

The Practice of Public Journalism Worldwide: A Comprehensive Overview

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ABSTRACT

The US journalistic reform movement known as “public” (or “civic”) journalism has during the past decade inspired like-minded initiatives in other parts of the world, including Africa (Malawi, Senegal, Swaziland), the Asia-Pacific Rim (Australia, Japan, New Zealand), Europe (Finland, Spain, Sweden), and South America (Argentina, Columbia, Mexico). Drawing on scholarly research on these initiatives, this article offers the first comprehensive overview of the practice of public journalism worldwide. Following a brief description of the US experiments with public journalism, it examines public journalism initiatives in different parts of the world. The article concludes with some observations on what these initiatives reveal about the wider applicability of public journalism.

PUBLIC JOURNALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Since 1988, when the first public journalism project was launched by the *Ledger-Enquirer*, a local newspaper in Columbus, Georgia (Rosen 1991), more than 650 such projects have been carried out across the US (Friedland & Nichols 2002). While the vast majority of projects have been conducted by newspapers (Arant & Meyer 1998), many television and radio stations, both private and public, have experimented with public journalism (Dinges 2000; Potter & Kurpius 2000). These projects have either been carried out by given news organizations working on their own or by larger multiple-media partnerships (Denton & Thorson 1998; Friedland, Sotirovic & Daily 1998; Thorson, Ognianova, Coyle & Lambeth 1998).

The public journalism projects conducted to date fall within two broad categories: election initiatives and special projects. During national and local elections, news organizations committed to public

journalism have made efforts to focus their reporting on topics of concern to citizens rather than on the campaign agendas of candidates for office. This has been accomplished by identifying citizen concerns through large-scale telephone surveys, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews, soliciting questions to candidates from citizens and relaying their answers in the news pages, facilitating actual interaction between citizens and candidates in the form of town-hall style meetings, and reporting back on the outcomes of such citizen-candidate encounters (Charity 1995; Merritt 1998; Rosen 1999).

Similarly, news organizations committed to public journalism have engaged in special projects aimed at focusing attention on political problems of particular concern to citizens, such as race-relations, educational inequalities, and poverty, among others. This has been accomplished by reporting on those problems from the perspectives of citizens rather than politicians, experts, and other elite actors, offering citizens opportunities to express and debate their opinions in the news pages, elaborating on what citizens can do to address given problems in practice, organizing sites for citizen deliberation and action such as roundtables, community forums, and local civic groups, and following up on citizen initiatives through on-going and sustained coverage (Ford 2001; Haas 2003b; Thorson, Friedland & Anderson 1997).

Aside from such project-based initiatives, many news organizations have taken steps to make public journalism an integral part of their routine information-gathering, reporting, and evaluation practices, including by restructuring their newsrooms from conventional beat systems revolving around institutional sources of information to include multiple teams focusing on particular topics of concern to citizens, reporting on those topics from the perspectives of citizens rather than various elite actors, and offering citizens opportunities to evaluate news coverage on a regular basis (Gade & Perry 2003; Johnson 1998; Massey & Haas 2002).

The following sections offer a comprehensive overview of how news organizations in other parts of the world have adopted these journalistic practices to involve citizens more actively and meaningfully in democratic processes.

ASIA-PACIFIC RIM (AUSTRALIA, JAPAN, NEW ZEALAND)

The Australian experiments with public journalism date back to 1997 when the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the national public broadcasting service, commissioned a telephone survey and organized a

series of community forums in Queensland to identify the topics that local residents would like to see covered. Following these community forums, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation organized two additional, more comprehensive town-hall style meetings, broadcast live on ABC Radio and Television, in which local residents debated those concerns with a number of invited municipal officials. The broadcasts were followed by talk-back radio sessions devoted to further discussions of those concerns among local residents themselves (Reynolds 1998).

In 1998, the *Courier Mail*, a regional newspaper based in Queensland, launched a more comprehensive, two-year long project on race-relations called "Public Journalism, Public Participation and Australian Public Policy: Connecting to Community Attitudes." Inspired by the *Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal's* "Question of Color" project (Haas 2001), the *Courier Mail* organized two community forums on race-relations in Queensland and New South Wales, respectively, which together were attended by more than 600 local residents. Subsequently, the *Courier Mail* reported back on the outcomes of those community forums, carried articles which described local, citizen-based initiatives to improve race-relations, and solicited much reader feedback in the form of opinion columns, letters-to-the-editor, and hotline comments (Hippocrates 1999).

The following year, in 1999, five local newspapers from the Rural Press Publishing Group in New South Wales conducted a series of focus group discussions with young people as part of their joint "Project Youth." The media partners went to schools and youth centers to identify topics of particular concern to young people and subsequently focused their coverage on those topics (Romano 2001).

More recently, in 2000, the *Latrobe Valley Express*, a local newspaper in Victoria, conducted a project on the state of public transportation. As part of the project, the *Latrobe Valley Express* organized a community forum to identify particular problems of concern to local residents and subsequently devoted considerable coverage to discussions of what could be done to address those problems (Romano & Hippocrates 2001).

Unlike in Australia, where the public journalism projects conducted to date have focused on long-standing problems of local, regional, or national scope, the projects in New Zealand have all been carried out in connection with specific election campaigns. The first project was launched during the 1996 national elections. Three regional newspapers, the *Manawatu Evening Standard*, the *Press*, and the

Waikato Times, used several information-gathering tools to identify the topics of concern to citizens, including a large-scale telephone survey and readers' panels in which the participants were asked to comment on the performance of the different political parties. The media partners subsequently carried in-depth stories about the topics identified and asked candidates from the various political parties to respond to questions from citizens. Inspired by the *Wichita* (Kansas) Eagle's "Your Vote Counts" project (Rosen 1996), the participating news organizations threatened to insert a block of white space with the words "no response," if the parties refused to respond to any of the citizen-generated questions. And as in *Wichita*, this occurred only once when the National Party, the governing party at the time, refused to answer a question. After one of the media partners, the *Press*, inserted a block of white space under the National Party's name, which appeared next to the answer of the rival New Zealand First Party, the National Party did not refuse to answer any subsequent questions. The project culminated in several town-hall style meetings, organized by the media partners, in which the candidates responded to a series of questions formulated by a readers' panel in front of a live audience (Ewart 2000).

In 1999, another similar project was carried out by the *City Voice*, a local newspaper in Wellington, during the national elections that year. To identify the topics of concern to citizens, the *City Voice* conducted in-depth interviews with 276 local residents in its circulation area, asking them to rank-order a list of election issues. The highest-ranked issues subsequently became the topics of several town-hall style meetings between citizens and representatives of the different political parties. Two additional meetings were added to cover two referenda presented to voters - a proposal to reduce the number of MPs and a proposal to implement more stringent crime measures. Each meeting was preceded by news stories in the *City Voice* and followed up by extensive coverage of their outcomes (McGregor, Fountaine & Comrie 2000).

Two of the media partners from the 1996 project, the *Press* and the *Waikato Times*, teamed up with two other regional newspapers, the *Evening Post* and the *Otago Daily Times*, to take a public journalism approach to the 2001 local elections. The media partners conducted a large-scale telephone survey to identify the topics of concern to citizens and subsequently covered those topics in a series of background articles, ran profiles of each of the candidates for office, and carried citizen-generated questions to the candidates. As during the 1996 project, the media partners threatened to insert a block of white space

with the words “no response,” if the candidates refused to respond to any of the citizen-generated questions. Once again, this occurred only once when the *Evening Post* carried through on its threat when one of the candidates refused to answer a question. As in 1996, the project culminated in several town-hall style meetings, organized by the media partners, in which the candidates responded to questions formulated by a readers’ panel in front of a live audience (Venables 2001).

Aside from these project-based initiatives, steps have been taken in both Australia and New Zealand to make public journalism an integral part of routine news practices. Since 2004, APN News & Media, an international newspaper group that owns 23 regional newspapers in Australia and New Zealand, has been involved with a public-journalism-inspired initiative called “Readers First.” As part of the still on-going initiative, newspapers operated by APN News & Media try to focus their reporting on topics of concern to citizens and to cover those topics from the perspectives of citizens rather than politicians, experts, and other elite actors. This is accomplished by identifying citizen concerns through telephone surveys, focus group discussions, and readers’ panels and by using more non-elite and fewer elite sources of information in news stories (Ewart 2005).

As in Australia and New Zealand, several public journalism projects have been carried out in Japan. The Japanese experiments with public journalism date back to 1995 when the *Asahi Shimbun*, one of the largest national newspapers, conducted a project on public dissatisfaction with the established political parties. Following a large-scale telephone survey of more than 2,000 registered voters, the *Asahi Shimbun* conducted in-depth interviews with 69 non-party-supporting citizens, the results of which appeared in the paper. The *Asahi Shimbun* subsequently relayed the interviewed individuals’ questions and concerns to representatives of the five major political parties and carried their answers in the paper (Ito 2005).

Two years later, in 1997, the *Kahoku Shimpō*, a regional newspaper based in the Miyagi Prefecture, conducted a project on the role rice production could play in lessening food shortages worldwide. As part of the project, the *Kahoku Shimpō* organized community forums at 11 different sites where journalists from the paper discussed the future of rice production with farmers and consumers (Ito 2005). In 2003, the *Kahoku Shimpō* conducted another project on the topic of unregistered chemicals in the food industry. As part of the project, the *Kahoku Shimpō* offered suggestions to what citizens could do to address the problem and created a web site where citizens could discuss the topic

among themselves as well as with representatives of the food industry (Perry 2004).

In 2001, the *Tokyo Shimbun*, a Tokyo-based regional newspaper, conducted a project in connection with the national elections that year. As part of the project, the *Tokyo Shimbun* solicited questions to the candidates from citizens and subsequently carried their answers in a series of articles (Ito 2005).

In 1999 and 2002, the *Shinano Mainichi Shimbun*, a regional newspaper based in the Nagano Prefecture, conducted two projects on nursing care and child rearing, respectively. During both projects, the *Shinano Mainichi Shimbun* organized and subsequently reported back on a series of community forums in which citizens discussed the topics among themselves as well as with journalists from the paper. The *Shinano Mainichi Shimbun* also launched web sites, eventually used by more than 800 individuals, where citizens could discuss the topics among themselves (Ito 2005; Perry 2004).

In 2003, the *Chugoku Shimbun*, a regional newspaper based in the Hiroshima Prefecture, conducted a project on the increase in youth gang activity in Hiroshima. As part of the project, the *Chugoku Shimbun* conducted in-depth interviews with victims of gang violence, asked readers what they believed could be done to address the problem, and encouraged local residents to help solve the problem themselves, including by reaching out to young gang members (Ito 2005; Perry 2004).

Finally, the *Nishi-Nippon Shimbun*, a regional newspaper based in the Fukuoka Prefecture, has since 2003 been involved with a project relating to the merger of municipalities, a topic that is being promoted by the central government to make local municipalities more efficient. As part of the still on-going project, the *Nishi-Nippon Shimbun* organizes community forums attended by citizens and journalists from the paper, reports back on their outcomes, and otherwise describes the specific problems facing particular municipalities (Ito 2005).

Aside from being the first Japanese newspaper to experiment with public journalism, the *Asahi Shimbun* is also the one that has done the most to make public journalism an integral part of routine news practices. Since 2000, the *Asahi Shimbun* has had a so-called "Section for Civic Welfare" in which participating journalists try to cover topics of concern to citizens from their perspectives. Journalists affiliated with this section regularly meet up with group of citizens to discuss their concerns, report back on those concerns in the news pages, and even help set up meetings between citizens and relevant policy-makers. For

example, in 2002, the Section for Civic Welfare carried a series of articles on the lack of pediatric care in the Tohoku Prefecture. As part of the series, journalists affiliated with this section organized three community forums in which parents and physicians discussed their concerns, reported back on the outcomes of those forums, and subsequently set up meetings between parents, physicians, and relevant policy-makers. While the *Asahi Shimbun* has done much to make public journalism an integral part of its routine news practices, other Japanese news organizations have also made efforts to enhance interaction between citizens and journalists. Like many US news organizations, the *Tokyo Shimbun* has since 1990 held a yearly day of discussions between readers and senior editors, the results of which are subsequently summarized in the paper (Ito 2005).

EUROPE (FINLAND, SPAIN, SWEDEN)

As in the Asia-Pacific Rim, news organizations in several European countries, including Finland, Spain, and Sweden, have experimented with public journalism. The Finnish projects date back to 1997 when *Aamulehti*, a regional newspaper based in Tampere, conducted a project relating to the Tampere city budget. Inspired by the “We the People” project in Madison, Wisconsin (Friedland, Sotirovic & Daily 1998), *Aamulehti* convened a 12-member budget jury which, in consultation with politicians and civil servants, was charged with developing a budget proposal. *Aamulehti* subsequently reported back on the outcomes of the budget jury’s deliberations and, more broadly, explained to readers the actual political processes through which the city’s budget comes into being (Kunelius 1999).

In 1998 - 1999, the *Savon Sanomat*, a regional newspaper based in Kuopio, conducted three small-scale projects relating, respectively, to inter-generational conflicts in Kuopio, citizens’ lack of opportunities to influence local political processes, and the national elections of 1999. As part of these projects, which all followed similar procedures, the *Savon Sanomat* organized a series of community forums in which local residents debated their concerns among themselves and, in the case of the second and third projects, also relayed those concerns to relevant politicians and candidates for office, respectively (Heikkila 2000).

More recently, in 2003, the *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest national newspaper, conducted a project during the national elections that year. The *Helsingin Sanomat* commissioned a comprehensive telephone survey to identify the topics of concern to citizens, focused its election

coverage on those topics, solicited questions to the candidates from citizens, and subsequently carried their answers in the paper (Ahva 2005a). Similarly, in 2004, *Aamulehti* conducted a project during the municipal elections that year. As part of the project, *Aamulehti* organized town-hall style meetings in sixteen different municipalities where local residents debated their concerns with local candidates for office and subsequently reported back on the outcomes of those meetings (Ahva 2005b).

Aside from these project-based initiatives, several news organizations have taken steps to make public journalism an integral part of their routine news practices. Since 1999, the *Savon Sanomat* has had a weekly section devoted to coverage of local public issues written from the perspectives of local residents. The section includes several features, including articles which carry questions to local authorities from citizens, articles which report back on the answers obtained, and articles which include citizen feedback on coverage obtained through regular meetings with groups of citizens. Similarly, the *Uutispaiva Demari*, a local newspaper affiliated with the Social Democratic Party, has since 2003 had a weekly section called "Citizen Channel," in which readers ask questions of party representatives and evaluate their answers. The *Uutispaiva Demari* has also instituted novel story features, including a so-called "Democracy Barometer" in which journalists at the paper assess given political decisions in terms of their potential impact on citizens' opportunities to influence democratic processes (Kunelius & Renvall 2003). Finally, in 2004, the *Ita-Hame*, a local newspaper in Heinola, appointed a so-called "civic reporter" whose responsibility it is to meet up with groups of local residents on a regular basis to discuss their concerns. Like journalists affiliated with the "Section for Civic Welfare" at the *Asahi Shimbun* in Japan, the civic reporter also organizes meetings between groups of local residents and relevant policy-makers and reports back on their outcomes in the paper (Ahva 2005a).

Unlike in Finland, only a few Swedish news organizations have experimented with public journalism. In 1998, two local newspapers, *Goteborgsposten* and *Vestmandlands Lans Tidning*, based, respectively, in Gothenburg and Vestmandland, conducted separate projects during the national elections that year. Both papers commissioned telephone surveys to identify the topics local residents were most concerned about and subsequently covered those topics in depth, including by carrying answers from various party representatives to questions solicited from citizens (Becksmo & Stjernfeldt 2001; Horngren 2000).

More significantly, *Dagens Nyheter*, the largest national newspaper, has since 1999 had a so-called “mobile newsroom,” which travels to different parts of Sweden for 4 - 6 weeks at a time to report on topics of concern to local residents from their perspectives. Journalists affiliated with the mobile newsroom organize community forums in which local residents debate topics of concern to them, report back on the outcomes of those forums, and offer local residents opportunities to evaluate the paper’s coverage of those topics (Beckman 2003).

Finally, the *Diario de Burgos*, a local newspaper based in the province of Burgos in Spain, conducted a project during the national elections of 1993. Inspired by the *Charlotte* (North Carolina) *Observer*’s “Your Voice, Your Vote” project (Miller 1994), the *Diario de Burgos* decided to cover topics of particular concern to citizens rather than to focus attention on the campaign agendas of the candidates. Specifically, the paper encouraged readers to forward their views on those topics, outlined the candidates’ own opinions, and solicited questions to the candidates from readers. As did the media partners during the 1996 and 2001 election projects in New Zealand, the *Diario de Burgos* threatened to insert a block of white space with the words “no response,” if the candidates refused to answer any of the reader-generated questions. Unlike in New Zealand, however, none of the candidates refused to do so when learning of the paper’s intentions (Sanchez 1997).

SOUTH AMERICA (ARGENTINA, COLUMBIA, MEXICO)

Like in the Asia-Pacific Rim and Europe, news organizations in several South American countries, including Argentina, Columbia, and Mexico, have experimented with public journalism. In 1999, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, the two largest national newspapers in Argentina, conducted a joint project, called “Citizens Agenda,” during the election for mayor of Buenos Aires. With the financial support of the United States Information Agency, *Clarín* and *La Nación* organized a series of community forums in which local residents were invited to debate the topics they believed should drive the newspapers’ election coverage, held town-hall style meetings between local residents and the various mayoral candidates, and subsequently reported back on the outcomes of those community forums and citizen-candidate encounters (Mwangi 2001).

As in Argentina, Columbia’s largest national newspaper, *El Tiempo*, conducted a project in connection with the 1997 municipal

elections. *El Tiempo* commissioned a large-scale telephone survey to identify the topics citizens were most concerned about, organized a series of community forums on each of those topics in which citizens debated their concerns, and subsequently reported back on the results of the survey and the community forums, including by summarizing the various mayoral candidates' positions on those topics. In 1998, a comprehensive network of newspapers (*El Colombiano*, *El Mundo*, *El Tiempo*), television (Teleantioquia, Telemedellin, Telepacífico), and radio (Caracol, RCN, Todelar) stations launched a still on-going project, called "Citizen Voices," which is aimed at offering citizens opportunities to debate a wide variety of topics of concern to them. The participating news organizations have organized numerous community forums on such topics as security (1998), soccer-related violence (2003), and poverty (2004) (London 2004).

While news organizations in Columbia have made efforts to regularize the practice of public journalism, none have gone as far as the newspaper group Grupo Reforma in Mexico. Since 1991, *Grupo Reforma*, a family-owned newspaper company consisting of four major newspapers in Mexico's largest cities (Guadalajara Mexico City, Monterrey, and Saltillo), have operated a network of so-called "editorial councils" which offers citizens opportunities to formally participate in journalistic agenda-setting, decision-making, and evaluation. The primary objectives of these editorial councils, which meet weekly, are to help the newspapers determine which topics citizens would like to see covered, how citizens would like to see those topics reported, and to obtain citizen feedback on coverage. Every year, editors of each major section at all *Grupo Reforma* newspapers - hard news sections, feature sections and zoned suburban editions - recruit a voluntary editorial council consisting of 12 or more citizens. From a single editorial council in 1991, this mechanism for citizen participation in journalistic processes has evolved into a comprehensive network of 63 editorial councils with more than 900 participants in 2005 (Chavez 2005).

AFRICA (MALAWI, SENEGAL, SWAZILAND)

As in South America, news organizations in several African countries, including Malawi, Senegal, and Swaziland, have experimented with public journalism. In 1998, four news organizations in Swaziland, the Swaziland Broadcasting Corporation (television), the Swaziland Broadcasting and Information System (radio), the *Swazi Observer*, and the *Times of Swaziland*, collaborated on two projects that dealt,

respectively, with criminal activities preventing the routine operation of rural health care clinics (“Rural Health Care: The Human Side of Crime on Health Care”) and rape, incest, and other forms of sexual violence (“Rape/Incest Issues: Far from the Headlines, Closer to the Heart”). During these projects, which were supported financially by the United States Information Agency, the media partners focused on the topics under investigation from the perspectives of citizens rather than elite actors, including by emphasizing what citizens themselves could do to address those problems and by reporting on grassroots efforts already taken to resolve them. Since the projects ended, two of the media partners, the *Swazi Observer* and the Swaziland Broadcasting Corporation, have taken steps to routinize the practice of public journalism by, respectively, instituting a weekly section that reports back on the outcomes of newspaper-sponsored community forums in which local residents debate particular topics of concern to them and by producing a weekly program that focuses on the specific problems facing rural communities (Gillis & Moore 2004).

Like the Swaziland Broadcasting Corporation, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, the national public broadcasting service, has also taken steps to make public journalism an integral part of its routine news practices. With the financial support of the George Soros Foundation, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation has since 2000 organized a comprehensive network of so-called “listening clubs” at the village level in which local residents listen together to its radio programming, debate which topics they would like to see covered in the future, and give feedback on past programming (Gillis & Moore 2004).

Finally, in Senegal, Radio Oxy-Jeunes, a local Dakar-based radio station, has since 2000 taken several steps to focus its programming on topics of concern to local residents. Specifically, the station has instituted a number of novel programming formats, such as “Dialogue Council,” a weekly program in which a local mayor is invited to debate, with a live audience of his or her constituents, particular topics of concern to local residents identified through in-depth interviews prior to the broadcasts. As part of the live broadcasts, those interviews are played for response by the mayor, and listeners are invited to call in with follow-up questions during the program. When, after three editions of the program, the invited mayors refused to participate because of the tough questioning and criticism they faced, the station continued the programs in their absence. Following public outcry, no invited mayor has subsequently refused an invitation to participate and the program continues to be one of the station’s most popular ones. Moreover, Radio

Oxy-Jeunes has instituted a weekly program called “The Bus.” Similar to the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*’s “mobile newsroom,” journalists from the station travel to different parts of the country, conduct in-depth interviews with local residents to identify topics of concern to them, and offer them opportunities to debate their concerns during the live broadcasting of the program (Mwangi 2001).

CONCLUSION

Ever since public journalism began to make inroads among news organizations in the US, scholars have debated the applicability of its practices to news organizations in other parts of the world. While scholars agree that public journalism’s goal of involving citizens more actively and meaningfully in democratic processes is universally applicable, they maintain that the specific practices associated with public journalism would need to be modified substantially to suit particular characteristics of given countries (Gunaratne 1998; Pauly 1999; Richards 2000).

The prior discussion suggests that those reservations might in fact be unfounded. Indeed, experiments with public journalism worldwide show that those practices are flexible enough to be of use to news organizations situated in countries with vastly different political systems and journalistic traditions than those of the US. As in the US, news organizations in various parts of the world have used public journalism’s practices to reorient their coverage of national and local elections from a focus on the campaign agendas of candidates for office to a focus on the topics of concern to citizens, report on political problems of particular concern to citizens from their perspectives rather than those of politicians, experts, and other elite actors, and even to reform their routine information-gathering, reporting, and evaluation practices. Overall, the strong and growing interest in public journalism lends support to Christians and Nordenstreng’s (2004) argument that, despite an ever-increasing commercialization of news media, we are currently witnessing a renewed commitment to the ideal of journalistic social responsibility worldwide.

While the flexibility of public journalism’s practices may account for their adoption by news organizations in various parts of the world, it still remains puzzling that certain non-US public journalism projects, especially those in Africa and South America, have not differed more substantially from those in the US. Specifically, considering the long tradition for development journalism in Africa and South America, one

could expect participating news organizations to have taken a much more activist stance than their US counterparts, including by advocating particular solutions to given problems under investigation and working with non-governmental organizations to resolve those problems in practice. One possible explanation for the lack of such activism on the part of participating news organizations may be that many of the projects were made possible, as previously noted, by the financial support of US-based organizations like the United States Information Agency and the George Soros Foundation (e.g., Argentina, Malawi, and Swaziland).

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