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Part of Our World: Journalism as Civic Leadership

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The news as cultural artifact

Some years ago, while watching the CBS Evening News, I was startled to hear Dan Rather say, "And that's part of our world tonight." Mr. Rather then thanked me for watching, but it was I who wanted to thank him—for frank acknowledgment of what he and his colleagues actually do. They give us part of the world, a version of it; and there is no scandal in saying that this artifact, the news, is something journalists make, which means it can be made poorly or well.

The point may seem simple, or even simple-minded; and yet it is a good starting point for any discussion of journalism and our public culture. For it allows us to name well what journalists do well: present a version of events that bears the mark of mind and the stamp of belief. "And that's part of our world tonight" is a very civil thing for an anchorman to say. It admits: "This is not the final word, or the whole truth, or a mirror we've made, just the best we could do in crafting our nightly report."

Freed from some of its grander pretensions, ("Expect the world," says the New York Times in its current ad campaign, "And that's the way it is," spoke Walter Cronkite from the chair Rather now holds) the news is made simultaneously more human, more artful, more reliable—in fact, more real. For it is easier to trust in a journalist's version of events than a journalist who says: I deal not in versions. My trade is the truth.

On the other hand, to say the news is made is not to say the news media make it up. "The Legend on the License," in John Hersey's memorable phrase, declares: "what we tell you is true, not an invented or consciously distorted account, not colored by prejudice or freighted with a wish." But if we want the truth from journalists, as best they can discern it, we should also reckon with the truth in what Dan Rather was saying. And with what Walter Lippmann meant in 1922, when he likened the news to "a beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another, out of darkness into vision."

By picturing the people who shine the beacon here and there—using their judgment, including their judgments about us—we adopt a more humble but more compelling image of the journalist than "that's the way it is..." ever was. And with this image there is much we can do. Once we realize that the news is made, rather than found, we can ask what it looks and feels like when it is made well. And we can ask what "well" means, from a variety of perspectives. An investor with business interests in Asia might ask for news made one way, a machinist scanning a union newspaper wants it another.

But what about those whose investment is in democracy itself? That means us, the political community at-large, ritually invoked in that newsroom battlecry, "the public's right to know." How do we and our fellow citizens know when the journalism we are getting is the one we need to navigate the public world and take our proper place within it? Here is a matter too important to be left to journalists alone, in the same way that health is too vital to be delegated to doctors.

In the century now closing, American journalism has taken on more and more of the trappings of a profession: we train journalists in some of our best universities; we expect from them, as they expect from themselves, certain standards of conduct; and we give them wide latitude in deciding what right conduct shall mean. The journalist's standards rest in turn on certain ideas about democracy, politics, public discourse, constitutional government and the common interest. Those ideas are subject to debate, even as we recognize that an independent press, free of undue pressure, is in everyone's interest.

I teach in a journalism department at a research university in the media capital of the world. We do not require of our students, nor do we offer ourselves, any courses in "democracy for news professionals." We do not ask them to inquire deeply into the requirements of a healthy public culture, a workable sphere of discussion, a politics we can respect, a government that comes as near as possible to the ideals of the American republic.

We, and the schools to which we compare ourselves, do not insist on teaching these things because we have something to teach in their place: how to be a competent professional. Press ethics and a knowledge of media law are thus

the spots in the curriculum where the political community edges into view. But once we think of journalism a curriculum in itself, a sort of daily tutorial in the events of our time, then all the teachings of that curriculum fall open to examination. From this angle, the relevant questions are not whether journalists are competent, ethical and professional; but whether the craft as a whole is serving the public interest, which means the stake we all have in making democracy work.

In the words of historian Christopher Lasch, democracy is best defended "not as the most efficient but as the most educational form of government." All the institutions that help make democracy work are educational, in Lasch's sense; and this includes the press. Typically, when we debate press performance, we fix on a handful of familiar problems: inaccuracy, bias, or a rush to judgment; a fixation on scandal and sleaze; stories that are bungled amid others that are missed; and "news" that signals little more than a commercial formula at work. But a more vital debate would reach deeper: to the lessons we receive from journalists as they educate us to a sense of the world while reporting on the here and now, the far and near.

What kind of instruction should we expect, along with our daily diet of information? When the searchlights are thrown up, the klieg lights come on, what ought to be well illuminated in their path? In presenting what can only be a part of our world, what parts should journalists take care to include and highlight? And beyond sound reporting, a profession in whose standards we can trust, what can we ask of a press that is both a private business and a public actor?

The press as an actor

I use the word "actor" with some hesitation—and to make a point. The hesitation is that American journalists are reluctant to describe themselves as anything more than observers or commentators. And for good reason. There is, finally, a difference between doing journalism and doing politics; between conveying the scene to others and striding across it as one of the players. The

press box, set apart from the public stage, is not an imaginary locale. By reserving a place for journalists in their capacity as chroniclers, we expect them to tell us about the world, not rearrange it to their liking. So there is sound sense, and a good deal of common sense, in the traditions of objectivity, independence and detachment, which are very much American inventions—among our contributions to the journalism done around the globe.

But if there is honor in these traditions, as I believe there is, there is no dishonor in calling them part of our political tradition, one way in which we realize our aspiration to live together, as free-thinking citizens who try to solve their problems through democratic means. And this is my point in describing journalists as actors, of a kind. What they do cannot be easily separated from what gets done in politics, even though the two arts are distinct. To borrow a thought from Jean Bethke Elshtain, (who was writing about the schools) to call journalism "political" work is not to say it should be freely politicized. Rather, we gain a wider view of what that work is about when we describe it as political, in the broadest meaning of the word.

As any savvy operator (or attentive citizen) knows, the version of the public world we get from journalists doubles back to become, as Rather said, a part of that world. When, for example, news crews show up in a Senate hearing room, the room becomes a different kind of space, inviting a different kind of politics; and no one wise in the ways of power can ignore this fact. In a broader and deeper way, the news is always getting mixed up with our public and popular cultures, returning "us" to us with all our excesses and discontents, but also setting out a pattern, amplifying a tone, inviting a pattern of behavior—all part of journalism's hectic and varied curriculum.

This tenor of thought—which understands journalism as an education in democracy and politics, a civic lesson of sorts, as well as a maker and molder of our public climate—is not entirely foreign to the American press, although I would call it a minor chord. It can be heard clearly in these passages, all three from mainstream journalists with considerable experience:

> "For quite some time now, the public square has been has been more like a vicious circle. The fakery of the candidates (whether through attacks ads or through empty promises, on the order of "Read my lips: no new taxes") begets

> the cynicism of the reporters and voters, and the cynicism of the reporters and voters begets fakery and attack politics, because those tactics work best when the public is poised to believe the worst about the candidates."
>
> —Paul Taylor, former reporter for the *Washington Post*, in a 1992 essay.

> "Modern American culture is loud and adversarial, and politics reflects the culture. And the ever-adversarial, conflict-seeking press helps shape the politics."
>
> —Katharine Seeyle, reporter for the *New York Times*, in a 1995 article.

> "We have to remember, as journalists, that we may be observers but we are not totally disinterested observers. We are not social engineers, but each one of us has a stake in the health of this democracy. Democracy and the social contract that makes it work are held together by a delicate web of trust, and all of us in journalism hold edges of the web. We are not just amused bystanders, watching the idiots screw it up."
>
> —Robert MacNeil, former anchor of the MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour on PBS, in a 1995 speech.

I have a file in which I deposit such statements because they elaborate on Dan Rather's tempting remark. That is, they go beyond the acknowledgment that news is not a mirror of events to a further truth: that the press is an active agent in public life, not a passive observer.

As Paul Taylor wrote, the behavior of journalists "begets" the behavior of others in the public square, even though the reverse is also true. As Katharine Seeyle puts it, journalists who seek out conflict and adopt an adversarial stance gradually "shape" politics into this pattern, even as they are shaped by it. And as Robert MacNeil observes, one of the things journalists make (or undo) is "the web of trust" on which democracy hangs. Though they are not social engineers, or the only ones involved, neither are they "amused bystanders," watching the fools commit their follies.

Journalism and leadership

All of which raises the tricky but not impossible question of "leadership" in journalism, for anyone who acts on our common life can try to point the way to a better life, or, in the case of journalism, find a way of telling our story that helps us own and improve it.

Most journalists would probably admit that leadership is something we can occasionally expect of their profession. If asked what this means, they might reply as follows: the press can employ its editorial voice to awaken public conscience, warn of possible dangers and recommend a course of action. That is, it can be an opinion leader, as long it labels what it is doing "opinion." Beyond that, it can take the lead in exposing corruption, documenting the abuse of public trust, bringing hidden or suppressed facts to light. Investigative reporting is leadership because it can lead (indirectly) to reforms. Finally, by focusing on matters that might otherwise escape notice, the press can lead by example. It can say to the community: "we're giving time and space to this story because we believe it's important, whether or not others agree." Here, leadership means bringing people around to the belief that what journalists are reporting deserves sustained attention.

These three acts would, I believe, exhaust the common meaning of leadership in American journalism. But they do not exhaust the possibilities. Consider: If journalists like Taylor see how they keep a "vicious circle" going, can't they learn to sustain other, more virtuous cycles? If reporters like Seeyle understand that the "press helps shape the politics" we have, can't they begin shaping the politics we need? If an accomplished broadcaster like Robert MacNeil knows that social trust is a "delicate web" that journalists, among others, uphold, can't he and his colleagues also try to strengthen that web? And wouldn't these be responsible acts of leadership for an institution that claims a duty to the public good?

My answer would be "yes," but it is not my answer alone. Here is a provocative passage from a column by David Broder of the Washington Post, arguably the most respected political journalist of our time:

> We cannot allow the [1990] elections to be another exercise in public disillusionment and political cynicism... It is time for those of us in the world's freest press to become activists, not on behalf of a particular party or politician, but on behalf of the process of self-government.

Broder explained what he meant by "activists" in a 1991 lecture that followed up on his column. There he described a "bleak political landscape" where citizens "tell us that they are disgusted by the campaigns they are offered in this

country." Public confidence in politics and politicians was reaching dangerous lows, he said. Journalists were not the cause of this development; and it was important not to overstate their role. But the widespread "disillusionment about the heart of politics—the election process—is something in which we play a part," Broder noted.

Along with the political consultants, whose power was rising in the campaign system, journalists had become a "permanent part of the political establishment." Both groups characteristically denied "any responsibility for the consequences of elections." This was disingenuous at best, dishonest at worst, for the fact was "we have colluded with the campaign consultants to produce the kind of politics which is turning off the American people." What can I do? Broder asked himself:

> My answer is tentative and expressed without any great confidence. But if we are going to change the pattern, we in the press have to try deliberately to reposition ourselves in the process. We have to try to distance ourselves from the people we write about—the politicians and their political consultants—and move ourselves closer to the people that we write for—the voters and potential voters.

The time had arrived to rethink a fundamental assumption of political journalism: "that the campaign and its contents are the property of the candidate." Broder sought "an alternative proposition," another way of defining the story. Journalists should treat the campaign period as part of a longer drama, ("embracing both elections and government") centered on the American people rather than the candidates and their advisors. The campaign should be treated as the property of the voters, a time when they "have a right to have their concerns addressed and their questions answered by the people who are seeking to exercise power."

"Let their agenda drive our agenda," as Broder put it. Journalists should represent the public to the political process, rather than just bring the process home to a public already disaffected with it. Why do all this? Because the situation was not beyond remedy. Broder held to a belief that the American people were not "apathetic or unconcerned;" nor were they "selfish or indifferent." They were simply tired of seeing politics treated as a "sport for a rela-

tive handful of political insiders." He closed on a personal note. "I would like to leave some better legacy than that behind when I get out of this business."

What is this speech, if not an act of leadership? Broder, a prominent figure in his field, diagnoses a problem, implicates himself and his colleagues in it, and tries to imagine a way out. He lays forth an "alternative proposition" that is both practical and, if this is not too strong a term, visionary. It is visionary because it refuses to accept what is as the horizon of what could be—in politics, in public discourse, and in journalism. In Broder's treatment, things appear in what philosopher Sheldon Wolin once called their "corrected fullness," which, for Wolin, is what political vision is all about. The hope that election campaigns might become the "property" of citizens, a time when their concerns are fairly addressed, is a prescription for a better politics and a better press.

Broder thought that this enlarged vision, if embraced by his colleagues, might bring changes to political reporting, which might also affect politics. After all, he said, journalists had already "colluded" with political professionals to produce a dreary dialogue dominated by the maneuverings of insiders. Perhaps the press could move away from one kind of cooperation toward another: finding and amplifying citizens' concerns during election season, asking for a response from candidates, then persisting in this aim as balloting gives way to governing.

Three things impress me about Broder's act of rhetorical leadership: The first is that he understands journalists as actors who have helped to create the scene they also survey. The second is that Broder knows he must re-imagine politics in order to improve the journalism done about it. The third is his lengthened time horizon: a concern for the "legacy" he and his colleagues were leaving to future generations. None of these moves is common in what we might call the mind of the American press. All have wide implications. And as it turned out, Broder's leadership had some tangible effects, most notably in the experiment that has come to be known as civic or public journalism.

Birth of a notion: The public journalism movement

By 1990, some in journalism were already moving ahead without waiting for the nod from Broder. Out in the plains of Kansas, Davis Merritt, editor of the Wichita Eagle, had begun refashioning his newspaper's approach to political coverage. Merritt was a 35-year veteran of the newspaper world who had spent time in Washington during the Watergate era.

Like many of his colleagues, he was d Did not talk about it," is a fact generated by a particular way of imagining political time: as the weekly process by which the choices facing the state are (or are not) discussed by the candidates.

"Where They Stand" was thus more than a handy voters guide. Fundamentally, it was an argument for what politics is supposed to be about: public concerns and public debate. It was a powerful use of political space, especially the threat of a blank appearing under a candidate's name. Deploying this threat was the Eagle's way of being "tough" on the candidates. Here, however, toughness doesn't becomes an end in itself, as so often happens in political reporting. A candidate can avoid the penalty of white space by cooperating in a process that will help voters make up their minds. The rules are clear: say something meaningful about the key issues; we'll report it and keep reporting it.

Merritt's 1990 experiment recognized that beyond "information," the press sends us an to experience public life in one manner or another. Reflecting on what this invitation should say was perhaps the most daring thing the Eagle did. The experience should be participatory, Merritt and his staff said. It should cultivate a useful dialogue about issues. It should address people in their capacity as citizens, in the hope of strengthening that capacity. It should try to make public life go well, in the sense of making good on democracy's promise.

These "shoulds" were acts of leadership by a local newspaper. And they would eventually form the core of public journalism as a philosophy. As Merritt wrote about the 1990 voter project:

> Something intriguing and promising had happened. We had deliberately broken out of the passive and increasingly detrimental conventions of election coverage. We had, in effect, left the press box and gotten down on the field, not as a contestant but as a fair-minded participant with an open and expressed interest in the process going well. . . It was also a liberating moment, for me and the journalists at the Eagle. We no longer had to be the victims, along with the public, of a politics gone sour. We had a new purposefulness: revitalizing a moribund public process.

In the fall of 1992, this "new purposefulness" was taken further by the Charlotte Observer with its own experiment in election coverage. Like others in journalism, executive editor Rich Oppel was dissatisfied with press performance in past campaigns, particularly with horse-race polling, which had miscalled a bitter 1990 Senate race between Jessie Helms and Harvey Gantt. In 1992, Oppel and publisher Rolfe Neill were determined to try something different.

The Observer set out to amplify and extend the "new political contract" outlined two years earlier by Merritt, and described in strikingly similar language by Broder. In a front-page column entitled, "We'll help you regain control of the issues," Oppel announced the paper's intentions:

> David Broder of the Washington Post has said voters see no "connection between their concerns in their daily lives and what they hear talked about and see reported by the press in most political campaigns." We think this is dangerous... We will seek to reduce the coverage of campaign strategy and candidates' manipulations, and increase the focus on voters' concerns. We will seek to distinguish between issues that merely influence an election's outcome, and those of governance that will be relevant after the election. We will link our coverage to the voters' agenda, and initiate more questions on behalf of the voters.

Oppel's column represents a kind of coming clean that was long overdue in campaign journalism. First, he admits that politics-as-strategy is a narrative device that was bringing diminishing returns; then he declares that his newspaper will be consciously applying a new device: a "focus on voters' concerns." He acknowledges that the temporal frame—the definition of political time—that ordinarily shapes campaign coverage is too narrow, focusing as it does on "issues that merely influence an election's outcome." He then announces the choice of a new frame: matters of "governance that will be rele-

vant after the election." He admits that question-asking is an important public function that can be performed in several different ways. The way the Observer chooses is to "initiate more questions on behalf of the voters."

In the same passage, Oppel concedes that "covering politics" and "having an agenda" are not mutually exclusive; then he vows, "We will link our coverage to the voters agenda," just as Broder suggested. Finally, Oppel declares that a newspaper naturally has convictions about politics ("We think this is dangerous") and that news coverage follows from those convictions ("We'll help you regain control of the issues.") This is a far cry from traditional thinking in journalism, which pretends that convictions are properly contained within the editorial page, while the news. David Broder was one. He grasped that if journalists are to be seen as actors, it is reasonable to expect from them a kind of agenda, or at least a desired outcome of their actions.

But what should the agenda of the press be? How can they justify it to wider audiences? What sort of rhetoric should they employ in doing so? Such questions confound the profession's view of itself. Almost all the key tenets in the journalist's ethical code emphasize, not civic action, but professional detachment: the maligned but still influential doctrine of "objectivity," the related emphasis on "fairness" and "balance," the separation between the news columns and the editorial page, the "watchdog" role, the "adversarial" stance, the principle of ignoring consequences in deciding what's newsworthy ("let the chips fall where they may.") None of these ideas offers guidance to the people Broder tried to address: professionals willing to acknowledge their influence in politics and to use it on behalf of "genuine democracy in this country."

Nor was it journalists alone who declined this challenge. The entire political culture, preoccupied with media "bias," made it perilous to even ask about agendas and outcomes. Far safer for journalists to cling to the observer's position, even if failed to describe way things worked. But there were the mounting costs to these attitudes. How long before public confidence in the press evaporated? How long before politics transmuted into something so little resembling democratic choice that nothing journalists did would matter much? How long before the entire enterprise of political reporting would come to

feel almost pointless, an exercise in futility, a song for the cynical? Broder felt the clock was ticking: as politics went, so went the press.

Meanwhile, a similar tangle of problems confronted journalists at the local level. Readers were disappearing; in many cities, the sense of community was unraveling along with broader changes in American life. Journalists found they could do excellent, even prize-winning work and it would have little effect, either because fewer people were paying attention or because too many had given up on politics and journalism. Here, editors like Buzz Merritt and Rich Oppel had gone Broder one better. They were experimenting with dramatic changes in practice.

- If these early gropings were to continue, a lot of work lay ahead. Some of the work was intellectual: finding a coherent philosophy for a press that might elect a different path. Some of it was practical: experimenting with a revised approach that fit the constraints of daily journalism. Some of it involved mobilizing like-minded people to form something resembling a "movement." And some of it was institutional: finding money and organizational support to further a rising spirit of reform.

Public journalism: Getting a fix on the phenomenon

Much of this was accomplished in the years 1993 to 1997, when "public journalism" (also known as "civic journalism") came to the attention of the American press. The profession had some trouble coping with this development because public journalism was not a single phenomenon, but a broad pattern of activity that moved in many directions and relied on multiple sources of support. Among the key players were:

- Editors and executives and newspapers and broadcasts outlets, along with reporters and producers who worked under them;

- Foundations (chiefly, the Kettering Foundation, the Knight Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts) that provided funding for research, conferences and experiments in the field;

- Think tanks like the American Press Institute and the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, where important get-togethers were held;

- Companies, (Knight-Ridder was the most prominent but not the only one) that exposed the journalists in their employ to the ideas behind public journalism and urged them to take it seriously;

- Professors (like me) at journalism schools, who undertook research and advanced the thinking behind public journalism, often in interaction with working professionals.

To further complicate the picture, the range of experiments that fell under the heading of "public journalism" went considerably beyond the election-year projects I have detailed here. For example:

- Newspapers like the Herald-Dispatch in Huntington, West Virginia, which helped convene a group of citizens (900 showed up for the first meeting) to discuss what might be done about a faltering economy and the flight of young people from the area. The citizens organized themselves into task forces that examined what needed to be done in different areas—such as economic development, job training and education. The newspaper pledged helped out by reporting on how similar-sized communities had coped with massive job loss and by opening its pages to ideas and opinions generated by the ensuing civic discussion.

- Media partnerships like one in Madison, Wisconsin, which brought newspapers, TV stations and public radio outlets together to sponsor televised public forums where citizens could deliberate, grand-jury style, on important policy questions, with background materials printed in the newspaper. The forums examined health care, land use, public education, the federal deficit and other pressing problems, with citizens—rather than experts—in the lead role.

- Editors and reporters like those at the Dayton Daily News, who, faced with the imminent shut down of a major defense plant and the loss of thousands of jobs, hired an architect to complete a rendering of what the plant might look like if converted to civilian use, while simultaneously reporting on what it would take—from government, business, labor and the community itself—if the jobs were to be saved.

- Editorial pages like those at the Spokesman-Review in Spokane, Washington, which were re-designed to become more open public forums. In Spokane, the editors ventured out into the community and found people who had something to say, but lacked the skills or courage to say it. The editors acted like writing coaches, helping ordinary citizens gain a voice in the community, rather than relying on the "usual suspects" who dominate public debate.

- A problem-solving focus like the one taken by the Charlotte Observer in its "Taking Back our Neighborhoods" series, which examined the crime rate in the hardest-hit sections of town. The paper asked residents there to deliberate about the causes and consequences of crime, then profiled these neighborhoods in depth—without whitewashing the realities of street crime on the one hand, or exploiting it for lurid headlines on the other. The paper then highlighted what local residents had to do for themselves, what city government could contribute and what the community as a whole could do to help, moving from neighborhood to neighborhood with news that spoke of problems and possible answers.

This is but a sampling of hundreds of experiments that put into practice the ideas behind public journalism. One of the results was a lively and frequently caustic debate within the press about the proper role of thl campaigns instead of focusing on "horse race" stories, attacks and controversy for controversy's sake.

The compact invites citizens to reinstate the honored tradition of community-level political discussions.

Although the coalition was unable to get agreement from the two leading Senate candidates in 1996, it did succeed in Minnesota's First Congressional

District, where Republican incumbent Gil Gutnecht and Democratic challenger Mary Rieder agreed to be bound by the compact's terms and a separate advertising code. These signed agreements were voluntary and unenforceable by law; as the campaign wore on, both candidates complained about violations in the advertisements that each side aired.

But they also felt constrained by the agreement. Rieder noted that she and her opponent "said in effect we want to run a hard campaign but don't want to have ourselves made a mockery of." As she met with other female candidates around the country and was told to prepare for the attack-style of campaigning, her fears surfaced: "It made me sick to my stomach... hearing they would try to go after you and your family. I felt better knowing the compact was in place." She added that her advertising consultant in Washington thought that his "creativity" had been hampered by the compact's terms, a sentiment shared by Gutnecht's ad expert, who said there were things he wanted to try but couldn't. Which was precisely the point: to place limits on what the consultants could "create" as they tried to destroy the opposition.

Here, then, was another case of civic leadership in the press. Tom Hamburger, a political journalist, felt he had something to offer his state that went beyond a chronicle of depressing events. His idea sparked the imaginations of other actors who shared the same desire for a better civic climate. They agreed to cooperate with one another. The whole episode illuminated the possibilities of action in the face of national trends that appeared irresistible. It brought to life the ancient wisdom of the political compact and made it seem relevant to the politics of today. And it worked to bring two politicians together in an attempt to avoid the spiral of mutual destruction. Rieder and Gutnecht still went at each other with vigor and in some cases an excess of zeal. They accused each other of violating the code. Their contest did not become a civics class or a polite discussion among friendly rivals. But it did show there were alternatives to the ruling ethic: "destroy your opponent and do it early." In Minnesota, politics didn't have to be what it was elsewhere. So said one reporter, moved by the spirit of public journalism. And so says the Minnesota Compact coalition, which is still in place in that state and ready to try its hand in the 1998 elections.

Conclusion: Public journalism and the Penn Commission

I have not given here a complete (or even balanced) picture of public journalism. There is plenty more to say in fair criticism of the idea and the experiment; but I will leave that to others, including other commissioners.

What I can do is offer a few concluding thoughts on why public journalism matters to the work of the Penn National Commission. As I understand it, the commission has addressed itself to certain destructive patterns in our common life. These include the deterioration of public talk and a faltering sense of community amid a host of pressing challenges—especially the challenge of living together in a diverse and complex society, where competing notions of the good are inevitable. What is not inevitable, the Commission seems to believe, is a public climate of perpetual warfare and rampant incivility, problems that are particularly apparent in the way we do politics and conduct our national discourse.

In searching for ways to address these problems, the Commission has asked itself a series of related questions: what forms of leadership are required to steer our way out of our current discontents? How can the spirit of community be revived, without getting overly romantic about it? What are the cultural patterns that engender civic values and shape behavior in the public square? What would a better national dialogue look and sound like, if one can be imagined and brought to life? And how can we act upon the questions we are asking?

In that light, the case of public journalism suggests to the Commission the following lessons:

1. Look to the professions.

As people are constantly reminding me, journalism is a business. It needs to turn a profit in order to survive in an increasingly commercialized and competitive environment. This is an unarguable fact, but it is not the only fact

that is relevant—for the concerns of the Commission or the lives of journalists themselves.

Most people who choose journalism as a field do not make that choice seeking money, power, or fame. I know because I have asked them—several hundred of them—in my travels about the field. They often say they went into journalism to "make a difference," or right wrongs, or look out for the little guy, or, in a favorite phrase, to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Never has a journalist said to me: "I chose this field because my passion is... objectivity!" Never have I heard: "I am by nature a neutral person, so I thought journalism would be best for me."

What I am trying to point out is that, despite all the constraints and pressures they face, most journalists feel a strong duty to the public good. And this is what makes their craft, which is a business, also a profession. Professions matter because they profess things. They legitimate themselves around a commitment to the public interest and democratic values; and if they sometimes define this commitment in self-serving fashion, we do them (and ourselves) no favor by treating the professional's claim to public service as merely a sham or shield.

Rather, if the professions are not serving the public as well as they might, we should look to what they profess, for we will find there the rhetorical ground on which a renewed commitment to the common good can be based. Public journalism was a way of taking seriously the journalist's identity as a professional. It accepted this claim in good faith. But it did not assume that what people in the press did and said was adequate to the times, or faithful to the values that drew them into the field. Instead, it argued with the profession about what journalism ought to profess. The argument called for a renewal of professional identity, along the lines Thomas Bender suggests in his call for a more "civic professionalism" in the academy.

What civic identity means within any given profession—law, medicine, accounting, education, commerce, public administration, social work—will vary with each field of endeavor. But it should also move with the times, since what we need from professionals will change as our problems alter and

grow. One thing the Commission might do, then, is try to discern the shape and sound of a more "civic" identity in all institutions where people feel some sort of professional duty.

Public journalism is an example of that. It does not appeal to everyone in the press, or even a majority. And it does not offer a ready-made template for other fields. But it is a useful reminder that professionalism is not dead or deaf to democracy's call. If we take the professions more seriously than some professionals do, we might awaken their slumbering potential for public good.

2. Enlarge the language of democracy.

What does it mean to be a democrat—and a journalist? This is another way of saying what public journalism was about. Democracy, as John Dewey relentlessly declared, is a way of life, not just a system of government. When Dewey declared that the only cure for the problems of democracy was more democracy he did not mean we should vote on everything. He meant that discovering what democracy demands is a never-ending inquiry.

In particular, it requires fresh and varied attempts to speak and think like a democrat, while going about all the other business of life. Public journalism offered another way to talk about democracy as the ultimate end the press should serve. Not the only other way, or the one "right" way, but just a different way—one that we hoped was more attuned to the times.

And so another thing the Commission might do is ask itself what other "democratic dialects" need now to be spoken—in what haunts and by whom? And then it might set itself the task of trying to talk in such dialects, or at least hear from others who think they know how to speak them. Public journalism tried to do that, with limited success. The Commission might improve on and extend its example to other spheres of politics and culture. What does it mean to be a democrat—and a movie producer? And a doctor? And a pollster? Questions like this may have heuristic value, if nothing else. And there's always the chance they will turn practical on us in surprising or fruitful ways.

3. Call for an experimental spirit.

Public journalism said to professionals in the press: try stuff and learn from what you've tried. It had to proceed this way because, in truth, no one knew exactly how to fortify civic identity in the craft or renew its commitment to public values. When you don't know how to move forward, there are two choices: you can pretend you know, or you can experiment. What Dewey called the "quest for certainty" is everywhere the enemy of the kind of patient inquiry and piecemeal reform he thought appropriate in a democratic society—which to him meant a community of learners.

And so another thing the Commission might profitably do is imagine what an "experimental" spirit would look like in various corners of society where our key concerns resonate. Without prescribing the "stuff" to be tried, we can still say "try stuff" in a more than a cursory manner. We can do this by imagining what the atmosphere would be like in any public sphere where a spirit of experiment is needed. We can find out who is experimenting in a genuinely "civic" way—and who is not, but could be.

"Try stuff" may not seem like a bold recommendation. But it is sometimes the best advice to give when we spot predictable patterns in place, sense a calcified institution in our midst, or see through the inhibiting quest for certainty.

4. Make resistance revelatory.

Public journalism brought down on its head a good deal of criticism. Some of it, no doubt, was due to the fuzzy or even wrong-headed direction in which the experiment sometimes moved. But much of it revealed in its intensity and dismissive tone a reflexive quality that had overtaken the mind of the American press.

The elite press, in particular, was overly quick on the draw, as it attempted to wave away public journalism as a gimmick or fraud—or worse. In the process, however, even the most shallow critiques revealed where the critic stood on some key questions: What does civic purpose mean in journalism? What

should the power of the press be used for? What's the best way for this profession to serve democracy? What is the political role of a journalist?

Any answer that was given to these questions actually contributed to the experiment. Why? Because speakers had to move into public and declare themselves on something larger than the latest scandal or missed story. Resistance to public journalism thus revealed how far the movement had to go to engage the mind of the press. But it also displayed the contents of that mind, which made the challenge of finding a civic identity for journalism easier—easier to locate.

For the Commission, this might mean calling for things that are likely to be resisted in ways that say something about what we're up against. Let me be clear: I am not urging that we be "controversial" for controversy's sake or to make headlines. But I am saying we can be strategic in finding the fault lines in our public culture: where resistance to reform and rethinking might reveal why it hasn't happened yet.

I believe this was the case with public journalism, which is simply another way of saying: we should be grateful to have opponents. In declaring what they're against, they help you understand what you're for.