

Spring 2008

Dilemmas and Solutions in Public Journalism: Review of The Pursuit of Public Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism

Jack Rosenberry

St. John Fisher College, jrosenberry@sjfc.edu

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/commj_facpub

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Custom Citation

Rosenberry, J. (2008). Dilemmas and solutions in public journalism: review of *The Pursuit of Public Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*. [Electronic version]. Retrieved [insert date], from Fisher Digital Publications: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/commj_facpub/3/

This document is posted at http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/commj_facpub/3 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

Dilemmas and Solutions in Public Journalism: Review of *The Pursuit of Public Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*

Abstract

Review of *The Pursuit of Public Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, by Tanni Haas. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2007. ISBN 0-415-97825-4. 193 pp.

Disciplines

Communication

Comments

This is an author's accepted manuscript of an article published in Global Media Journal, available online at <http://lass.purduecal.edu/cca/gmj/fa08/issue-book-reviews/rosenberry.htm>. ©2008, Global Media Journal.

This appeared in an online-only journal and was published at:

<http://lass.purduecal.edu/cca/gmj/fa08/issue-book-reviews/rosenberry.htm>

The Pursuit of Public Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism, Tanni Haas. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2007. ISBN 0-415-97825-4. 193 pp.

Reviewed by Jack Rosenberry
St. John Fisher College, Rochester NY

1337 words

From its outset nearly 20 years ago, public journalism has been a sprawling conundrum of a concept – full of dichotomies and disagreements that academics and practitioners have struggled to comprehend. Even one of the scholars credited with developing the intellectual foundation of public journalism in its early days, Jay Rosen, used not one label for it but three, calling it “an argument” about the role of the press, “a set of practices” for journalists to employ, and “a reform movement.” What is it really? Ask a dozen people familiar with public journalism, and you might get a dozen different answers.

In *The Pursuit of Public Journalism*, Tanni Haas seeks to bridge some of these gaps and resolve the contradictions to define and evaluate public journalism more coherently and consistently than has been previously done. The centerpiece of this effort is his drafting of “a public philosophy” articulating the basic tenets of the practice. His stated goal in doing this is to provide public journalism advocates with a set of principles that they can use in their efforts to critique traditional journalism practices, develop new ones, overcome obstacles to implementation of these newly developed practices, and avoid co-optation by commercial influences. In addition to this theory-building, Haas also takes the reader on a tour of 20 years of research into the practice, addresses common criticisms about it, examines potential practical models for implementing it, and reviews its application on an international stage – all through the filter of this new normative view of public journalism.

Haas does succeed in adding some philosophical clarity about public journalism, although in many cases where there is conflict between two dichotomous approaches his answer is “do both,” or blend the two. If only it were that simple. Not all of the differences between advocates and antagonists of public journalism, or even disagreements among the advocates, are philosophical ones.

For example, among the dilemmas Haas addresses – and the “middle ground” solutions he proposes – are:

- Whether journalists engaged in public journalism should be more concerned with processes or outcomes of citizen deliberation; he suggests that “under conditions

- of widespread social equality, journalists should be concerned with whether both the processes and outcomes of citizen deliberation serve the interests of marginalized social groups (p. 6).”
- Whether proper “deliberation” of social issues means simply facilitating dialogue about them, or whether it means coming to a public judgment about solutions even if no face-to-face dialogue is involved. Haas says there is no need to choose between the two because “Face-to-face dialogue and mass-mediated deliberation are mutually supportive aspects of public discourse that can be integrated into a continuous cycle” (p. 34).
 - Whether public journalism should work to support participatory or deliberative democracy, and, in a related issue, whether it should seek solutions outside of the existing institutions of civil society or seek to mobilize those institutions to provide the solutions. Haas maintains that through the dialogic-deliberative process citizens should gain access to information that would connect them with relevant social institutions, creating a mutually supportive relationship between a public sphere facilitated by journalists and the institutions of civil society (p. 41). In his view, journalists should evaluate and facilitate whichever approach – direct participatory involvement in problem-solving or working through a representative institution – would be more effective (p. 44).
 - Whether the goals of public journalism projects should be rooted in a consensus view of the public good or a pluralistic one. Here, he contends that neither is sufficient and a blend of the two is required because the consensus or communitarian view underestimates how powerful conflicting views of the public good can be in undermining social debate while the pluralistic view lacks the “sense of solidarity” needed as a guidepost in deliberation and problem solving.

This approach to some real dilemmas and disagreements that have beset the field for much of its history is encouraging in its optimism but also in some ways too facile, to the point of undermining his stated goal of offering practical solutions. If “just do both” or “do something in the middle” could resolve these nettlesome issues, wouldn’t that solution have emerged already in many of these arenas? Nevertheless, by identifying all of the contradictions and conundrums in one volume, arguing they are not irreconcilable, and then seeking to offer ideas for such reconciliation, however philosophical and theoretical, Haas does contribute to an improved understanding of the goals of public journalism and potential ways of realizing those goals.

In setting out the principles of his public philosophy, Haas suggests that the role journalists should play is development of a “conversational commons,” which proceeds from the standpoint that citizens want to be actively engaged on social issues but generally lack opportunities to come together as an active, deliberating public. This is built, perhaps appropriately given his other “split the difference” approaches, on two somewhat contradictory conceptions of the public sphere. They are the views offered by Jurgen Habermas (who advocates for a set of procedural, discursive rules that create a deliberating public) and by Nancy Fraser (who contends that the overall public sphere is not the unified one conceived by Habermas but an amalgam of discursive spaces across a range of interest areas).

The “conversational commons” proposed by Haas would be a form of journalistically facilitated deliberation that would help citizens reflect on their different and potentially conflicting concerns to reach solutions without relying on a communitarian view of common good that likely does not exist, as per Fraser, and also help these subsets of the public sphere interact in a joint deliberative space, the outcome proposed by Habermas. Thus would develop a mutually supportive relationship among a journalistically facilitated public sphere and the institutions of civil society, whereby outcomes of the facilitated deliberation can be channeled back into the institutions of civil society, thereby forming a continuous cycle (p. 41-42).

This is another of Haas’ middle-ground or “blended” solutions, but one that does have practical, pragmatic aspects that make it seem potentially workable in translating theory to practice. It echoes ideas advocated elsewhere, including critiques of Habermas that seek to ground the German philosopher’s idealistic approaches in a more practical realm as well as discussions of how journalistic coverage can contribute to locating common ground in the face of a plurality of viewpoints, e.g. the “interlocking publics” suggested by Kovach and Rosensteel in *The Elements of Journalism*.

Haas seeks to put his newly crafted theory into practice with chapter-long reviews of several topics, such as the criticisms of public journalism both within and from outside the profession. In doing this, he seeks to show how his “public philosophy” can answer long-standing criticisms of public journalism, such as being inadequately defined or being a threat to traditional journalistic norms. He constructs an elaborate critique of a Pulitzer Prize-winning bellwether project on racial issues done by the Akron *Beacon-Journal* in 1993 to illustrate how his theory could have helped editors see shortcomings in their approach to selecting sources and identifying themes for the stories in the project. He likewise uses his philosophy to inform a critique of the move toward participatory journalism, which he sees as having little relation to realizing the true goals of greater civic engagement and deliberation.

Despite the weaknesses identified earlier as being overly idealistic in some respects, this is still a worthwhile book and an important contribution to the understanding of public journalism. The strongest part of Haas’ work is the depth and breadth of the research used to construct it. The reference list contains more than 400 entries, filling 23 pages of the slim volume, making it perhaps the most comprehensive review of the literature ever done on public journalism. His discussion of the history of the movement, research into it, and the bellwether projects that helped establish are all well-organized, informative, concise and comprehensive. If anyone with little or no prior knowledge of public journalism wanted to read just one book to be quickly informed on the topic, this would be the book to read.