
SOURCES AND CIVIC JOURNALISM: CHANGING PATTERNS OF REPORTING?

By David D. Kurpius



Research studies consistently demonstrate a disproportionate use of elites, males, and non-minorities as sources. Previous research demonstrated that only enterprise reporting altered journalistic routines and therefore improved source diversity. Civic journalism is a decade-old, foundation-driven effort to encourage journalism organizations to alter their coverage routines to better reflect communities and the public dialogue on issues. Civic journalism encourages greater depth of knowledge of communities, alternative framing for stories, and developing sources within layers of civic life (from officials to private individuals). This study of 1,071 sources in 184 television entries to the James K. Batten Civic Journalism Awards found that civic journalism improved traditional source diversity for women and minorities.

Journalists reflect a pattern of access, credibility, and news practices across media content through the people they choose to quote or use in a television sound bite.¹ Media scholars, journalists, and the communities they serve continue to debate the lack of source diversity, the level of expected diversity (which varies), and the path to achieving greater diversity since research on this subject began in the early 1970s.²

Source representation is a type of diversity most frequently studied by researchers who address this issue in ways that range from media channels and news structures to the diversity and affiliations of people represented in the news. If journalism is a reflection of the community, the quality of that reflected reality depends to some extent upon sources used.

During the past quarter century, only enterprise stories have shown promise for improving source diversity. Hansen found that such stories contained a greater diversity of sources.³ However, enterprise reporting is not common today, and there are no signs of improvement.⁴ One potential answer is civic journalism which assumes a stronger connection to non-traditional sources, leading to greater diversity of sources in news stories. This study tests a major assumption underlying civic journalism by asking whether civic journalism succeeds in moving television journalists toward more diverse sourcing patterns for race and gender.

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Introduction

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Source Definitions

Voakes, Kapfer, Kurpius, and Chern wrote: "Source diversity is a dispersion of the representation of affiliations and status position of sources to create a news product. The more even the dispersion of the representation among source affiliations, status, and proximity in a given story or medium, the greater the diversity."⁵ This study expands this definition to include the dispersion of representation of race and gender.

Reporters select sources for what they know, their position in an organization, and/or their status in society. Some selections are dependent on the form of media used. Newspaper and magazine stories reflect material through direct quotations or paraphrased statements by the reporter. For broadcast, it is the "direct voice of the quotee" or the quotee's words—restated by the reporter.⁶ This study uses these definitions.

Journalists gather information for their stories according to the norms and practices of their news organizations.⁷ Historically, the sources journalists turned to for information reflected a narrow section of society.⁸ Research shows sources are predominately white, male officials who are situated in proximity to the media organization and are easily regarded by journalists as providing credible information.⁹

Some researchers focus on the governmental, business, and organizational affiliation and status of sources used. Others look at women and minorities as news sources. Still others analyze the structural elements that potentially alter source-selection patterns, including channels of news coverage, length and types of stories, and use of technological advances.¹⁰

Minority Sources

People of color are generally missing from news coverage, unless it is coverage of crime or festivals.¹¹ Grabe and Barnett found that 86 percent of news sources in newsmagazine programs were Caucasians.¹² Campell found underrepresentation of journalists and sources of color in television news. "While news is not entirely white," he wrote, "the infrequent presence of journalists of color and of minority news sources dictates an otherness that is compounded when the coverage that does exist perpetuates traditional racist notions about minority life."¹³ Entman found that TV news used fewer black sources than white sources. Entman said, "The blacks received much less opportunity to convey their perspectives in their own voices and were much more likely than whites to be discussed by a police official not of their race."¹⁴

Smith found that in both newspapers and television coverage of the San Francisco area, about 80 percent of the sources used were white people. In television, black sources were used only 12 percent of the time, and minority sources accounted for 19 percent.¹⁵

Women as Sources

Several researchers found low gender diversity and a heavy reliance on elite male sources.¹⁶ Zoch and Turk found that 68 percent of sources were male compared to 21 percent female sources, but they attributed part of this to the heavy reliance on official sources who tended to be male.¹⁷ McShane found that women are underrepresented as

sources in business magazines compared to their numbers in the labor force.¹⁸ Liebler and Smith's study of 159 network television news stories found journalists are more likely to choose males as sources and to present them in a professional capacity.¹⁹ Smith found that white men dominate news sourcing, but noted that minority women and men are used as sources in almost equal proportions.²⁰

Sigal argued in 1973 that routine news channels created efficiencies for journalists, who commonly rely on government officials and business leaders as primary sources.²¹ Today, marketplace forces dictate television journalistic practice more than beat routines. The FCC no longer requires television stations to assess their coverage of the communities in the local area of dominant influence. The lifting of this requirement, combined with the consolidation of ownership, has shifted the focus to demographically driven news based on advertisers' target audiences. Such marketplace emphasis creates a structure ripe for sponsor interference and these pressures are likely to continue or increase as larger ownership groups consolidate stations.²² The federally mandated move to digital transmission standards also increased the financial burden stations face, resulting in increased airtime for news and therefore in journalists' workloads.²³ Workload increases result in a greater reliance on non-local (feed) material and reapportionment of material (using the same story in multiple news programs).²⁴ Sigal and others demonstrate that this leads to greater reliance on government officials as primary sources.²⁵

Marketplace Forces

What works to improve source diversity? The answer is not much. Crisis coverage included much higher numbers of unaffiliated sources, but it is limited to a narrow type of coverage. One promising solution is enterprise reporting, a process through which journalists tend to use more diverse sources and fewer official sources than traditional news coverage, Hanson writes.²⁶ However, enterprise reporting is costly because it takes time and effort to develop story angles and sources, and it is declining in use at television stations.²⁷

What Works?

Civic journalism is an attempt by media organizations, print and broadcast, to link journalism and democracy to help public life go well.²⁸ Friedland noted that the term "public" denotes three important associations: "public as government," "public as a collection of private opinions," and "citizens who argue and deliberate."²⁹ Civic journalism is an effort to alter journalistic practices to improve the connection between journalists and the communities in news coverage.

Civic Journalism

Civic journalism, in theory and practice, is a public discussion; thus there is no universally accepted definition. Jay Rosen, one of the founders of civic journalism, wrote that defining civic (or public) journalism "is something you're always doing as you try to figure out the shape the thing has."³⁰ In his book, Rosen offered this definition:

Public journalism is an approach to the daily business of the craft that calls on journalists to (1) address people as citizens,

potential participants in public affairs, rather than victims or spectators; (2) help the political community act upon, rather than just learn about, its problems; (3) improve the climate of public discussion, rather than simply watch it deteriorate; (4) help make public life go well, so that it earns its claim on our attention.³¹

Civic journalism is designed to improve journalists' understanding of the community, its citizens, values, problems, issues, and aspirations. This deeper and more contextual understanding of the community is assumed to show through reporting as journalists identify alternative frames or angles for stories and focus more on developing enterprise reporting.

The definitions of civic journalism tend to avoid ties to the norms and routines of journalistic practice. Civic journalism specifically aims to improve connections to public life through development of new listening posts in non-traditional places (outside of government offices).

Civic journalists, therefore, must think differently about source choices.³² They identify people in the community who act as catalysts, connectors, and experts. Community catalysts are individuals who help initiate change and problem solving. Connectors are community members with a vantage point to see across community boundaries. Community experts are those people who hold the institutional memory for the community. Civic journalism also encourages reporting in five key layers of public life: official, quasi-official, third-place, incidental, and private. This is very different from the traditional conceptualization of source diversity, and while this would seem to dictate improved source diversity, no evidence exists that source diversity has in fact been altered at television stations where civic journalism is practiced.

In traditional journalistic practices, the value of a citizen source is often questioned. Charity wrote, "Many newspapers treat the printing of citizen voices as a kind of welfare system for the news-space impoverished—a service aimed much more at good community relations than at forwarding the debate on public issues—but public journalists think differently. They are perfectly comfortable drawing on citizens for ideas."³³ Television journalists also tend to view citizen sources as simply storytelling elements that add emotion to the expert source's ideas.³⁴

While many newspapers have embraced civic journalism, the development of television forms of civic journalism have been less successful.³⁵ Still, several shining examples of television attempts exist, including KRON's "About Race" project that spanned almost three years. But television civic journalism may be starting to develop. In the past two years, the number of entries to the Pew Center for Civic Journalism Batten Awards has increased steadily, indicating a growing willingness to attempt this type of work.³⁶

Some evidence also exists that civic journalism improves source diversity in newspaper coverage. Kenamer and South compared election coverage in two newspapers, one civic and one traditional. They found the civic journalism paper used a much greater percentage of

unaffiliated sources (43 percent vs. 12 percent).³⁷ Boynton found increased use of female sources in civic journalism work in her study of the *Charlotte Observer*, although female sources tended to be used less prominently.³⁸ Boynton also found that male reporters were more likely to use female sources, but that many of these female sources were from the unaffiliated ranks.³⁹

Massey also found increased use of female sources in civic journalism newspaper stories. However, in his study the gender of the reporter was a confounding variable, because only female reporters increased their use of female sources.⁴⁰

This study builds on the previous research on source diversity. It asks whether a new form of journalistic practice that includes an emphasis on enterprise reporting and digging deep into community life does in fact improve diversity of source race and gender. Improved diversity might provide additional proof of the value of television forms of civic journalism. Lack of improvement will provide evidence of the limitations organizational norms and routines place on the practice of television journalism.

This study focuses on the diversity of sources presented in civic journalism television news reports. Because the number of television stations that practice civic journalism is limited, this study assumes that any station attempting civic journalism would be likely to submit a tape to the James K. Batten Awards contest. The Pew Center for Civic Journalism has a history of encouraging stations to submit entries. Of primary interest is whether television civic journalists used greater diversity of sources—race and gender—compared to proportions in the 2000 U.S. Census. This leads to the following hypotheses for television coverage:

Hypotheses

H1: Civic journalism will use minority sources in proportions equal to the U.S. Census.

H2: As part of an expected increase in minority sources in civic journalism stories, minority reporters will use a greater percentage of minority sources than non-minority reporters do.

H3: Civic journalism will use female sources in proportions equal to the U.S. Census.

H4: As part of an expected increase in female sources in civic journalism stories, female reporters will use a greater percentage of female sources than male reporters.

The data consist of a content analysis of all the television news stories on 184 entry tapes submitted for the James K. Batten Award from 1996 through 2001. This award is the premier recognition for civic

Method

TABLE 1
Comparisons of Percentage of Source Use and Race

	U.S. Census 2000	Civic Journalism
Non-Minority	75.1	64.4
Minority	24.9	35.5
African-American	12.3	23.0
Latinos	12.5*	7.7
Asian	3.6	3.4
N	281,421,906	1,071

Note: $X^2=63.672$, d.f.=1, $p<.000$ (CJ x Census- dichotomous); $X^2=214.574$, d.f.=1, $p<.000$ (CJ x Census).
*According to the U.S. Census, "People who identify their origin as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino may be of any race." Thus this is not counted as part of the 24.9% minority population for the census. The 9% minority population from the census not reported here is made up of people indicating they are of "some other race" (6.6%) or of two or more races (2.4%).

journalism work in the United States. A total of 1,071 news sources was coded by three trained coders. The stations ranged in market size from the second largest to number 156. Stations were from all parts of the country. All the reports were original content created for the station by station employees. The Scott's pi intercoder reliability coefficient for each variable ranged from .84 to 1.0.⁴¹

News sources were defined as any person or group to which information was attributed. If a source appeared more than one time in a single story, the source was coded only once and the times for both appearances combined. The sources were coded for affiliation, race, and gender.⁴²

Results

The first hypothesis predicted proportional use of minority sources when comparing civic journalism to U.S. Census data. This hypothesis was supported with some qualifications (see Table 1). Civic journalism used a higher percentage of minority sources (35.5%) than the actual population in the United States (24.9%). African-American sources (23%) were presented at a rate almost twice that of the population (12.3%). Asian-American sources (3.4%) were presented at a level almost equal to the Census (3.6%). Latinos were underrepresented compared to the Census (7.7% vs. 12.5%).

The second hypothesis, predicting that reporter race would be related to minority source selection, was also supported (see Table 2). African-American reporters were more likely to use African-American sources (38.2%) in their stories than non-minority (17.9%) or Latino reporters (18.6%). Latino reporters also were more likely to use Latino

TABLE 2
*Comparisons of Percentage of Minority Source Use and Reporter Race
in Television Civic Journalism*

	Non-Minority Source	African-American Source	Latino Source	Total	
Non-Minority Reporter	68.7	17.9	7.2	93.8	N=739
African-American Reporter	58.8	38.2	2.0	99.0	N=199
Latino Reporter	47.5	18.6	33.9	100.0	N=59

Note: The total percentages do not add up to 100 for non-minority reporters and African-American reporters because this chart does not include sources of Asian decent and sources that could not be coded for race. $X^2 = 129.493$, d.f. = 20, $p < .000$, $n = 1,071$.

sources (33.9%) than non-minority (7.2%) or African-American reporters (2%). Minority reporters might simply hold a greater affinity for using minority sources, or they may be more likely to cover beats and communities with disproportionately more minorities.

The third hypothesis predicted parity use of female sources compared to U.S. Census data (see Table 3). In the civic journalism stories studied, women represented little more than 40% of the sources. Civic journalism did not reach the 50.9% census level. Thus the hypothesis was not supported.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that female civic journalists would use a greater percentage of female sources. This hypothesis was supported. In fact, female reporters were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to include female sources in their stories (see Table 4). However, even in this case, female source representation does not rise to Census levels.

This study provides evidence that civic journalism alters the routines of coverage in a positive manner. While this research did not look at the nature of the portrayal of the sources, positive or negative, it does indicate that groups disproportionately left out of news coverage do gain access and an opportunity to express their views in a television civic journalism model.

Based on these results, it is possible to say that civic journalism produces a positive effect on the diversity of sources presented on television news. When compared to the literature on television sourcing, the difference is even more pronounced. Women and minorities are portrayed more often in civic journalism than in traditional journalism.

Civic journalism minority source use (35.5%) more than doubled Grabe and Barnett's findings of 13.6% minority source use in television magazine shows.⁴³ In contrast with Smith's study of television news in one of the most diverse communities in the country, San Francisco, civic journalism was still higher than the 19% of minority sources reported.

Conclusion and Discussion

TABLE 3
Comparisons of Percentage of Source Use and Gender

	U.S. Census 2000	Civic Journalism
Male	49.1	59.6
Female	50.9	40.4
Sample Size	281,421,906	1,071

Note: $X^2 = 46.981$, d.f. = 1, $p < .000$.

Minority sources in civic journalism exceed their proportion in the population. This is primarily explained by the high level of African-American sources used in civic journalism (23%) compared to the African-American population reported in the Census (12.3%). However, both this study's and Smith's findings are significantly lower for Latinos compared to the Census data. People of Asian descent were reported at parity levels in all three versions.

At a basic level, it makes sense that journalists find it easier to locate sources most like themselves. Journalistic norms push journalists to cross racial and gender boundaries in search of diverse representations for their stories. Civic journalism tools help journalists effectively cross boundaries and understand unfamiliar communities in deeper and more meaningful ways. The findings in this study certainly indicate more work is needed, even within television civic journalism. African-American reporters over-compensated in their presentations of African-American sources compared to the Census. This is likely a response to less-than-equitable source use in stories covered by journalists of other races. Two important points may be made here. One is that non-minority civic journalism reporters made progress in covering minority communities. The other is that civic journalism appears to give minority reporters the opportunity to draw minority sources into coverage. More research is needed to investigate how minority journalists use civic journalism tools within organizational routines to improve source diversity.

Television civic journalism's female sourcing is higher than the best gender diversity reported in the literature. For example, Zoch and Turk's study of 2,998 sources in the front and metro sections of daily newspapers found only 20.8% of sources were women.⁴⁴ Liebler and Smith's analysis of 448 sources in 159 network television stories found even lower levels; women made up only 16.3% of all sources.⁴⁵ Because the civic journalism entries studied here came from both networks and local stations, the percentages are not entirely comparable.

Unlike the sourcing by reporters of color, female source use by female reporters did not reach the Census benchmark of 50.9%. Some might argue that a more fair comparison is with the level of female workers in the U.S. workforce. However, civic journalism is not simply covering the workforce. Also of note is that male civic journalists easily

TABLE 4
*Comparisons of Percentages of Civic Journalism Television Source Gender
with Reporter Gender*

	Male Source	Female Source
Male Reporter	62.6	37.4
Female Reporter	55.5	44.5

Note: $\chi^2 = 9.263$, d.f. = 2, $p < .01$, $N = 1,071$.

topped the best reported level of female source use in the literature (20.8%) by using 37.4% female sources in their work. This replicates Boynton’s finding that a civic journalism newspaper included a “significantly higher number of female sources than found in other studies where women comprise one-third or less of the identifiable sources.”⁴⁶ Grabe, Zhou, and Barnett’s study of television news magazines found that “female reporters seek out more female sources (38.3%) than male reporters do (27.6%).”⁴⁷ The current study replicates this finding but at higher levels. Of the sources selected by female television civic journalists, 44.5% were female. For male civic journalists, female sources accounted for 37.4% of all sources used. The enterprise nature of news magazines studied by Grabe, Zhou, and Barnett likely improved source diversity on these programs.

Improved source diversity in civic journalism should not be surprising because it relies heavily on an enterprise model of coverage. In 1991, Hansen found that enterprise reporting improved source diversity. However, the civic journalism model goes well beyond simply developing an enterprise report. Civic journalism dictates that reporters spend time in communities gaining a greater depth and context of understanding. If it is true that reporters tend to use people they know and trust as primary sources, and if civic journalism creates a routine of getting to know and trust people in diverse communities, then it makes sense that civic journalism practices would improve the diversity of sources in race, gender, and affiliation.

The adoption rate of civic journalism among television stations remains low. While KRON-TV in San Francisco provided proof that television news is capable of doing high-quality civic journalism, Kurpius found that television forms of civic journalism were generally not sustainable in the current market-driven news model. While managers and journalists indicated a desire and a willingness to use a civic model for coverage, marketplace forces limited the potential for development without the now commonplace foundation financial support for this type of work.⁴⁸

The need for improved source diversity remains, even in civic journalism. Women and Latinos are still underrepresented. While the benchmark for improving gender diversity is a stable target, the Latino population is one of the fastest growing in the country. This will

challenge journalists who make good faith efforts to accurately and effectively represent the communities they cover.

Another concern is that television stations are unlikely to see the gains found in this study because of the limited adoption of civic journalism techniques at stations across the country. This limits the potential for finally correcting an almost half-century-old problem in television's coverage: the lack of inclusion and accurate representation of minorities and women in news content. However, more work is needed. For instance, because there are differing levels of adoption of civic journalism practices among television stations, it is unclear at what level the tools start to produce improved diversity. In addition, a qualitative study of news workers within civic journalism television organizations might provide a better understanding of exactly how they altered their routines to improve diversity.

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40. Brian L. Massey, "Civic Journalism and Gender Diversity in News-Story Sourcing" (paper presented at the annual meeting of AEJMC, New Orleans, 1999).
41. The Scott's pi coefficients were as follows: Source race .91; source gender .93; affiliation .84; status .87; reporter race 1.0; reporter gender 1.0.
42. Affiliated sources were categorized in four groups (a) government (including local, state, and federal); (b) business/industry; (c) organization (e.g., Sierra Club); (d) unaffiliated (e.g., citizen). The status level of the source was based on previous coding schemes. Status level was coded in four levels (a) executive (a manager or decision maker); (b) professional (e.g., scientists, doctors, lawyers, accountants, educators); (c) public relations worker or spokesperson; (d) worker (e.g., police officer, industrial workers, administrative staff); (e) unaffiliated; (f) unknown. If affiliation, race, or gender could not be determined, the source would be coded as unknown for that category.
43. Grabe and Barnett, "Sourcing and Reporting in News Magazine Programs: 60 Minutes versus Hard Copy."
44. Zoch and Turk, "Women Making News: Gender as a Variable in Source Selection and Use."

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45. Liebler and Smith, "Tracking Gender Differences: A Comparative Analysis of Network Correspondents and Their Sources."
 46. Lois Boynton, "She Said, He Said, and Who Wanted to Know? The Role of Gender in Source Selection at a Public Journalism Newspaper" (paper presented at the AEJMC Southeast Colloquium, New Orleans, LA, March 1998).
 47. Grabe and Barnett, "Sourcing and Reporting in News Magazine Programs: 60 Minutes versus Hard Copy," 305.
 48. Kurpius, "Commercial Local Television News: In Search of a Civic Model"; Kurpius, "Bucking a Trend in Local Television News: Combating Market-Driven Journalism."