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IS JOURNALISM INTERESTED IN RESOLUTION, OR ONLY IN CONFLICT?

JOHN J. PAULY*

One of the things we say about journalism, most often and routinely, is that its thirst for conflict is unquenchable. Critics have cited the profession's habit of framing issues between opposing views, portraying elections as horse races, attending more closely to strong, extreme minority opinions than to the moderate majority, and returning again and again to familiar stories of violence and human depravity.¹ Many of these observations seem true, although they do not explain why journalists turn so often to tales of conflict as a way of organizing their news work.

Organizational structures, bureaucratic work routines, economic constraints, and professional norms all contribute to journalism's preference for conflict.² News organizations recognize conflict and revolution more easily than they do slower, more subtle forms of social change. They know it when they see it, believe the audience will find it interesting, and know how to mobilize their resources in order to cover it.

As storytellers, journalists constantly seek and exploit narrative tension. The time constraints of newsgathering make reliance on opposing sources a quick and simple way to tell stories across many content areas. The institutions journalism most regularly survey are, by their nature, sites of deep social and political conflict, including battlefields, city streets, courts, and legislatures. Conflict, then, is not merely one of the types of stories that journalists cover; in many respects, it is the very mode through which journalists normally understand and interpret the world.³

For anyone seeking the peaceful resolution of international conflicts and disputes, and hoping journalism might contribute to that goal, an unasked question hangs uncomfortably over this analysis: Is journalism as deeply committed to the resolution of human conflict as it is to its meticulous

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1. *See generally* JEAN SEATON, *CARNAGE AND THE MEDIA: THE MAKING AND BREAKING OF NEWS ABOUT VIOLENCE* (2005).

2. Three decades of field research by sociologists have produced a rich literature on the organizational dynamics of news work. For a classic example of this work, see HERBERT J. GANS, *DECIDING WHAT'S NEWS: A STUDY OF CBS EVENING NEWS, NBC NIGHTLY NEWS, NEWSWEEK, AND TIME* (Northwestern University Press 2004) (1979).

3. *See* Michael Schudson, *The Virtues of an Unlovable Press*, in *WHAT CAN BE DONE? MAKING THE MEDIA AND POLITICS BETTER* 23, 28 (John Lloyd & Jean Seaton eds., 2006).

documentation? For violent conflicts such as war, genocide, and terrorism, the stakes are particularly high. Is journalism's possessive investment in disorder so great that it lacks the will or ability to change its habits, presuming that such change would be desirable for all of us?⁴

Journalists' own way of talking about their work can blur the moral issues at stake. Reporters who have covered international events for decades sometimes describe themselves as eyewitnesses to history or scribes of its first draft.⁵ In such usages, journalists cite their presence at actual events as a guarantee of the reality and truthfulness of their accounts. But media scholars have noted that the term *witness* carries a wider range of moral implication, for we think of a witness not just as someone present *at* an event but as someone present *to* its implications and charged with testifying to others about what was seen.⁶ Journalists struggle to carry the burdens of this role, however, for it seemingly conflicts with their professional norms of nonpartisanship.⁷

Members of the profession more comfortably describe themselves as observers on the sidelines, forever present as history unfolds, but as themselves only incidental to the action.⁸ In more assertive versions of their professional mythology, when defending the public's right to know or exposing corruption, journalists sometimes celebrate a stronger notion of witnessing, although they typically justify their moral outrage in factual terms—that is, as merely making available information to which the public has a right, or making visible the effects of otherwise hidden corruption.⁹ Journalists claim both the weak and strong senses of witnessing as constitutive of their profession—both the everyday routines in which the

4. For an argument that journalism and the audience share a reciprocal relationship in producing representations of violence, see SEATON, *supra* note 1.

5. This habit of thinking about journalists as witnesses to history is most obvious in the titles of war correspondents' memoirs. See, e.g., PETER ARNETT, *LIVE FROM THE BATTLEFIELD: FROM VIETNAM TO BAGHDAD: 35 YEARS IN THE WORLD'S WAR ZONES* (1994); THOMAS GOLTZ, *CHECHNYA DIARY: A WAR CORRESPONDENT'S STORY OF SURVIVING THE WAR IN CHECHNYA* (2003); FRED INGLIS, *PEOPLE'S WITNESS: THE JOURNALIST IN MODERN POLITICS* (2002); PAUL PRESTON, *WE SAW SPAIN DIE: FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR* (2008); JON SNOW, *SHOOTING HISTORY: A PERSONAL JOURNEY* (2004); JAMES TOBIN, *ERNIE PYLE'S WAR: AMERICA'S EYEWITNESS TO WORLD WAR II* (1997).

6. John Durham Peters, *Witnessing*, 23 *MEDIA, CULTURE & SOC'Y* 707, 708–10 (2001); see also Carrie A. Rentschler, *Witnessing: U.S. Citizenship and the Vicarious Experience of Suffering*, 26 *MEDIA, CULTURE & SOC'Y* 298 (2004) (describing the role of media in the public's witnessing of human suffering).

7. JAMES S. ETTEMA & THEODORE L. GLASSER, *CUSTODIANS OF CONSCIENCE: INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND PUBLIC VIRTUE* (1998).

8. See GANS, *supra* note 2, at 183–84; see also JAY ROSEN, *WHAT ARE JOURNALISTS FOR?* 54 (1999) (pointing out the tendency of journalists to see themselves as observers).

9. See ETTEMA & GLASSER, *supra* note 7, at 8–9.

reporter impartially describes events, and the dramatic moments when reporters step forward to expose a truth that leads to social change.

I wish to explore the implications of American journalists' understanding of their profession for the study of international conflict. My conclusions affirm a general point made by Eytan Gilboa in this symposium—that journalists tend to concentrate on some phases of conflict rather than others, particularly on its build-up and the violence itself, with little attention to the processes of peacemaking or the ultimate resolution.¹⁰ I arrive at a similar end by a different path—by describing how the historical contradictions of journalists' own profession have led to what seems to others an apparent preference for conflict narratives and an apparent indifference to resolution.

My argument proceeds in three steps. First, I show how the evolution of mass media has structured the profession's work, situating journalists at the very center of social and political conflict but limiting their cultural authority to interpret what they witness. Second, I briefly reprise the public journalism debate of the 1990s as a revealing example of what happened when journalism educators and critics as well as reformers within news organizations tried to alter the profession's approach to conflict. Finally, I analyze how conventional journalism understands its own communicative practices, and ask whether journalism is capable of contributing to the dialogical conversations that conflict resolution requires.¹¹

I.

In a wise essay published at the height of the American involvement in the Vietnam War, the journalism scholar James Carey argued that the communication revolution of the nineteenth century had unleashed contradictory forces of centralization and decentralization, and that those forces have powerfully structured and constrained the work of journalists and other professional communicators ever since.¹² By "communication revolution," Carey meant the application of industrial techniques of manufacture to the creation, distribution, and consumption of cultural materials.¹³ We sometimes remember that revolution as a series of inventions that by the mid-nineteenth century had culminated in a remarkable new

10. Eytan Gilboa, *Media and Conflict Resolution: A Framework for Analysis*, 93 MARQ. L. REV. 87 (2009).

11. For an extended analysis of this last point, see ROB ANDERSON, ROBERT DARDENNE & GEORGE M. KILLENBERG, *THE CONVERSATION OF JOURNALISM: COMMUNICATION, COMMUNITY, AND NEWS* (1994).

12. See James W. Carey, *The Communications Revolution and the Professional Communicator*, in 13 SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW MONOGRAPH: THE SOCIOLOGY OF MASS MEDIA COMMUNICATORS 23, 24–31 (Paul Halmos ed., 1969).

13. See *id.* at 23–24.

communication medium: the daily newspaper. Considered the new technology of its era, the daily newspaper deepened and extended the powers of the printing press, using steam power and stereotype plates to accelerate production, woodpulp paper and cheap ink to reduce costs, and the telegraph to gather information from across the globe.¹⁴ Equally profound social, political, and economic changes supported this technological revolution and made it meaningful. The creation of a postal system that favored publications with low rates, the Protestant commitment to literacy, the expansion of public education, transportation improvements that opened and extended markets, democratization in Europe and the United States, and the growth of cities all played a role.¹⁵ What the daily newspaper lent to this emerging social system was a sense of coherence and purpose. Each day it offered a microcosm of society, available for reflection and debate, and it created a business model that could fund its own production and renewal.¹⁶ One of the earliest consumer products created by the industrial revolution was news, society's daily image of itself.

Carey recognized that these new structures of production necessarily refigured relationships of cultural authority and status between center and margin and, as a result, professional communicators would find themselves forever enmeshed in controversy. On one hand, Carey argued, the new communication media embodied centripetal forces.¹⁷ Large city dailies and national magazines possessed the power to gather masses of readers into a single audience that cut across group boundaries and geography.¹⁸ On the other hand, these very same structural changes also produced countervailing forms of decentralization, which Carey called a centrifugal effect.¹⁹ Communication technology creates new niches for groups with specialized, subversive, or stigmatized interests, and can publicize across the society the existence of a group that, in its own locale, had once felt hidden, protected, or isolated.²⁰ Both centripetal and centrifugal forces, Carey noted, call into existence "the national" as a contested cultural space, either by creating widely shared and uniform cultural products and rituals designed to draw

14. See PAUL STARR, *THE CREATION OF THE MEDIA: POLITICAL ORIGINS OF MODERN COMMUNICATIONS* 252 (2004).

15. See *id.* at 27, 88, 110, 233–35, 252 (describing the political impact on the media of these factors and others).

16. *Id.* at 252; Carey, *supra* note 12, at 24.

17. Carey, *supra* note 12, at 24–25.

18. *Id.* This is the media effect implied when we express our fear of the ideological power of mainstream media or the way in which popular culture creates a mass society or appeals to the lowest common denominator.

19. *Id.* at 31.

20. See *id.* at 24–26.

everyone together or by testifying to isolated groups that their special interest should be considered as normal.²¹

Conflict inevitably emerges from both these tendencies, in related but somewhat different forms. Centralized culture inspires discussions of *representation*—about who will get to speak for whom; whose way of life will be celebrated, ridiculed, or rendered invisible; how different groups will be portrayed in one another's presence; or how political issues will be framed.²² Decentralized culture inspires discussions of *difference*—about what essence marks group life as distinctive, how the wider society treats the special group, or how the group might remain authentically true to its fundamental values.²³ In each case, the debate attempts to name the “we” that binds society together. When talking about the American nation as a whole, for example, groups vie to name the country as Christian, libertarian, capitalist, or republican in its founding impulse and core values. When smaller, specialized groups discuss their relation to the larger society, they vie for authenticity, claiming to define the group's sense of its best traditions or lived reality. For example, country music aficionados endlessly debate the meaning of “country,” and earlier styles once ridiculed as inauthentic, such as the Nashville sound of the 1960s, came to be considered classic.²⁴

Carey's ultimate point was that professional communicators cannot escape these dilemmas, for the very structure of the media organizations they serve creates the conditions of group conflict over public language and images.²⁵ Every medium of communication assembles an audience, market, or public for commercial, political, religious, or intellectual purposes. By their very nature, mass media become nodes within the social system, and sites of group awareness, interaction, competition, accommodation, and conflict. In this they resemble the cities in whose histories they have figured so profoundly. Lewis Mumford, the historian of technology and culture, once wrote that we ought to think of the city as “a theater of social action” in which all human effort—commerce, art, education, politics—serves to make the drama of social relations “richly significant.”²⁶ Mass media hope to render the world intelligible, and in debates about their form and content we can detect the

21. *Id.* at 24–27, 31. A similar and influential account of this same phenomenon that emphasizes the role of news is offered in BENEDICT ANDERSON, *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF NATIONALISM* (2006).

22. See Carey, *supra* note 12, at 24–25.

23. See *id.* at 25–26.

24. JOLI JENSEN, *NASHVILLE SOUND: AUTHENTICITY, COMMERCIALIZATION AND COUNTRY MUSIC* (1998).

25. See Carey, *supra* note 12, at 35–37.

26. Lewis Mumford, *What Is a City*, in *THE CITY READER* (Richard T. LeGates & Frederic Stout eds., 1996).

boundaries of group life constantly being drawn and erased.

Of all professional communicators, journalists experience this struggle most deeply, as Carey recognized. News work places journalists at the very nexus of political and social conflict. Conventional wisdom has it that journalists value conflict because of its commercial value.²⁷ Conflict sells. If it bleeds, it leads. But stories about violence are not themselves violence, nor are such stories even usually about violence per se. News offers condensed and powerful moral fables, in which violence figures as a narrative shorthand for the roles, motives, and ethics of the participants.²⁸

The audience approaches stories of conflict wanting to know what it means: What sort of person would do that to another? Whose way of life was defended or attacked today? Who fights fair and obeys the rules of conflict, and who does not? Even more challenging is our expectation that journalists not pick sides when reporting such stories. We expect them to honor their professional norms of impartiality, and we want them to stand in for the public at large and to report and interpret reality with the interests of the commonweal in mind. Even when journalists sometimes retreat to a narrower conception of their work, by covering an event or simply gathering the facts, they do so with some sense of the moral weight they bear. Journalists realize that their stories often set the terms by which groups understand one another.

Time and again journalists find themselves tangled in these contradictions. Does being a witness mean standing on the sidelines and objectively reporting reality, or does it require a deeper advocacy on behalf of the public? Are journalists in the information or the storytelling business? Do journalists have any stake in the consequences of their work, or does their obligation end when the paper goes to press or the broadcast signs off? Like most large questions, these do not lend themselves to easy answers.

What is slightly surprising is that the journalism profession so rarely grapples with ethical questions at this broader level of social implication.²⁹ Newsroom discussions of ethics tend to be narrow and precise, focusing on decisions being made by reporters and editors as they are working on a particular story. For example, over the last decade many American journalists have used a set of ten questions developed by the Poynter Institute's Bob

27. See, e.g., GANS, *supra* note 2, at 214 (suggesting that the expectation of profits is a motivation for story selection).

28. For provocative case studies of how news stories involving violence can be read as mythic tales, see JACK LULE, *DAILY NEWS, ETERNAL STORIES: THE MYTHOLOGICAL ROLE OF JOURNALISM* (2001). For a penetrating analysis of the cultural meanings of violence, see William Ian Miller, *Getting a Fix on Violence*, in *HUMILIATION AND OTHER ESSAYS ON HONOR, SOCIAL DISCOMFORT, AND VIOLENCE* 53 (1993).

29. The best statement of this critique continues to be CLIFFORD G. CHRISTIANS, JOHN P. FERRÉ & P. MARK FACKLER, *GOOD NEWS: SOCIAL ETHICS AND THE PRESS* (1993).

Steele to guide their ethical decision making. Steele's questions ask reporters to examine their own purpose and their need to know their stakeholders' interests and motivations, and to reflect upon the range of perspectives they have consulted, the consequences of their choices, and alternatives to minimize harm.³⁰

These questions do honest ethical work, and they help journalists make better day-to-day decisions. But they sidestep larger issues such as those discussed in this symposium issue. Like many other professions, journalism asks the public to love it on its own terms—that is, to accept the premise that journalists operating within the norms they have set for themselves will create a product that benefits the entire society. In subtle but significant ways, the profession distances itself from any deeper responsibility to support conflict resolution. When both parties to a controversy criticize their performance, journalists respond that they must be doing something right if both sides find fault.³¹

II.

There has been at least one moment in the recent history of American journalism, however, when journalists and critics alike questioned reporters and editors' working assumptions about conflict. The public journalism movement of the 1990s in the United States confronted this issue directly, for it hoped to alter the terms that framed the profession's understanding of its civic purposes and guided its work.³² These understandings had been passed down for decades with little challenge or alteration. Here is the litany of commonplaces: Journalism is the profession that provides information citizens need to participate in democracy. It serves as a watchdog against government corruption. It offers impartial, factual, and objective information uncolored by propaganda or publicity. It alerts citizens to the existence of controversy and conflict, but never enters such controversies itself, always offering citizens enough information to allow them to make up their own minds.³³

30. See Bob Steele, Ask These 10 Questions to Make Good Ethical Decisions, Poynter Online (Feb. 29, 2000), <http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=36&aid=4346#>.

31. See, e.g., JAMES FALLOWS, *BREAKING THE NEWS: HOW THE MEDIA UNDERMINE AMERICAN DEMOCRACY* 5 (1996). For a recent contrarian argument that the most frequently criticized features of journalism, including its penchant for conflict, may be the features that best serve democracy, see Schudson, *supra* note 3, at 23–32.

32. The best overview of public journalism remains ROSEN, *supra* note 8. For an earlier popular account, see ARTHUR CHARITY, *DOING PUBLIC JOURNALISM* (1995). A 1996 Stanford University conference on public journalism led to a collection of critical essays, *THE IDEA OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM* (Theodore L. Glasser ed., 1999). For a more recent critique of public journalism's ideas from a Habermasian perspective, see TANNI HAAS, *THE PURSUIT OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM: THEORY, PRACTICE, AND CRITICISM* (2007).

33. See ROSEN, *supra* note 8, at 54.

Advocates of public journalism found reasons to question each of these premises. The vast amount of information available had not, in fact, led to higher levels of citizen participation, as measured either by voting or participation in civic and service organizations.³⁴ Although reporters occasionally uncovered government wrongdoing, they continued to depend heavily on public officials, allowing unnamed sources to frame stories and only rarely including non-expert citizens' voices in their stories.³⁵ The commitment to objectivity and facts did little to connect the fact-gatherers to the citizens whose interests they hoped to serve.

Historical circumstances after 1988 had deepened the press's sense of its disconnection from community life. Citizens, and even some journalists, noticed that politicians seemed less interested in solving shared social problems than in capitalizing on those problems for partisan advantage, and that the profession's codes of nonpartisanship and objectivity made it difficult for journalism to intervene on the public's behalf in an effective way.³⁶ Others argued that the problem ran even deeper. In a famous and widely cited 1988 essay, Joan Didion described the press's commitment to an "insider baseball" model of public discourse that had, in effect, disenfranchised citizens. Didion thought this shift was evident in the way Americans had begun to talk about politics as "the process":

When we talk about the process, then, we are talking, increasingly, not about "the democratic process," or the general mechanism affording the citizens of a state a voice in its affairs, but the reverse: a mechanism seen as so specialized that access to it is correctly limited to its own professionals, to those who manage policy and those who report on it, to those who run the polls and those who quote them, to those who ask and those who answer the questions on the Sunday shows, to the media consultants, to the columnists, to the issues advisers, to those who give the off-the-record breakfasts and to those who attend them; to that handful of insiders who invent, year in and year out, the narrative of public life.³⁷

Similar critiques would emerge in the work of other prominent journalists, such as E.J. Dionne, William Greider, and James Fallows. Each argued that mainstream journalism seemed implicated in the failures of American politics,

34. See *id.* at 24–25; THE IDEA OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM, *supra* note 32, at xvi, xix–xx.

35. See THE IDEA OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM, *supra* note 32, at xxiii–xxiv.

36. See ROSEN, *supra* note 8, at 36–39.

37. Joan Didion, *Insider Baseball*, in AFTER HENRY 47, 49–50 (1992).

and that the failure was due not just to politicians' manipulation but also to the press's own approach to its work.³⁸

During these same years, dissatisfaction with professional journalism's performance surfaced locally across the country.³⁹ Public journalism found its first advocates among editors and reporters of small-city dailies.⁴⁰ Journalists and their fellow citizens said that their cities had lost a sense of neighborliness and community and were being torn apart by unresolved social problems, and that journalism too often seemed interested only in documenting the problem but not in helping citizens discover a solution.⁴¹

The cities where these experiments occurred tended to share a common feature: Each was experiencing a crisis of identity as it became larger, more complex, more modern, and more prone to big-city miseries.⁴² In Columbus, Georgia, the editor noticed that even though formal segregation had ended years before, blacks and whites hardly knew each other socially, and that this division was making it hard to shape the city's future.⁴³ Wichita, Kansas, was struggling with big-city problems such as street gangs; then, to its dismay, the city found itself at the very center of Operation Rescue's 1991 "Summer of Mercy" anti-abortion demonstrations, which deeply divided community opinion.⁴⁴ In San Jose, California, the Silicon Valley boom had created a large and ambitious commercial center without the infrastructure to support its multicultural population and transportation needs.⁴⁵ In Dayton, Ohio, the impending loss of jobs from the closing of a nuclear weapons plant and Defense Department supply center led to a newspaper-led conversation about "What do we do now?"⁴⁶ In Akron, Ohio, the 1992 Rodney King beating inspired editors to document persistent racial disparities in their own region, and to engage civic groups, religious organizations, and schools in a discussion of how the city might improve race relations.⁴⁷ And in Norfolk, Virginia, editors used citizens' dissatisfaction with election coverage to

38. E.J. DIONNE, JR., *WHY AMERICANS HATE POLITICS* (1991); WILLIAM GREIDER, *WHO WILL TELL THE PEOPLE: THE BETRAYAL OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY* (1992); FALLOWS, *supra* note 31.

39. See ROSEN, *supra* note 8, at 53–54.

40. See HAAS, *supra* note 32, at 12–17 (describing various early public journalism projects, mostly at small-market dailies).

41. See CHARITY, *supra* note 32, at 1–2.

42. ROSEN, *supra* note 8, at 86–127 (describing the use of public journalism in specific communities to address issues of job loss, race, urban sprawl, and political discourse).

43. *Id.* at 28–30.

44. *Id.* at 43–50; HAAS, *supra* note 32, at 13–14; JAMES RISEN & JUDY THOMAS, *WRATH OF ANGELS: THE AMERICAN ABORTION WAR* 317–38 (1998).

45. ROSEN, *supra* note 8, at 101–02.

46. *Id.* at 86–87.

47. *Id.* at 92–95.

imagine a more conversational approach to the work of journalism.⁴⁸

In all these experiments, the journalism profession's attitudes toward political and social conflict were much discussed. For example, at a 1991 meeting of the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot's* staff, senior newsroom leaders, asked to formulate a mission statement to guide their work, said that, "Our responsibility is to identify conflict and air it."⁴⁹ Years later, a new set of editors would question the value of such a mission. The academic founder of the public journalism movement, New York University professor Jay Rosen, summarized the critique:

Is airing conflict a worthy mission, good for its own sake? Certainly the clash of interests, personalities, and parties is part of a noisy public square, which is the kind democracy expects. But reporting on conflict doesn't tell you what your reporting should accomplish. Noting the persistent complaints from readers about an excess of "bad news" and bias in the news columns, *Pilot* editors and reporters wonder about the "distorted mirror of life" that the paper presents: conflict is news because news is about conflict.⁵⁰

We should plainly acknowledge that the public journalism movement often framed its discussion of conflict within a somewhat narrow and too lightly examined set of middle-class American assumptions. The social and political problems that these city editors addressed were indeed damaging, but the level of conflict and violence in these cities remained significantly less than that found in much of the rest of the world. Others might well view these American conflicts as vexing and difficult family disagreements, not the sort of intractable blood feuds found elsewhere.

Similarly, public journalism's imagination of the virtues of community may seem excessively nostalgic and politically unrealistic to many. And it is worth asking whether part of the objection to conflict may be cultural and stylistic; conflict (coded as single-minded argumentativeness) may represent, to some, a betrayal of preferred American values of friendliness and mutual aid. Nonetheless, within the limitations of an American perspective, these concerns over conflict were heartfelt and widespread, and represented inhabitants' sense that the lived experience of their cities had somehow changed.

The debate over public journalism made visible some of the operating

48. *Id.* at 128–30.

49. *Id.* at 145 (internal quotation marks omitted).

50. *Id.* at 146.

assumptions of mainstream journalism, assumptions that hindered reporters from writing about conflict in a way that might encourage resolution. Public journalism advocates quickly identified the profession's bad habits in its handling of news of conflict.⁵¹ Journalism focused much more heavily on problems than on solutions. It tended to two-sided rather than multi-sided accounts of controversy in the process, oversimplifying complex issues and hardening opposing positions. Journalism's choice of sources and voices favored the most extreme and exaggerated ideological positions, obscuring more moderate positions that might actually be more widely shared.⁵² It did a poor job of following up on the investigative stories it so highly prized, and of finding ways to make its research count more in public policy. And, finally, journalism looked to create "gotcha" moments, rather than opportunities for dialogue.⁵³

The profession's response to the public journalism critique was quick, angry, and negative, and it was often led by prominent editors and reporters at flagship papers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Michael Gartner, former page-one editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, editor in chief of the *Des Moines Register*, and president of NBC News, called it a "menace."⁵⁴ Former *Washington Post* reporter and then-*New Yorker* writer (and now editor) David Remnick was dismayed that public journalism advocates would ask journalists to "abandon the entire enterprise of informed, aggressive skepticism . . . in the hope of pleasing an imagined public."⁵⁵ "When journalists begin acting like waiters and taking orders from the public and pollsters," Remnick wrote, "the results are not pretty."⁵⁶ Max Frankel, former executive editor of the *New York Times*, condemned public journalism's "fix-it" approach that was "not content to tell it like it is," but wanted to "tell it and fix it all at once."⁵⁷ Frankel and others expressed suspicion of the underlying motives of college professors such as Rosen and of foundations such as Pew, Kettering, and Knight that were sponsoring public journalism initiatives.⁵⁸ *Washington Post* executive editor Leonard Downie compared public journalism to what the "promotion department" did at his paper, condemned its attempt to make journalists activists, and mocked its "fancy

51. For one editor's critique of his profession's handling of conflict, see DAVIS "BUZZ" MERRITT, *PUBLIC JOURNALISM AND PUBLIC LIFE: WHY TELLING THE NEWS IS NOT ENOUGH* (2d ed. 1998).

52. *THE IDEA OF PUBLIC JOURNALISM*, *supra* note 32, at xviii.

53. *Id.* at xx–xxii.

54. ROSEN, *supra* note 8, at 184 (internal quotation marks omitted).

55. *Id.* at 177 (internal quotation marks omitted).

56. *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted).

57. *Id.* at 219 (internal quotation marks omitted).

58. *Id.* at 219–20.

evangelistic fervor.”⁵⁹

These comments speak for themselves, but if we were to stitch them together the narrative would go something like this: At its best, public journalism is nothing new; good news organizations always have been involved in getting readers and viewers interested in discussions of public policy. At its worst, public journalism encourages a dangerous brand of activism. Journalists work best when unrestrained by what the public thinks because they must be free to tell hard and unpopular truths. Journalism serves a watchdog function in society, and it must approach its role with ferocity and independence. Public journalism advocates are evangelists seeking to reform a profession they do not understand.

These criticisms of public journalism state, directly or indirectly, that journalism, as a profession and institution, cannot do much to resolve conflict, nor should it. In its more extreme forms, the critique takes conflict as a sign that journalism is doing its best work on behalf of society. Time and again, the commonplaces of conventional journalism actually praise its ability to incite conflict in the name of the public interest—to “identify conflict and air it,”⁶⁰ or “[c]omfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable,”⁶¹ or act as citizens’ “watchdog.”⁶²

If readers do not always appreciate the work journalists do on their behalf, it is because the public itself is not well informed—all the more reason for reporters and editors to persist in their habits of aggressive skepticism. In a rarely cited interview, Rosen suggested that he thought of public journalism as being done in the spirit of *tikkun olam*—an attempt to repair a broken world.⁶³ For critics of public journalism, the work of mending society belonged to others. At a 1989 panel discussion, Downie famously declared that, as a profession, journalism required a certain distance even from one’s own self.⁶⁴ Journalists, he said, should try to free their “professional minds” from “human emotions and opinions.”⁶⁵ In the service of that end, Downie said he even refused to vote—a stance he recommended to his reporters, although one Downie realized he could not require.⁶⁶

59. *Id.* at 240, 242 (internal quotation marks omitted).

60. *Id.* at 145 (internal quotation marks omitted).

61. *Id.* at 222 (quoting PAUL TAYLOR, *SEE HOW THEY RUN: ELECTING THE PRESIDENT IN AN AGE OF MEDIAOCRACY* 23 (1990) (internal quotation marks omitted)).

62. ROSEN, *supra* note 8, at 54 (internal quotation marks omitted).

63. Journalism, Judaism, and the Search for a Third Language: An Interview with Jay Rosen, Jewish Public Forum (March 2000), <http://www.clal.org/jpf2.html>.

64. ROSEN, *supra* note 8, at 241.

65. *Id.*

66. *Id.*

III.

My gloomy argument about journalism's inability to contribute to conflict resolution has emphasized external constraints on the profession. The very structure and purpose of news organizations places journalists at the center of the social system in a way that encourages every group to lobby, cajole, or propagandize them. Journalists, in turn, insulate themselves from these pressures by declaring themselves nonpartisans, prizing an aggressive skepticism, and invoking a higher purpose—devotion to the public interest—that softens the sting of the criticism directed at them. And it always should be remembered that journalists believe they came to their code of conduct honestly (and they do consider it an ethical code) because so many groups routinely try to deceive them and, unlike district attorneys and judges, they cannot easily compel truth or punish lies.

Even within these constraints, however, we could imagine journalism contributing more to conflict resolution if journalists, like diplomats and negotiators, understood and skillfully employed a range of subtle communication practices. Such is not the case. The profession has traditionally identified a small core of communication practices as essential to good journalism.⁶⁷ For the most part, journalists continue to think of themselves as writers, and whatever philosophy of public life they may invoke to explain the importance of their profession to others, they continue to prize, in one another's work, the ability to create a compelling narrative.⁶⁸ This commitment counts for less than it might seem at first, however, because journalists also describe what they provide as "information," a much more narrowly circumscribed literary form.⁶⁹ The now immense body of scholarship on narrative constantly emphasizes the power of story to select and deflect reality, frame perception and experience, situate the audience, and shape behavior.⁷⁰ Journalism, by contrast, continues to work with a crabbed theoretical understanding of its own narrative practices. When journalists praise one another as storytellers, they celebrate their ability to size up a situation quickly (i.e., to know what "the story" is), consult a network of knowledgeable sources, and deliver a product under deadline. They favor what the literary critic Hugh Kenner once called "[t]he plain style,"⁷¹ and tend

67. See generally John J. Pauly, *Media Studies and the Dialogue of Democracy*, in *DIALOGUE: THEORIZING DIFFERENCE IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES* 243 (Rob Anderson et al. eds., 2004).

68. See John J. Pauly, *Recovering Journalism as a Democratic Art*, in *MEDIA, PROFIT, AND POLITICS: COMPETING PRIORITIES IN AN OPEN SOCIETY* 18, 23 (Joseph Harper & Thom Yantek eds., 2003).

69. See *id.* at 25–27 (exploring the contradictions between journalism's account of itself as both information and story, with an eye to the public journalism debate).

70. See *id.* at 21–25.

71. See Hugh Kenner, *The Politics of the Plain Style*, in *LITERARY JOURNALISM IN THE*

to distrust oblique or elliptical forms of storytelling. Journalists imagine their stories moving the reader to action rather than to discernment and reflection. This system of cultural preferences comes to be embedded not only in the everyday talk about one another's work, but in the extravagant range of awards the profession bestows upon itself.⁷²

If asked, journalists will also admit to a second important set of communication practices: those related to interviewing. Here again, journalists define the ideal practice in terms far more narrow than other communication professionals might. The belligerent, unflappable, and righteous interrogator is largely a figure of myth and legend, for journalists depend so deeply on their sources that they cannot afford to insult or ridicule them at every turn. Much of the profession's advice to itself consists of learning how to get sources to open up and speak honestly, especially when those sources are constrained by their roles, fear of reprisal, or advice of public relations counsel. Journalists, perhaps more than other researchers, believe that talking to subjects will allow them to discover the truth and get to the real story. Journalists consider such research as the authentic work of their craft, and they praise the persistent, "shoe leather" methods of investigative reporters as the epitome of the profession.⁷³

The limits of this conception of interviewing become obvious when placed alongside the advice given by communication scholars and philosophers who study dialogue. Advocates of dialogue favor a rather different set of communication practices.⁷⁴ Especially in stories in which they think a public interest is at stake, journalists tend to see the interview as an opportunity to expose the subject's hidden beliefs to arrive at the real truth.⁷⁵

By contrast, advocates of dialogue ask that we listen actively, not to collect gobs of fact but to build a relationship with others. (And television journalists' excessive displays of attentiveness in cut-away shots do not meet this requirement.) Partners must enter dialogue in a spirit of mutual regard rather than suspicion or advocacy. Dialogue requires us to listen for the deep-seated interests that the other brings to the conversation and not to get

TWENTIETH CENTURY 183, 183 (Norm Sims ed., 1990).

72. See Pauly, *supra* note 68, at 18.

73. For a more imaginative approach to the work of journalistic interviewing, see GEORGE M. KILLENBERG & ROB ANDERSON, *BEFORE THE STORY: INTERVIEWING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR JOURNALISTS* (1989).

74. I explore the tensions between dialogical communication and media studies traditions in Pauly, *supra* note 67, at 244–45.

75. This is a practice so distasteful to *New Yorker* journalist Janet Malcolm that she once famously stated that, "Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible." JANET MALCOLM, *THE JOURNALIST AND THE MURDERER* 3 (1990).

caught up in our own or their positions.⁷⁶ Journalism, in this respect, routinely explains the world in terms of positions, visible and hidden, and agendas, a fact that led Carey to argue that the “[d]ark [c]ontinent” of American journalism is its struggle to explain the how and why beyond the who, what, when, and where.⁷⁷

Journalists may reasonably protest that more dialogical communication practices are beyond the scope of their profession. Certainly little in journalists’ everyday work routines encourages moments of calm reflection, and they have no power to compel others to engage in dialogue with them. However, as seen in the public journalism controversy, the profession often has mocked even modest attempts to change its practices. The pizza parties, issues forums, and other modes of community engagement proposed by the public journalism movement’s advocates were deemed an unwarranted intrusion on journalists’ autonomy.

The profession’s contempt for the public it rhetorically reveres can be stunning. In a study of how a California newspaper managed its letters-to-the-editor page, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen documented how journalists made the public “the object of ritual ridicule in the culture of the newsroom.”⁷⁸ In the absence of an articulate, organized, self-conscious public that stands independent of the audiences gathered by media organizations, Wahl-Jorgensen argued, journalists declare the letter-writing public “insane,” thereby affirming the value of their professional culture and absolving themselves of any responsibility to change the status quo.⁷⁹

This praise for “The People” writ large and contempt for “the people” writ small could be sustained as long as the business model for mainstream journalism remained solid.⁸⁰ But the public now has walked away from the daily newspaper,⁸¹ and is beginning to abandon the network television newscast.⁸² Although these media still command relatively large audiences, they now struggle to defend their importance in relation to all the other digital media with which they now compete.⁸³

76. See Pauly, *supra* note 67, at 244.

77. James W. Carey, *The Dark Continent of American Journalism*, in JAMES CAREY: A CRITICAL READER 144, 147 (Eve Stryker Munson & Catherine A. Warren eds., 1997).

78. KARIN WAHL-JORGENSEN, JOURNALISTS AND THE PUBLIC: NEWSROOM CULTURE, LETTERS TO THE EDITOR, AND DEMOCRACY 156 (2007).

79. *Id.* at 163.

80. For an analysis of the history of this contradictory language of democratic culture, see JOLI JENSEN, IS ART GOOD FOR US? BELIEFS ABOUT HIGH CULTURE IN AMERICAN LIFE (2002).

81. See WILLIAM A. HACHTEN, THE TROUBLES OF JOURNALISM: A CRITICAL LOOK AT WHAT’S RIGHT AND WRONG WITH THE PRESS 92–93 (3d ed. 2005).

82. See *id.* at 77–78.

83. See *id.* at 149–53.

IV.

My goal has been to offer a historical context within which to understand the limits of conventional journalism's possible contribution to conflict resolution. I have focused on three key factors that have limited the profession's ability to serve that cause: its structural placement at the very center of political and social conflict, which denies it the luxury of being a mediator standing outside the debate; journalists' embrace of conflict (rather than its resolution) as constitutive of their sense of professional identity; and the narrowness of the profession's understanding of its communication. The dilemma, as Simon Cottle pointed out, is that almost all forms of significant social conflict now have come to be "mediatized"—that is, media "are capable of enacting and performing conflicts as well as reporting and representing them."⁸⁴ Cottle noted four models of "corrective journalism"—peace, development, public, and online alternative—that have usefully critiqued mainstream contemporary practices. Nevertheless, Cottle concluded that none of these models has provided "an encompassing conceptualization of the complex communicative spaces of contemporary societies or how they could and should interact within these [spaces]."⁸⁵

What a historical perspective adds to Cottle's observation is a sense of how journalism's twin mythic allegiances, to information and to story, commit it to somewhat contradictory models of social change: one that emphasizes the profession's impartial contributions to public discourse and modes of rational deliberation, and the other that emphasizes its ability to forge cultural connections between groups. These goals are not exclusive of each other, of course. Truth and reconciliation often need to begin with a dialogical encounter, but they hope to end in new structures of deliberation and governance.

But if I had to argue where journalism might better invest its energy at this point (and regain its audience in the process), I would stress the cultural. As Martin Buber long ago argued, dialogue creates a "between," a shared space that stands apart from the private understandings the interlocutors bring to the encounter.⁸⁶ Journalism often creates the illusion of a between but does not foster the dialogical work that makes it actionable and sustainable. At a moment of diminished resources, with the profession's sense of purpose so battered, journalists might usefully choose simply to start again, in a different place, with a different charter: to encourage dialogical practices that make the

84. SIMON COTTLE, *MEDIATIZED CONFLICT: DEVELOPMENTS IN MEDIA AND CONFLICT STUDIES* 9 (2006).

85. *Id.* at 119.

86. MARTIN BUBER, *I AND THOU* 21–22 (Ronald Gregor Smith trans., Scribner Classics ed. 2000) (1958).

wider task of conflict resolution palpable and urgent.