

Community Journalism: Hope for a Society Without Heroes

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Media theorists recognize that the new media and the ecology that they have created are not good for heroes. Although persons of great valor are still present in our society, the electronic media dethrone those who might be heroes, making them celebrities. But society needs its heroes. This paper proposes community journalism (also called public journalism and civic journalism), led by the print medium, is the key to making ready true heroes for future generations.

[It] has become obvious that both the mechanical world picture and its technological components are hopelessly backward in their human commitments. The more firmly we get attached to the power system, the more alienated we become from those vital sources that are essential to further human development. (Mumford, 1970, p. 393)

THE means of communication significantly affect what people make of their heroes. Oral culture and typography served the creation of heroes. Today, the absence of true heroes, whether within the political, sporting, or spiritual spheres, can be attributed to the rise of the electronic media.

Regarding the political hero, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) says the seeming lack of persons of presidential stature is mostly a projection of communication media:

The decline in presidential image may have surprisingly little to do with a simple lack of potentially great leaders, and much to do with a specific communication environment—a communication environment that undermines the politician’s ability to behave like, and therefore be perceived as, the traditional “great leader.” (p. 269)

Heroes are a product of communication. “It is through communication that we come to know our heroes,” says Strate (1994), “and consequently, different kinds of communication will result in different kinds of heroes” (p. 15). But today, the modern means of communication has spirited away our heroes.

To speak of the absence of heroes is not to imply there are not genuine, a priori acts that contribute to a person’s greatness and that, even in today’s commercially-driven society, there are not those who perform great acts of valor. But it is how these acts are transmitted that make and dethrone the hero, or make the person worthy of the title of something much less—a celebrity, a “human pseudo-event” (Boorstin, 1992, p. 57). Any possibility of reviving the hero in the media age, therefore, calls for transformation within journalism itself.

While I do not underestimate the extraordinary power of new technology and the improbability of staving off the march of that which passes for progress, I argue that

some change is possible—even likely in the present media environment. Further, I hold that this transformation is essential for democracy and social development, as it is necessary for directing the public’s attention to persons of true greatness. Preparing society for tomorrow’s heroes might be one of the preoccupations of a new journalism.

The Power of the Visual Image

ONE of the realities of the new media age has been the dominance of the television medium and its influence on news journalism. Print’s decline has been partly due to the effects of conglomeration and the business of media, which have affected how journalists practice their craft. But electronic media, with their emphases on immediacy and entertainment, have radically changed the whole media ecology. It is this reality and the proclivity of media in general to influence and radically affect the message that Marshall McLuhan (2003) addressed in the aphorism, “the medium is the message.”

Neil Postman (1986) says television is not just entertaining, “it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience” (p. 87). Paul Messaris (1997), seeking to provide a theoretical framework for understanding why the visual image affects us the way it does and why it elicits its particular response, points to three particular properties of the visual image. It is *iconical*, *indexical*, and has *syntactic indeterminacy*. Its iconicity allows it to reproduce the *appearance* of reality, which “can call forth a variety of ‘preprogrammed’ emotional responses” (p. xi). It is indexical because the image has the ability to serve as documentary evidence—no matter how contrived. It has syntactic indeterminacy because, by itself, the visual image lacks precision and clarity in showing how, in a given context, one image may be related to another. This feature is exploited in advertising, including the political campaign ad. “Visual communication does not have an explicit syntax for expressing analogies, contrasts, causal claims, and other kinds of propositions” (p. xi). Visual expressions, however, because they come directly from a human being, seem more real than words, and are powerful and effective (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 105).

In contrast to the electronic environment, a print-dominated culture allows for public discourse, characterized by “a coherent, orderly arrangement of facts and ideas” (Postman, 1986, p. 51). It allows people to “select the messages that are relevant to them and reflect on their meaning” (Bogart, 1995, p. 196). The structure of television does not allow for such freedoms. While the growth and pervasiveness of new communication technologies have served the media business well, these developments have had dire social consequences: democracy itself is threatened.

Remaking the Journalist

IT is, perhaps, to state the obvious but journalists do make the news. This is to say that news is not hanging out there, in some ethereal way, and journalists dutifully pass it on. News is not a commodity that can be apportioned in some neat way for readers and viewers. I am not saying either that journalists concoct the news. But the journalist, like the artist, paints the picture, chooses what will go into the picture and what will not, decides where the onlooker will stand—positions the reader, the viewer, the citizen. Further, more than a particular style, journalists work from within an overarching point of

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view, that which Jay Rosen (2002) calls a “master narrative,” the story that produces all the other stories, which influences how a story is told and, naturally, how it is received. What all this means is that journalists possess enormous power.

Kenneth Boulding (1959), in a study of the national image, divides the society into the “powerful” and the “ordinary.” He sees the head of state as powerful because this person’s decision affects a great number of people, but views the average citizen as ordinary because this person’s decisions affect only the self and a relatively few other people in the immediate environment. The distinction, of course, is not a sharp one. Boulding recognizes, rather, a “continuum of power among the persons of a society,” along which the journalist has a significant place in the circle of power. He says:

There will be some who are less powerful but still influential—members of the legislature, of the civil service, even journalists, newspaper owners, prominent businessmen, grading by imperceptible degrees down to the common soldier, who has no power of decision even over his own life. (p. 121)

Boulding (1959) admits to a certain simplicity in this model. For sure, while journalists possess power, if it is to be real, it cannot be of the same kind as the government or the business executive. Journalists’ power is seen in their ability to question those who exercise other kinds of power in the society. But more than that, I argue journalists’ power also arises from those whom they serve. Boulding seems to agree, when he says, “the powerful are always under some obligation to represent the mass, even under dictatorial regimes” and that “in democratic societies the aggregate influence of the images of ordinary people is very great” (p. 121). All of this is not to minimize or underestimate the influence of big business, commercial culture, and technology on the work of journalists. Nevertheless, the source of real power for journalists who are serious about their craft must lie in an engaged public.

Because of the power they do possess—the charge laid upon them—journalists need to exercise exceptional care in the images they project. To put it another way, media must work to ensure that the images they project arise out of the perspectives of the people, and are not the projections of advertisers or the indiscriminate use of technology for its own sake. Journalists are called to do more than inform, entertain, and chronicle. If media are to contribute to societal development, then, journalism itself has to change.

The Place of Community Journalism

MUCH critical research and analysis, today, is concerned with the effects of media on the social environment. Studies often draw attention to the popular culture and the commercial culture—the advertising agenda—that drive the conventional media house. Critics and researchers have observed the rise of the global media marketplace and how it promotes the economic and political interests of the world’s powerful nations and blocs, while further isolating and crippling the developing world. Thussu (2000) writes, for example:

In the absence of a credible alternative media system, the US position—given the reach and influence of the Western media—often becomes the

dominant position, whether on nuclear issues, trade policy, human rights or international law. (p.166)

The issues that researchers identify are important for our understanding of the social environment, but the insights they give ought to lead, in some practical ways, to a more responsible journalism and to the enrichment of the society. Now that we know about the influence of media, how can journalists face the challenges and better satisfy the needs of particular societies?

The good news is that while media have gone about their business serving their own particular ends, a more media-savvy public has emerged. Given the knowledge that both journalists and citizens have today, the present circumstances seem to suggest this may be the opportune time for embracing a new kind of journalism.

If journalists are to live up to the ideals of their profession, they would need to look beyond the customary boundaries of politics and journalism as they now exist—borders which, in large measure, they themselves have set since they enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy in democratic societies. Too often, the master narratives are about conflict, and winners and losers, which in turn generate the superficial story that fails to effect necessary social change and development.

In our overheated and overloaded culture, more information may not be helpful information—information that members of the society can do anything with or want to do anything with.

[The] situation created by telegraphy, and then exacerbated by later technologies, made the relationship between information and action both abstract and remote. For the first time in human history, people were faced with the problem of information glut, which means that simultaneously they were faced with the problem of a diminished social and political potency. (Postman, 1986, p. 68)

Whether journalists recognize it or not, they have the particular and formidable task of telling citizens which portions of the news to take seriously and which portions to reject. In *The Two Ws of Journalism*, Merritt and McCombs (2004) write that “it is an unavoidable fact that the values we as journalists apply to the flow of available information—what we choose to pass along—set the agenda for the public conversation that drives and nurtures democracy” (p. xiv).

Since the late 1980s, Rosen, Merritt, and others have been speaking of a better way to do journalism, one that takes into account how it has failed and recognizes its ability to bring awareness and understanding to citizens—and restoration to the profession. It has been called “public journalism,” “community journalism,” and simply, “whole journalism.” I prefer to use the term community journalism, which is not to suggest a narrow kind of journalism, one limited to the small group or village. The term, community journalism, I hope, might evoke the creative force of early print media, which helped form a recognizable nationhood and delineation of communities. Benedict Anderson describes the nation as “an imagined political community,” which came into existence with the rise of the “print culture,” especially newspapers. For the first time, here was a community “that went beyond the literate individual’s personal range of acquaintances to encompass a publication’s entire potential readership” (Albrecht, 2004, p. 110).

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Ultimately, it does not much matter what people call this journalism movement: it is meant to be chameleonic, disappearing into the journalistic and media environment as it grows and becomes more effective. Community journalism is about reform of traditional or conventional journalism; it is about journalism in its truest form. It seeks to help citizens see their stake as informed participants in the life of the community. A press that is not cognizant of its vital role in building community would not act in the interest of public discourse and would unwittingly act to stifle it; but also, as Rosen (1999) points out, such a medium would destroy itself.

Good journalism requires more than good journalists—more even than enlightened ownership, First Amendment protections, and a strong economic base. For without an engaged and concerned public, even the most public-minded press cannot do its job. Thus, the involvement of people in the affairs of their community, their interest in political discussion, their willingness to abandon a spectator's role and behave as citizens—all form the civic capital on which the enterprise of the press is built. To live off that capital without trying to replenish it is a dangerous course for journalists to follow, but this is precisely the predicament of the American press today. It addresses a "public" it does little to help create. (p. 75)

Clearly, there are difficulties and challenges in the practice of community journalism, which have been identified by those who have written about the concept; those who wish to embrace this form of journalism must reckon with these issues. Among these problems are (a) how to maintain independence and trustworthiness in the commercially-driven news environment; (b) how to report the news fairly, yet not as onlookers, but as citizens and members of the political community; (c) how to seek after truth yet report with compassion and sensitivity; and (d) how to give due attention to the engagement of citizens in discourse while working within the pressures of a commercial enterprise in which immediacy is a vital concern.

These problems become real for journalists who recognize themselves as citizens among citizens, working for the engagement of ordinary men and women in civic life. Every journalist has to maintain fairness, and be aware of his or her particular biases and properly deal with them. This is what all good journalism is about. Where community journalism has been tried, journalists have become more conscious of their own frailty. The problems of community journalism are really opportunities for good journalism. Journalism is strengthened where journalists grapple with these issues.

Preparing for the New Hero

IF community journalism is to move beyond the realm of ideas, journalists will need to have the strength of will to pursue their ideals. In various parts of the United States, the experiment has been tried in concerted ways. Journalists from various media houses have come together for discussion and reflection on the concept. A few editors have dared to restructure their newsrooms, rethinking their priorities so reporters might be able to engage citizens on issues of real importance to the people's development. And as journalists have listened more intently and respectfully to the voices of citizens, their

work has reflected more of the people's concerns rather than the agendas of government offices and advertisers. Community journalism continues, however, to be a work in progress.

One of the ways in which community journalism could move forward and the media could contribute to the development of society might concern giving proper treatment to those persons who embody the higher values of society—the particular qualities that come to be seen, by most members of the society, as worthy of emulation.

The task of helping society to honor the honorable is far from simple. Any attempt to seek out the exemplary citizen is, in a way, an attempt to re-present or resurrect the traditional hero, whose decline began in the latter half of the 19th century with the “Graphic Revolution” (Boorstin, 1992), when it became possible to “make, preserve, transmit, and disseminate precise images” (p. 13). Boorstin (1992) argues that the Graphic Revolution and the new media age have brought the demise of the hero. Those “who populate our consciousness are with few exceptions not heroes at all, but an artificial new product—a product of the Graphic Revolution in response to our exaggerated expectations” (p. 48). In place of the hero, the electronic media have produced, he says, the “person who is known for his well-knownness,” the celebrity, distinguished by his lack of identifiable qualities. “He is neither good nor bad, great nor petty. He is the human pseudo-event” (p. 57). He is a fabrication.

How then are we to draw attention to those persons in our society who show quality, have achieved great things, and might be able to inspire the ordinary citizen? Can media resist the temptation to trivialize and diminish those who live exemplary lives? If media are to perform the function of making known those who deserve to be known and preserving them for posterity, then media will have to work in different ways. Community journalism seems to offer some possibilities here.

Because community journalists take up positions among fellow citizens and, indeed, recognize themselves as citizens, and because they aim to make the citizens' agenda their own agenda, they stand in a position of seeing with the eyes of the public and hearing with its ears. Community journalists do not make the new hero. They cannot. They allow the rest of the community to recognize the courageous or noble woman or man who has achieved greatness.

To be able to recognize these persons of true greatness takes time and is a product of the community's memory. The traditional hero needed time; the celebrity does not thrive with time.

The hero was born of time: his gestation required at least a generation. As the saying went, he had “stood the test of time.” A maker of tradition, he was himself made by tradition. He grew over the generations as people found new virtues in him and attributed to him new exploits. Receding into the misty past he became more, and not less, heroic. (Boorstin, 1992, p. 62)

Community journalism offers society the possibility of one day examining its history to acknowledge those persons who are worthy to be heroes.

Among the many challenges faced by community journalism is the public's insatiable appetite for news. It is a problem that media, egged on by commercial culture, have created. The appetite is of a piece with the pseudo-event and its human counterpart, the celebrity. The problem that media have created can be solved only when they are freed,

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as far as possible, from the shackles of an ever-advancing technology. Clearly, the television medium is the wrong medium to take the lead in community journalism.

Any examination of the historical data regarding the development of communication media invariably emphasizes the vital role the print medium has played in stimulating learning, knowledge, the economy, and civilization. Much has been said about the consequences of print in terms of how it spawned capitalism and profiteering—but often left out is the part it has played in preserving human freedoms and aiding the development of society in all areas. From 1600 to 1900, Western music developed so rapidly, Albrecht (2004) says, “it is difficult to imagine how the period could have evolved in the manner that it did without the mediation of the printing press” (p. 109).

Whereas earlier, the print medium took the lead in the process of human development and pointed the way forward for mass communication, today, print seeks to copy the television format. Can the press, once again, take the lead, and be of better service to democracy? It seems that in the power-driven circumstances of the present, there is the impetus for a new journalism. As Merritt puts it:

Journalists in the United States are at a critical point in the history of their craft. Threatened on one side by declining readership and new economic pressures in the media industry, they face a different kind of threat from the fraying of community ties, the rising disgust with politics, and a spreading sense of impotence and hopelessness among Americans frustrated by the failures of their democratic system. If this second threat isn't noticed and taken seriously American journalism may lose control of its future, which is bound up with the strength of public life in all of its forms. (Rosen, 1999, p. 73)

Although print lacks the intimacy and immediacy of the electronic media and brings us the event after the event is over, it can save us from the pseudo-event in ways in which the television medium cannot.

To say that the electronic media are the wrong media to take the lead in community journalism is not to say that they cannot be developed along these lines or work at producing programs that adhere to the principles of this form. But the electronic media work naturally against this process. Television, with its emphasis on the image, will, it seems, always find it virtually impossible to sustain community journalism for its own sake. As Strate (1994) notes, television emphasizes appearance and personality and not ideas and actions. When “ideas are presented on television, they are overshadowed by images, creating an image of ideas, divorced from any substance . . . We are left only with an image of action, an image of the hero as a man or woman of action, whereas specific deeds are forgotten” (p. 21). But further, as Strate observes, “on television, the distinction between fact and fiction becomes meaningless” (p. 22). The task of building up the persons of authentic greatness and preparing for the new hero is one for literacy and the print medium.

Boorstin (1992) relates the story of the 25-year-old Charles A Lindberg, who made the first nonstop flight from New York to Paris in 1927. Lindberg fit the old heroic mold perfectly at first, but by the 1940s, having supplied reams of copy to a sensation-seeking press and having been led into seeing himself as a celebrity (he had become a public spokesman), the hero and, in fact, the celebrity was no more. It is not incidental, I argue,

that the enormous amount of newsprint that was used up in the publicity of Lindberg in the early years coincided with the early years of radio. By 1921, scheduled radio programs were being broadcast in the United States. The BBC began its transmission in the United Kingdom in 1923, and by 1925, some 600 stations had mushroomed worldwide, according to the *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* (Pearsall & Trumble, 2002). It is not insignificant that Lindberg's rise and fall coincided with the first rush of the new media and a press coerced by radio.

Conclusion

IT was typography and the print medium that sustained the image of the traditional hero, individualizing him (Strate, 1994, p. 18) and making him more ordinary, but, nevertheless, maintaining him as a hero. It is print and responsible community journalism that today offers the possibility of building up the person of true greatness and preserving him or her from becoming a human pseudo-event. How could this happen, given the environment already created by the electronic media? Although the process will be a slow one, perhaps painfully so, a society better educated in the ways of the media, populated by more aware citizens, can make the difference.

While it would be foolhardy to suggest that United States citizens, in the first decade of the 21st century, have become media theorists, they clearly understand much more than citizens at the start of the electronic age. How this work of consciousness-building progresses is also a matter for community journalism.

Clearly, television can play a significant role in preserving the past; it can do so in a way that print and radio cannot. The traditional hero came to be seen, in the fullness of time, in the rearview mirror. Video clips that preserve the stories of truly distinguished citizens are indispensable in preparing society for the would-be hero of the coming age. But a self-serving television corporation and self-serving presenters, intent on preserving their image, cannot play a dominant role. The Internet, too, has a part to play in bolstering and giving depth to community journalism. Blogging gives the ordinary citizen an opportunity to speak, to learn from other citizens, to question, to act as a counter to conventional media. But it is the print medium that can best serve community journalism and prepare for the future hero.

Community journalism can seem somewhat idealistic in its vision. But journalism, today, needs a great vision. Nobody expects that everything will be transformed in dramatic fashion. But if the work continues, if journalists practice their craft according to the principles of community journalism, then change will inevitably come. The present media ecology seems to give rise to such hope and the possibility of heroes for a future generation.

Society needs its heroes. If society, itself, is not to take on the evanescence of the celebrity and the electronic media, it requires a new kind of journalism. The work is an urgent one. Most of the exploratory work in the field of community journalism has been done in the United States. It is proper that it begin here, but its principles are essential for the practice of journalism in every society that aspires to true democracy.

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