

ENGAGEMENT AND THE 21ST CENTURY NEWSROOM:
THE FOUR PHASES OF EDITORIAL VOICE
(AND FOUR “CRAZY” IDEAS FOR FINDING THEM)

(available from: <http://www.mediagiraffe.org/voice>)

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This is an edited and expanded version of remarks by [Bill Densmore](#), director of the [Media Giraffe Project](#) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, delivered on Sunday, March 2, 2008, to a meeting of approximately 30 U.S. newspaper editorial writers and others at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, in Los Angeles as part of the four-day seminar, “[Best Practices: Editorial and Commentary in Cyberspace](#),” presented by the Knight Digital Media Center of the USC Annenberg School for Communication in partnership with the National Conference of Editorial Writers. Thank-you to Vikki (Porter) and to Michael (Williams) for the opportunity to engage with you this evening.

This text is available at <http://www.mediagiraffe.org/voice>

Twelve years ago, I gave a talk in San Francisco at an interactive newspapers convention and I said something, which ended up quoted in *The New York Times*. I said I felt that trying to be a pundit and advise editors on the Internet was “kind of like the blind leading the blind.”

I still have that feeling. The speed at which technology is changing what you do, and what I used to do, is only accelerating. As an industry, newspapers adjusted pretty well to the transition from Linotypes to Linotronics to DEC to paste-ups and then pagination. The waves of change came more slowly. That’s changed. Two years ago, if I said “social network” most of us wouldn’t have understood what I was talking about. Now we know that refers to YouTube, Facebook, Ning, Tribe.net, MySpace – just to scratch the surface.

All of this produces anxiety. What do we need to learn, or try, next? The only certainty is that we must keep learning, and keep trying, or be left behind. In that context, let me propose some changes in the way editorial pages are put together and in the way we define their voice – or voices.

I did over the last week something akin to what you all will more and more be doing– I reached out to my own “social network.” I sent emails to some 20 advisors and friends, and more than 15 responded. I figure on speaking for about 30 minutes. And then I’d like to moderate a discussion about some of the ideas that these respondents and I raise. I’m sure many of those ideas will not be new to you (we discussed a couple this afternoon). Some of you may already be trying them in your own shops, and you will want to continue to share tips about that learning and trying over the next three of days.

So in this talk, I’m going to begin by summarizing the views of some key observers on the news organization’s emerging role as what I would call a “director of community engagement.” Then I’ll lay out what we’ll call the four phases of editorial voice. Then I’ll give some examples from some of

my 15 respondents of things you can do to adopt one or more of those voices. Finally, I'll finish with what we'll call four crazy ideas to ignite a useful discussion.

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE AND THE NEWS SOCIAL NETWORK

MIT Prof. Henry Jenkins, in his 2007 book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, popularizes the idea that information technology -- the ability of the network to allow real-time exchange among multiple people physically removed from each other (with serious games and other applications) -- is creating a new sort of participatory culture. What voice in this new culture is appropriate for the news organization -- I am not going to say *newspaper* in this talk because the newspaper is now just one output *product* not the core service. You are all [in a service business](#).

The Poynter Institute-sponsored Online-news list serve carried a rich series of exchanges last week that are on the point of news organizations building local community. (*A summary of some of the exchanges is APPENDED to this paper.*) I'll post a longer version of this talk on the web, which includes some discussion of the discussion. What folks like Steve Yelvington, Roy Clark, Rich Gordon and others are saying: The new news role is as an organizer/convener of conversations, that sociologists like author Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) find a tight relationship between news readership and strong community and -- this is the most important point -- it's time for news organizations to go back to their 19th century origin of taking on community-building as a personal and institutional mission. The phrase *du jour* for expressing that: Building social capital.

ENGAGEMENT -- THE FOUR PHASES OF EDITORIAL VOICE

Some of you may now be thinking: How do I figure out the roles I need to play in this new world of community engagement. Here's where I'd like to offer for consideration "the four phases of editorial voice." I'm going to suggest that we have four ways of serving news-hungry consumers available to us.

The first role of the 21st century news-sharing organization is to act as a **navigator**. The fiber optic cable and Moore's Law of accelerating microprocessor power have combined to all but eliminate the physical "pinch point" that limited the flow of information in modern society. That pinch-point was the printing press, or limited broadcast frequencies. And so the editor's role is less and less defined by choosing which information to leave out, and more and more by what information to highlight. Now most of you are probably struggling with a shrinking news hole. But that is a vestige of just one medium. It does not seem likely that the cost of bandwidth will seriously constrain the Internet anytime soon -- if ever. So now the key job is navigator -- helping your participant users just to *find* what they need in order to be informed, participatory citizens.

The second role of the 21st century news-sharing organization is to act as an [information valet](#). No, not the fellow who parks your car; more like the trusted **advisor** to an Enlightenment era European king, or maybe the concierge in a fine hotel. The valet, or concierge, doesn't make a product; he or she provides a service, the most trusted, personalized sort of service. And that's a fundamental change in thinking -- from making a product -- the newspaper -- to providing a service -- the trusted, customized information home base for your readers, users, viewers and listeners.

The third role of the 21st century news-sharing organization is that of a **referee**. Your customers no longer merely consume the news; they create it as well, with their blog, their cell phone and their Flickr, MySpace Facebook or Nonpublic pages. Where once your role was to arbitrate what ideas reached the public sphere via your pages, now management of the information public sphere is done the public itself. You can watch the cacophony and help players to find constructive roles. You can take note of off sides, illegal touching and rule infractions (where rules exist!) in the discussion. It's a critical role, and one you are institutionally suited to play.

I should at this point offer a credit and citation to Michael Oreskes, executive editor of the *International Herald Tribune*, who [spoke on Oct. 19, 2007](#) to the Online News Association annual convention in Toronto. In his remarks, he said: “Our authority and credibility used to come from our exclusivity and our control over the sources and distribution of information. In the future it may come just as much from our transparency and our willingness to interact with our audiences. In this new world, we are no longer gatekeepers. So what shall we become? Guides, perhaps? Color commentators? Referees? That question alone could keep our discussion going for some time. But whatever image we adopt for what we should become I think it is clear what we should NOT become. We must not be conveyor belts.”

Let me talk a little bit about the notion of editorialist as **referee** of the conversations, too.

Maybe not locally, but certainly nationally, and worldwide, there’s now much more opinion and many more data mashups and undigested, undifferentiated facts. And perhaps I guess more analysis, too. But certainly there’s not more reporting. And so the unique value of the editorialist is no longer merely the ability to offer opinion, but now it has to be differentiated opinion. And the differentiation it seems to me is in adopting ... one solution is to adopt more of an above-the-fray voice. Not an aloof voice, but a voice, which implies knowledge of and collaboration with many other voices at the level, if not necessarily at the grassroots citizen, level then at the next stage of the food chain up, which is the blogosphere now. This becomes the referee role.

Dale Peskin, a news-industry futurist with iFocos, [posted Feb. 20, 2008](#) on the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation website blog, a link to the BecauseItMatters.net community discussion of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation. The foundation has [posted 10 tips](#) for civil dialog, which are a useful guide to the role of the referee:

1. Respect
2. Think positively
3. Pay attention
4. Make a difference
5. Speak kindly
6. Say thanks
7. Accept others
8. Rediscover silence
9. Listen
10. Keep your cool

Navigator . . . valet . . . referee. While we may come up with better shorthand terminology tonight, I think the roles I’ve described fit within a generally accepted framework of the Rosenstiel-Kovach [Elements of Journalism](#) ethical paradigms. But I am going to go out on a limb and offer a fourth role. It’s that of a **teacher/coach**.

Memphis Commercial Appeal Editor Chris Peck put it this way in a paper delivered earlier to a NCEW session: “Editorial-page editors must be personalities, provocateurs and preachers for the First Amendment. They are alternately engaging and inspiring and always seeking community feedback. The words and opinions offered up need to be quickly and routinely critiqued by the community.”

American newspapers and their editorial pages are no longer the sole gatekeeper of the information commons in most communities. In print, although perhaps not online, their reach is shrinking. There are alternatives online now, and there will be more, as the owners of TV, radio, print, Internet and mobile platforms all converge. Since the 1930s, many editors accepted a “public trust” model to describe their stewardship of the precious and dominant print service. Most felt an obligation to – at least within a certain range – reflect ideological balance and a somewhat neutral point of view in the news columns – and openness to diverse views on the editorial pages. I am not suggesting that news organizations abandon impartial news coverage – that remains a vital service. What I’m saying is that the competitive and cultural landscape has changed to the point that users/participants now expect advice and counsel as they form opinions and take civic action.

My own view is that publishers who want to survive in the new participatory culture are going to have to revert back to the 19th-century form and be willing to coach and lead their users – openly – to active participation in civic life, in the discussions of the public sphere. There is integrity in strong opinions strongly felt. In the navigator and valet role, you can continue to show your users the way to other points of view. As the referee, you can hone and moderate the opinion that you sponsor and pay for on your own websites and pages. But somewhere, you ought to be coaching, too. Yes that implies taking a position. Information consumers, because of the Internet, can pick the poison when it comes to advocacy and point of view. I would argue that you can join in – as long as you do so transparently and independently of your news operation. If you don't spend some time in the coach role, you will miss out on the participatory culture.

Navigator, valet, referee, teacher/coach. These four terms form a continuum starting at relative detachment . . . the navigator . . . to advice . . . the valet . . . to creating the playing field . . . the referee . . . to building the community . . . the coach. Four distinct voices. But all, I think necessary in series, not parallel, in an era of virtual community. Because the Internet has enabled a new layer of community. Community used to be physical -- or perhaps topical. Now there is a virtual layer. And that virtual layer, even in the largest newspaper, is capable of being accessed, managed and played with by editors, almost in the same way that I as a rural weekly editor was able to work directly with my community.

The navigator finds, the valet recommends, the referee connects and facilitates community. And the teacher/coach builds community.

FINDING THE TOOLS

So what are the tools the editorialist can draw upon to adopt these new voices?

When speaking in any of the four voices, the editorialist's toolbox has changed. Where once the news organization had more in common with experts in its access to specialized information and data, now the public has caught up. Much of the factual grist the editorialist can summon is equally available to the public via the Internet. So now you have to be prepared to explain why you picked two sources out of the 10 available to muster an argument. You add value by assessing the validity and authenticity of those sources.

So what are the tools the editorialist can draw upon to adopt these new voices?

First, let's be explicit about the workspace where you should be applying your tools.

- On your organizations website
- Local radio
- Cable-access TV
- Text-messaging services
- In cafes, and schools (*see the discussion of NewsCafes later*)
- Where else?

ELEVEN IDEAS FOR ADDING VOICE TO THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

1. **George White and the Mexican readership council**

There are lots of ways to study how your now-participatory audience views what you're doing. I asked Media Giraffe Project advisory-board member George White, from UCLA's Center for Communications and Community, to describe the work he has been doing with readership councils. He suggested creating an online readership council for the opinion page. Here is an extensive report

on an innovative council program at a chain of Mexican newspapers. White's center assigned the story and it's [posted on White's C3 Online website](#) . This approach to getting community input can be applied to digital opinion pages. Here's how:

1. Select a readership council and change the membership every six months --ensure that the council is demographically diverse.
2. Encourage the council to suggest topics for editorials and opinion page commentaries. The council could also suggest that specific people write certain commentaries.
3. The council members would write brief essays on why the news organization should address certain topics. On some occasions, the best arguments for addressing some topics could actually be posted on the opinion page.

2. John Rash and putting readers in the lineup

In Minneapolis, John Rash has worked at an advertising agency for 25 years. He also lectures at the University of Minnesota journalism school, writes a column on the op/ed page of the *Star Tribune*, and has a weekday, five-minute commentary show on the CBS radio O&O. His idea: Put readers in rotation in the op/ed lineup, by inviting them into the some part of the editorial-formulation process. You might think initially that having an "outsider" in the closed-door debate over the paper's editorial voice may stifle debate. But who really are the outsiders?

Rash's idea has already been tried. Beth Lawton of the Newspaper Association of America reports in her *Digital Edge Snapshot* on the experience in New Hampshire of the *Nashua Telegraph*. The daily enlisted the high school's television-production class in video recording (and live-streaming!) the editorial board's interview with all the presidential candidates through the newspaper's Web site. That report is here: <http://tinyurl.com/38v2zj>

Rash suggests giving readers a "heads up" on the next day's editorial a day ahead of time – even the position you're thinking about taking. "You could write in print and online, 'here's what we plan on editorializing about online tomorrow.' Ask the audience for input. This is a step back from the LA Times open wiki experiment. You're not inviting the public to write the editorial, but to inform the thinking that goes into it before it's finished. Why didn't papers do this 30 years ago? Because you couldn't get that kind of real-time participation other than via a phone call. Now you can, so why not?

3. The streaming editorial visit

Rash says there's an opportunity to experiment with video in many forms. How about videotaping or live streaming an editorial-board meeting . . . an endorsement session . . . or a visiting with civic activists on an important public issue? The tools to do so are practically free. What would be lost compared with the added point of engagement with the public? Nash worries He worries a bit that some of the real honest collegian but contentious debate ion an editorial board meeting might be compromised because people don't want to say anything politically incorrect on video. Would the resulting dialog be less candid and less free ranging? The only sure answer is to try it.

4. Nick Reville and the video curator

[Nick Reville](#) and a couple of high-school buddies from Worcester, Mass., started a nonprofit called The Participatory Culture Foundation and built a web browser called "Miro", that it is designed to help a user to manage video feeds rather than text. Reville's goal was to create an environment where video syndication can occur without a central authority. People such as Mitch Kapor, the founder of Lotus Development Corp., and the Mozilla Foundation, which owns the Firefox browser,

are contributors to Miro. Reville was one of the people from whom I sought advice on newspaper editorial voice. He's about 25. Reville says he's enthusiastic about using the web to promote localism with such things as EveryBlock.com, OpenCongress.org, Flickr and the idea of geotagging. A couple of words of advice from Reville:

Find 20 or 30 of the best local blogs in your circulation area – or however many you can find – and get in touch with them – whether text or video. Link to the best of their posts in print and online. Invite some to do a guest blog or column. Magnify, them, says Reville, because they are likely to be some of the best thinkers in the community. Even consider posting comments on those blogs. “When you insert yourself in the conversation,” says Reville, “you become relevant to those online people.” The idea, says Reville, is to be in the position of curator of local resources. “The approach in traditional print journalism has been a closed loop,” concludes Reville. “But there is a chance to be a trusted source for recommendations on lots of external content.”

5. Sorting and creating letters – two ideas

Another idea from Rash – the letter-data mash up. Why not organize what you know about letters, so many of which now come in by email? Cache the zip code of the sender; tag the views expressed. Over time, you can develop a picture of how the geography of your users is reflected in their concerns as expressed in letters.

Ithaca's Dianne Lynch, who I mention earlier, pointed me to an idea which takes the letter data mashup idea a step backward – to encourage your users to create the letter in the first place. It's an Open Source application called “Vox Pop” that University of Kansas students built as part of a Knight-Foundation funded Innovation Incubator project involving five college journalism programs. It can add links to every news story or op/ed material on a news website (and can be printed in the paper, too). Readers can click on the link and be taken to a page that lists all of the 'newsmakers' in the story, with their contact information, both electronic and snail mail, as well as phone. Readers can click on the box, write a letter to their newsmaker or representative and send it -- no more saying, "I'm going to write that guy a letter" and never getting around to it. BUT just as important, says Lynch, a copy of that message goes to the editor.... so editors can track who's contacting their local officials and about what -- a measure of the issues and concerns of the community in a dynamic and organic way.

LINKS ABOUT VOX POX:

<http://www.news.ku.edu/2007/november/7/journalism.shtml>

<http://ehub.journalism.ku.edu/innovation/>

<http://newshare.typepad.com/mediagiraffe/2007/10/audio-students-.html>

<http://newshare.typepad.com/mediagiraffe/2007/10/video-students-.html>

<http://jschoolmichstate.blogspot.com/2007/06/innovation-incubator-launches-in-ithaca.html>

<http://newsideas.org/innovationincubators.html>

6. Reaching immigrant, other communities

Every immigrant community has an immigrant infrastructure that helps people adjust when they arrive in the United States, says Campbell Mithun's Rash. What about reaching out to the organizations, which drive that adjustment, asking for ongoing comment on the first-generation experience? Similarly, have you considered appearing on a music-station talk show or picked another community, literally and figuratively, that you don't normally reach?

In Lawrence, Kansas, *Journal World* Managing Editor Dennis Anderson invites minority leaders into the paper twice a month to critique coverage and to suggest stories or issues the paper needs to keep an eye on. He asked each participant to subscribe to the paper and to clip articles for discussion. He asks them to make a one-year commitment to participate. “This was valuable,” says

Anderson. "Because try as we might, a white middle aged editor still sees the world through the eyes of a white middle aged editor, but the group can make your more sensitive to issues minorities care about."

7. Chris Ridder and tech-related ways to foster more participation

Ideas from [Chris Ridder](#), a residential fellow at the Center for Internet and Society at Stanford University and a former journalist turned lawyer. He litigates copyright and trademark issues in the public interest, in addition to engaging in academic research. His advice:

- Blog your editorials, signed or unsigned, so that readers can add comments.
- Use <http://www.twitter.com> (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>) to send under-140-word teasers about your page content – perhaps the day before they hit the street – to a network of Twitter users. Twittering describes the sending of extremely short blogs across a special network.
- Enable people reading the newspaper to become aware of each other's presence and chat (or be in virtual worlds) with each other about letters, op/ed or editorials as they are reading them online.
- Invite users to generate content. Preferably, let them own the IP, too. CNN's <http://www.iReport.com> is an example. The network allows users to post unfiltered photos and video clips. A small percentage are then vetted and used by CNN on the cable network. The rest are left on the iReport.com website. The same approach could be taken with op/ed material and letters.

An example of the highly interactive news website (from Rich Gordon):
The Racine Journal Times (Lee Enterprises):
<http://www.journaltimes.com>

8. Scott Karp and Publish2.com

Commentary should be written as if you are talking to a group of people sitting in the same room as you, says Scott Karp, former head of interactive for The Atlantic Monthly and now a startup entrepreneur with Publish 2.0, a beta-stage platform for allowing journalists to share source links and stories. Karp says editorials should link to other editorials, discuss and acknowledge the opinions of other commentators -- that's one reason why the blogosphere is so dynamic while the newspaper editorial seems so static and stale by comparison. Bloggers engage in debate and conversation by linking to each other -- so should MSM commentators. The world of opinion has gotten very crowded and competitive. Newspaper commentators and editorial writers also need to realize that they no longer have a monopoly on the dissemination of opinion -- the world of opinion has gotten very crowded and competitive. "The typical journalistic voice, even for commentary, is detached, aloof, writing from on high," says Karp. "I think the key is to establish a sense of intimacy, as you would talking to someone face to face. You're only going to have a "conversation" if people feel like you are actually talking to them rather than at them. That's how the best blogs manage to get so many comments -- it actually feels like people are talking to each other. So the difference is writing with a writer's voice vs. your actual voice."

9. Fabrice Florin – help for the valet – trusted news ratings

In the role of information valet, or authenticator, editors might review the work of Newstrust.net, a non-profit website which helps the public to discover and promote quality journalism. Founder [Fabrice Florin](#), a former Macromedia and Apple executive who started out as a television documentary producer, [lists principles](#) which could be adopted by newspaper editorial-page editors to guide their work of discovering and recommending quality comment and news to their readers. The ratings parameters at NewsTrust include:

- Recommendation: Is it a good story?
- Trust: Do you trust this publication?
- Information: Is this story informative?
- Fairness: Is this story fair?
- Sources: Is this story well sourced?
- Context: Does this story show the "big picture"?

More Ratings:

- Evidence: Does this story provide factual evidence?
- Importance: Is this an important topic?
- Balance: Does this story present all key viewpoints?
- Style: Is this story well presented?
- Your Knowledge: Do you know about this topic?
- Accuracy: Is this story accurate?

At this point, many of you are probably a bit overwhelmed. You're thinking, "How am I going to find the time to engage communities in all these new ways, when I still have to write a daily editorial, edit the syndicated columnists, layout the daily pages and still have time to read and stay expert on the news? I think there are at least two answers to that question. I'll let Brad Stenger speak to one of them, and the other will be one of the crazy ideas we should discuss.

10. Brad Stenger – envisioning the news machine

Brad Stenger works for Wired Magazine. He and a team of about five other people organize an annual technology fair called "[Wired NextFest](#)" – this year it will be in Chicago – which attracts tens of thousands of visitors who want to learn about the newest inventions, systems, networks, gadgets and gizmos in information technology and technology generally. Brad has a graduate computer-science degree from George Tech and he just co-convened a 150-person gathering in Atlanta – co-sponsored by Yahoo, Google and others – entitled "[Symposium on Computation + Journalism.](#)" The premise – and this is also the premise of our NewsTools2008 gathering – is that journalists need to reach out to technologists. Together, they need to create the next generation of tools that will expand the ways journalists can be assisted by computers – to let the machines do some of the work of culling and comparing of multiple data sources – so the journalists have more time to analyze the results, to think and write and give voice to what all the data means.

Stenger outlined in an email to me his vision of a "computational editorial writer." We'll call this the CEW. He says the CEW will rely on a machine (not literally, but machine in the sense of a collection of computer-driven resources). That machine will support research required and helps to produce material in the volume and quality expected for an editorial page. To understand what he means, he suggests looking at: <http://www.everyblock.com>, developed by [Adrian Holovaty](#) -- where the local data streams are collected and where possible summarized and visualized. But that's only good for a coarse overview.

- You get a little closer by adding to the machine the voices in the community who blog and have RSS feeds.
- And for those voices who don't blog, you construct a Google search on key identifiers of those local VIPs, and then use the Google-generated RSS feed of that search to create an active source of intelligence about that person, or local issue.
- The CEW's machine should also track what's written on editorial pages in peer communities whether local, national, or international. If there's no RSS feed to tap those sources, it'll still be worth the work to screen scrape those sources and format it into RSS. That way all those sources can be accessed together.

EXAMPLE: <http://www.mediagiraffe.org/docs/stenger.png>

Stenger says if you can assemble all the inputs into a dashboard like his, now the machine has got a way to extract insights so that all the data can start life as a writing project. Or if the research points to a detail that adds to a project underway, the machine should help to plug those details in, keep writing projects in order and move the writing into the news organization's larger content management system. Stenger points to [Zotero](#), an example of a Firefox extension that does something like this. It's a tool that is designed for academic researchers to manage their intellectual workflow. And he wonders if something like this could be useful to journalists, too.

Change could go two directions, concludes Stenger. It could just make the same 900-word essays more thoughtful, better written, and possessing greater impact, while essentially maintaining the same shape and character. Or the increased productivity might also free up organizational bandwidth to experiment with new interfaces, new media formats, or new research methods--call them possible upgrades to the basic *machine*.

11. John Wilpers and the embedded blogs

John Wilpers has spent a career in mainstream media, editing dailies, writing editorials at *The Boston Globe*, and taking professional risks to help start three different free dailies in Boston and Washington, D.C. He's now consulting to the Los Angeles Times, helping the paper prepare to implement a massive community blogging strategy. At the free daily BostonNOW, which began publishing almost a year ago, some 30% of the daily content is from among more than 250 blogs that are on the paper's website. As BostonNOW's inaugural editor, Wilpers was adamant about putting blogger-submitted copy right beside the wires and staff-written stories. This "reverse publishing" strategy is exactly what needs to happen in every newsroom. Wilpers wrote to me: "You have to embrace those community voices in your work, in your pages, and on your website. You can't ghetto-ize them on special blogger pages buried in a corner of your website and doomed never to appear in print. Embed them in your web pages and in newsprint. Create opportunities for interaction between them and yourselves as well as within the community of readers." Wilpers says that from his experience at both BostonNOW and the LA Times, "I can tell you that when you make a courtesy call to tell a blogger his or her stuff is going to appear in the paper, you are creating a new fan, potentially a new reader, and certainly a link in a grassroots, viral marketing campaign that you couldn't buy."

However technology and journalism mash up in the years ahead, the best-of-breed news organization, in the words of Google technologist Bob Wyman, "will be something that includes email, social networking, spreadsheets, accounting software, etc. – the best newspaper will be an integrated part of a system that addresses the users' broad and integrated set of requirements."

Newspapers as Networks:

<http://www.naa.org/docs/Digital-Edge/de-social-media07.pdf>

RADICAL / CRAZY IDEA NUMBER ONE: END THE OMNISCIENT VOICE

So here we go with four crazy ideas. The first – end the omniscient voice. Scott Karp wrote with the same idea. He said: “Here’s a radical idea: Instead of writing the editorials with no byline, the product of some faceless editorial committee, have the editor who actually wrote it sign it. The editor should explain how the issue was discussed and decided with other editors. Make it transparent.”

Consider the possibility that where you have an editorial board, deciding positions to take on a public issue – would it make sense to report the dissent, or the vote, and might that provide a nuance to the view expressed that could actually make it more powerful, particularly when an editorial is backed by a strong majority or a unanimous editorial board?

I remember as a teen-ager coming of age and beginning to pay attention to newspapers being perplexed at the newspapers, which said, “*The Boston Globe* has endorsed” I thought to myself, “How could a *thing* endorse a person?” It had to be a person or a set of people. Why not say so? The Supreme Court does not decide a case, a majority of the Supreme Court does. That majority is composed of individual justices. Sometimes we know the vote and sometimes we don’t. I think the transparency of the count, and the ratio of support, makes the decisions of the court more nuanced and more powerful.

CRAZY IDEA NO. 2 – THROW AWAY THE EDITORIAL PAGE

Crazy Idea No. 2 goes a step further to ask this question: Is it time to throw away the editorial page? I’m not saying throw away the letters, or the informed commentary – or even one or more daily editorials which speak – by name – with the authority of a learned editorialist or identified board. What I’m suggesting is a new name and mission for it. Have this page be the home base for all of the multimedia engagement efforts of the 21st century news organization. And so I would call it the “Engagement” page. Now perhaps we don’t yet have the perfect name here – we don’t want people turning **THERE** for wedding photos – but I hope you get the idea. We can talk about the philosophical change a name change would represent.

CRAZY IDEA NO. 3 – THE CITIZEN JOURNALISM ACADEMY

If our voice is going to include that of referee and coach, then the 21st-century news organization is going to have to engage with and empower more public voices. A challenge then, is how to teach those voices to be effective. In Lawrence, Kansas, the World Company has done this by launching a Citizen Journalism Academy. Citizens apply to be a part of the Academy. The World Co. – which owns the daily, the cable system and an ISP in the college town west of Kansas City – then selects about 25 applicants for a program which involves once-a-week night meetings for about a month -- to teach them how to write, how to shoot video, how to prepare web-friendly copy. The editorialist in charge of the Engagement page might adopt the role organizing the local citizen-journalism academy.

Cody Howard, who runs the CJA in Lawrence, says there are now over 70 graduates. He says: “This is a diverse group of people, highly engaged in the news process. They provide content -- print stories and blogs we might not normally be aware of as a news organization -- and feedback about stories and projects.” These graduates don’t just writing about cooking, music, arts and their personal lives -- they are now infused with a journalist’s sense of mission to make a difference. They are covering meetings, events, ideas – and offering their work to the Journal World and its cable TV and its website. It’s a whole new source of serious, original reporting – seeded by the local news organization.

Cody Howard works for Ralph Gage, World Co.'s general manager. Here's what Gage says: "Efforts such as the Citizen academy don't cost much-- pop, cookies, shirts, plaques, etc. They take time and care and they build another sort of ROI. But with the landscape changing, it's imperative to nurture those relationships and to have established yourself in the community's mind. Where'd the first reports from the West Virginia shootings come from?"

CRAZY IDEA NO. 4 – NEWSCAFES.ORG

A few years ago, I joined the chamber board where I lived at a time when the president was just opening with his wife their own wireless-enabled Starbucks-style café mostly to serve the community which swirls around the 2,000-student college in town. I've been out of the print publishing business for a few years, but I talked to him about the idea of setting up a cubby in the back room of his new café, where a community blogger could meet with sources, officials and fellow observers, using the café as a physical presence for what would otherwise be a virtual web news service.

Then in April of last year, former *Berkshire Eagle* Editor David Scribner and I starting talking with a college in Bennington, Vt., about combining its ownership of the only radio station in town – a commercial AM license – with a website and physical presence in a downtown coffee shop. The idea is to broadcast the news, and feed the website, and write the articles, from a coffee shop in the center of town. Two weeks ago, Southern Vermont College announced it was willing to work with a community group to make this vision a reality. We've registered the domain "NewsCafes.org" to do so.

And so my fourth and final crazy idea is this: Why don't you extend your Engagement page out into the community, forge a relationship with one or more coffee shops, and establish your own NewsCafes.org for meetings, discussions and sharing with your participatory audience?

THE CORE CHALLENGE

To sum up: The core challenge we face is turning civic affairs back into a contact sport, not a spectator sport. News organizations must drift away from detachment, to learn, try and embrace the tools of engagement. To do this requires thinking about these voices: Navigator, valet, referee and even coach.

However technology and journalism mash up in the years ahead, the best-of-breed news organization, in the words of Google technologist Bob Wyman, "will be something that includes email, social networking, spreadsheets, accounting software, etc. – the best newspaper will be an integrated part of a system that addresses the users' broad and integrated set of requirements."

MANNING THE LISTENING POSTS

I'll give the last word to our Journalism That Matters co-collaborator, Chris Peck, the editor and former APME and ASNE president. He wrote about his vision of the "next editorial board nestled inside the next newsroom." And here's what he wrote:

"The desks increasingly will be occupied by young, Web-savvy personalities – who aren't there much. No more will the editorial board be chained to the telephone. Instead, the editorial board is out and about at listening posts set up in coffee shops, schools and retirement centers. Back in the office, the workday for the editorial board involves hosting online conversations, blogging, tapping into social networks to gather feedback and convening community discussions. And, the opinion writers work directly with citizen contributors. Together, they help shape the master narratives for empowering, not discouraging, those who live in a place."

Thank-you.

APPENDIX A

MORE ON THE POYNTER EXCHANGE:

One thread included an observation from former TV news director Terry Heaton. In today's world, Heaton said, the masses have access to much of the same knowledge bases that the elite experts formerly held and protected. And so the news organization is in a less privileged position. "If we are to find our future legs," writes Heaton. "We must look to view how the press can best serve the participatory culture, not one wherein we function from elite pedestals."

To this, [Steve Yelvington](#), the award-winning vice-president of digital strategy/content at Morris Digital Works, suggested the reading of Harvard University Prof. Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone*, and the related resources at <http://www.bettertogether.org>. Yelvington says Putnam's sociology research shows a strong correlation between "building social capital" and active consumption of local news. Does active news reading breed civic involvement, or the other way around? In either case, Yelvington argues, in effect, that news organizations need to come off the pedestal and engage. He writes: "It may seem heresy to start talking about creating an activist campaign to build social capital. But it would not be heresy to a 19th-century newspaper fonder, many of whom took on community-building as a personal and institutional mission."

Taking on a role to "form communities rather than just inform them," is how Poynter senior researcher Roy P. Clark advanced the comments of Heaton and Yelvington. Clark says building such social capital may be the best opportunity for news organizations to survive and prosper, to help citizens see themselves as part of a physical community, and to help strengthen those communities.

In preparing for this evening, I asked Dianne Lynch, dean of the Park School of Communication at Ithaca College, for her thoughts on editorial voice, and her comments, synchronize nicely with the Online-news thread I've just been quoting. Lynch says journalists and editorial writers are still experts, but they are experts in a sea of independent voices, many of which are equally expert and some of which have better information than the journalist. So Lynch says the "new" news professional role is that of presenter and participant "in the community as the organizer/convener of conversations in which s/he is not the central voice."

That's in fact, roughly what *Bowling Alone's* Putnam apparently recommended two weeks ago at a conference organized by the Knight Foundation. Knight gathered representatives of the nation's community foundations to showcase arguments that those foundations should be putting their philanthropic dollars to work supporting local journalism. In a talk, Putnam called for . . . quote . . . "practical strategies for building a more encompassing sense of 'we'."

Rich Gordon, who is associate professor and director of digital technology in education at the Medill School, heard Putnam's speech, and he blogged: "Putnam's research ought to be a clarion call for citizens, journalists and media companies in cities, towns and neighborhoods across the United States . . . the new research reinforces the need, especially in our most diverse communities, to build new ways for people to connect with one another."



JTM – Journalism as a conversation

For the last 18 months, the Media Giraffe Project has been working with the Commercial Appeal's Chris Peck, with consultants Stephen Silha, Peggy Holman and with Len Witt of Kennesaw State University to stage a series of roundtable events on the theme "[Journalism That Matters.](#)" Much of the dialog focuses on what "We The Media" book author and Arizona State University professor Dan Gillmor calls "journalism as a conversation rather than a lecture." I asked Holman to summarize JTM's key strategies. We:

- Focus on the art of engagement – developing the skills of both face-to-face and online conversation, where stories are sourced from ordinary people and places.
- Help journalists prepare to be conveners and navigators.
- Teach a "ready, fire, aim" strategy, moving from idea (ready) to implementation (fire) without months of planning (aim). The news industry isn't used to this approach. But in an era of open source and digital publishing, the cost of experimenting is trivial compared with the cost of failing to innovate out a spiral to irrelevance.
- Cultivate renewal of a "healthy inner life" for the journalist, preparing the next generation, with an eye toward the emerging citizen journalist role.
- Our next gathering is <http://www.NewsTools2008.org> -- April 30-May 3 at Yahoo-Sunnyvale.