating procedures required by public journalism has consciously complicated the way in which practical constraints should best be addressed. Still, there is little reason to think that public journalism cannot combine its normative emphases with a style and routines that can be at least as entertaining, profitable, and manageable as those of traditional reporting.

The juxtaposition of these two metaframes makes clear that: (1) the norms of mainstream journalism shape the way in which news is presented and do so from a particular perspective; (2) there are alternative ways to frame the news that are consistent with the overarching goals of journalism; and (3) *any single* approach to news gathering and reporting necessarily involves choices that inevitably affect how issues are framed for the public. These points are dramatized by examining the way in which the debate over public journalism was framed in the mainstream press.

Tellingly, this framing occasionally took on characteristics of public journalism. For example, one could find elements of public journalism's "consensus" frame, with mainstream journalists acknowledging that they inevitably make choices, that these choices have shortcomings, and that the goals of public journalism are worthwhile and consistent with the underlying purpose of journalism writ large. In addition, mainstream journalists sometimes directly involved citizens in the debate, addressing readers directly in their columns, quoting the views of citizens regarding the debate, and so on. At times these efforts were clearly aimed at finding common ground and treating views with which they disagreed with respect and fairness. For example, one *New York Times* article was simply an interview with Jay Rosen, allowing him to state his views extensively and without editorial comment.⁶⁶ At other times, however, this "agreement" was framed in ways clearly designed to discount public journalism. For example, it was often the case that critics of this movement would expropriate certain elements of public journalism, arguing that it really "isn't anything new" and that "some of it sounds like what the better papers have been doing for years."⁶⁷

Despite examples of public journalism frames, more traditional frames clearly dominated the pages of the mainstream press. For example, traditional journalists often drew on the “conflict” and “problem-identification” frames, writing stories that highlighted areas of disagreement and particularly controversial public journalism experiments and using quotes from both sides that dramatized this conflict—what Jay Rosen (1999) has described as “doing journalism to public journalism.” These frames can be seen in the titles of many of these articles and columns: “Public Journalism: Seeing through the Gimicks”; “Does National Public Radio Feel Pressure When Foundation Donors Specify Topics?”; “Public Journalism Pushes Elitist Agenda”; “Gannettization of the News: Boosterism Runs Rampant”; “Pitfalls of Public Journalism”; “Public Journalism: Bad News”; “We Regret to Report That Civic Journalism Is a Bad Idea.”⁶⁸

Mainstream framing of public journalism can also be seen in the way some critics defined public journalism: “A philosophy that holds that newspapers not only have a duty to report and comment on events but to actively shape them.”⁶⁹ “The idea of [public journalism] is that journalists and civic officials are to become partners. . . . Then the partners put their heads together to decide what news would be in the best interest of the peasantry to report.”⁷⁰ “The guiding principle of ‘civic journalism’ is that the public, through polls and ‘focus groups’ usually financed by the foundations, should play an important role in setting the news and editorial agendas of the press.”⁷¹ “Public journalism is what newspapers that have forgotten their readers are latching onto to win them back.”⁷² “There are many definitions of public journalism, but it boils down to having the press push a political agenda.”⁷³ “The idea is to employ focus groups and let readers say what to read, sort of like going to a dentist who will let you decide which tooth to pull or which root needs a new canal.”⁷⁴ “Public journalism . . . seeks to make liberal bias in reporting Standard Operating Procedure.”⁷⁵ “An attempt to increase the power of a journalistic upper class to dictate what are and are not fit subjects for public debate.”⁷⁶ “Wherein stories are written and segments aired promoting what is deemed by the media to be for the public good.”⁷⁷ “Where reader committees decide what goes into the paper and advocacy replaces objectivity.”⁷⁸

Mainstream journalists and columnists also framed the debate by their choice of descriptive language. Most common was describing the movement and its principal advocates in religious terms. Public journalism “is a kind of new age cult or rather, an old fashioned religion . . . which spawns a hierarchy equivalent to archbishops and bishops among editors and in the ranks, preachers, evangelists, elders, and deacons.”⁷⁹ It “seeks to convert the media from dispensers of salacious gossip into something more Good Samaritan-like.”⁸⁰

“Salvation, the theory goes, lies in public journalism.”⁸¹ One article, entitled “The Gospel of Public Journalism,” used the religious theme throughout, describing Rosen and Merritt as “preachers,” calling the movement “the hottest new secular religion in the news business,” and describing supporters as “believers” and opponents as “agnostics” who are harder to “convert.”⁸² Rosen has also been frequently described as “the guru” of public journalism and as a “crusader.”

It was also common to describe public journalism (and thus to frame the debate) in condescending terms. Public journalism was frequently described as “a fad,” “a hot new trend,” “a gimmick,” “a largely discredited, yet ‘hot’ movement.” The debate was further framed by distinguishing journalists-practitioners from academics-outsiders. Public journalism is “a mostly academic-favored movement.”⁸³ It is the brainchild of “foundations” and “elite universities.”⁸⁴ “Now, along come these professors—and editors who need to be, so they won’t be messing up any actual newsrooms—advising us to tear down every safeguard that has been laboriously built up over the years.”⁸⁵ Many of these attacks were aimed specifically at Rosen: “Rosen is a heavy hitter in the world of academic journalism, a made-man in the world of foundation money. . . . But while passionate about journalism, he seems quite uninterested in news.”⁸⁶ In one ultimately positive column on public journalism, Rosen is described as “the inkless professor, this ivory-towered intellectual who dares suggest that political journalists rethink their relationship with their readers.”⁸⁷

What would a close reader of the public journalism debate as framed in the mainstream press come away with? Clearly these stories include a wealth of facts and opinions, allowing a reader to get a general sense of the issue and enabling him or her to come to some judgment on the strengths and weaknesses of this new approach. But taken as whole, these articles, columns, and editorials hew closely to the frames of mainstream journalism explored in this chapter, leading to subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) alterations in the way in which the “choice” between mainstream and public journalism is presented. The conclusion reached by our reader, I would argue, would not be unlike those that emerge from reading other mainstream articles and columns devoted to public affairs: that there is a problem brewing; that the issue involves a conflict among competing elites; that while many public journalists may be well-intentioned, editors, owners, academics, foundations, and political actors are mainly motivated by strategic desires to sell more papers or shape the political agenda to their benefit; that there will be clear winners and losers in this debate; that the outcome of this conflict will affect citizens, but this outcome is outside of citizens’ control. If the coverage deviated consistently from the

tenets of mainstream journalism, it was in its willingness to advocate for a solution—to return to the tenets of mainstream journalism.

Of course a reader who only read *public* journalists’ account of the debate would be just as influenced by the way in which this account was framed. My point is not to suggest that either public or mainstream journalists have got it right—each side raises legitimate concerns about the potential shortcomings of the other’s practices. Rather it is to suggest that the professionalization of journalism in the first half of this century, while producing a number of important reforms and behavioral guidelines, does not and cannot lead to a single set of standard operating procedures that assure reaching the normative goals to which the press aspires. Journalism is by definition framing, in that it necessarily involves decisions that produce subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of judgment and choice problems. In *explicitly* acknowledging this (and in forcing mainstream journalists to examine their own frames) public journalists make the question of how best to frame the news, given the competing normative, practical, and institutional constraints under which the press operates, a frame of its own. In essence, public journalists have reframed the journalistic process, making fundamental questions—“What issues should we be covering?” “From whose perspective(s) should a story be written?” “What are the underlying areas of agreement and disagreement?” “Is the information we are providing useful to citizens?” “How might we facilitate public deliberation and problem solving?”—part of their normal routines. By regularly revisiting these issues, public journalists complicate their craft but do so in ways that keep the incontrovertible fact that they are constantly framing the news in the foreground. This may be the single most important contribution of public journalism and its greatest challenge to traditional journalists.⁸⁸