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Deliberative Television: Encouraging Substantive, Citizen-Driven News

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Abstract

With Americans' confidence in the news media dwindling, the quality of programming declining, and audiences turning elsewhere, the American news media is at a crossroads. We argue that news outlets should consider a new form of deliberation-based programming for local news coverage as a means of responding to these problems. As a basis for the programming, we build on public journalism (Rosen & Merritt, 1994) and deliberative citizen panels (Knobloch, Gastil, Reedy, & Walsh, 2013). By engaging citizens in the production of news, media outlets not only stand to gain viewers by increasing the quality of their issue coverage, but they also could secure their claim as a public institution providing a valuable public good. We urge media outlets to consider turning to citizen panels to determine which issues are salient and to engage in structured deliberations about those issues, which can be captured and built into content packages for use in news programming. In so doing, news outlets can help activate viewers by positioning them not as passive consumers but as engaged citizens prepared for public deliberation.

Keywords

News, Public Journalism, Citizen Deliberations, Civic Engagement

The United States news media face myriad problems. Americans' confidence in news media has plummeted since the 1970s (Ladd, 2012), and the quality of local programming is declining (Waldman et al., 2011). Even more frightening for news outlets, their audiences are shrinking (Pew Research Center's Project, 2013). These problems are interrelated, since local stations with the highest quality coverage also have the largest audiences (Belt & Just, 2008; Patterson, 2000). In this essay, we argue that, by using deliberation in news production, media outlets can make news more effective for democratic citizens.

In short, we propose that news outlets turn to citizen panels to investigate local issues and engage citizens in deliberative news production. Although our proposal seeks to improve the quality of the news content, it also carries democratizing implications for news production. Using citizen panels to deliberate over issues would refocus news outlets on their fundamentally democratic functions and foster a more engaged and deliberative citizenry.

Problem: Information Needs v. Profit Motive

Upon receiving a license to operate, television stations in the U.S. are required to operate in the public interest. Each local station "must air programming that is responsive to the needs and problems of its local community" (Federal Communications Commission, 2008). These needs include ease of access to relevant and credible information about communities and the ability to engage with that information (Knight Commission, 2009).

Unfortunately, a recent Federal Communications Commission report shows that local news consistently falls short of informing and engaging citizens (Waldman et al., 2011). Typical coverage focuses on soft news—stories that are not about public affairs (Patterson, 2000; Rather, 2012). While soft news may remind inattentive citizens to vote (Baum & Jamison, 2006), it also prompts negative thinking about media (Ladd, 2012). When public affairs do appear in the news, journalists avoid issues and frame politics in terms of winners and losers (Lawrence, 2000). This coverage encourages viewers to think about the strategy behind, rather than content of, issues (Rhee, 1997), increases cynicism toward institutions (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), and increases negative evaluations of issues (de Vreese, 2004).

Additionally, news often discourages citizen engagement. Professional norms encourage journalists to refer to officials, such as politicians, rather than everyday citizens (Gans, 1979/2004; Tuchman, 1978). Non-officials tend to be portrayed as passive observers (Lewis et al., 2004) and "relatively faceless" voters (Jarvis & Han, 2011, p. 432), rather than active, problem-solving citizens. Online news has tried to engage citizens but often falls short. News Web sites, for instance, include interactive tools such as polls, "like" buttons, and comment

sections (e.g., Bucy, 2004; Chan-Olmsted & Park, 2000; Chung, 2008; Stroud et al., 2013). These interactive features tend to exclude substantive news information, however. For example, many online polls ask users about their favorite season or an upcoming football game instead of substantive news (Stroud et al., 2013). The prevalence of these features indicates that news organizations recognize the importance of engaging citizens but often do so at the expense of providing relevant information.

There are financial motives for local stations to focus on fluff. News outlets that rely on a profit model often accept lower quality news and smaller audiences as long as revenue outpaces production cost (Hamilton, 2004; Kaniss, 1997; McManus, 1994). Research suggests, however, that there are both audience *and* revenue problems for local news (Pew Research Center's Project, 2013). Local news audiences decreased in 2012, extending a long-term trend of declining viewership. Additionally, although revenue did increase overall, the report suggests that the increase was due to political advertising purchased during the 2012 campaign and was found mainly in markets that featured competitive elections. Further, though revenues were higher in 2012 than in 2011, they were *lower* than in previous campaign years. Thus local news outlets could continue cutting costs and substance, expect smaller audiences, and, if these trends continue, still not increase revenues. Alternatively, they could take the advice of Patterson (2000) and Belt and Just (2008), produce higher quality content, and gradually grow their audiences. This alternative is not yet conventional wisdom among news providers, but researchers must offer local news providers better ways to meet communities' information needs; this includes studying whether content quality can strengthen local news viability.

We are not the first to attempt to improve news content. The public journalism movement sought to draw citizens into the news, help people participate in democracy, and solve problems in communities (Nip, 2006; Rosen, 1999; Rosen, 1995; Merritt, 1995; Rosen & Merritt, 1994). The practice of public journalism lacked specificity, however. At one extreme, public journalists may include user-friendly charts in a story (Coleman & Wasike, 2004), or, at another extreme, they may conduct door-to-door interviews to bridge political divides (Bowers et al., 1998; Charity, 1995). Organizations trying to implement public journalism rarely live up to the movement's high standards (e.g., Coleman & Wasike, 2004; Friedland & Nichols, 2002; Massey & Haas, 2002). Though the movement has lost steam (Nip, 2006), interviews with journalists suggest that there is interest in covering citizen deliberations of policy issues (Besley & Roberts, 2010). By offering a specific method for increasing citizen involvement, our proposal provides a space for public engagement in news production without asking lay citizens to obtain journalism degrees.

A Deliberative Solution

We believe that the problems facing local news can be overcome by changing the *content* of local news programming. In particular, we suggest news content be built on three components: emphasizing state and local issues, engaging citizens in the production process, and maintaining audiences by relying on an alternative format.

Because mainstream news currently focuses on national elections, local and state ballot initiatives are little more than an afterthought for most audiences. The change we propose would invert this relationship by integrating deliberation and news coverage in similar ways to *Washington Week with Gwen Ifill's* electronic town hall coverage of the 2012 election (Ifill, 2012). Instead of focusing on national politics like *Washington Week*, however, our program would emphasize only *local* and *state* issues. This focus should drastically improve voter knowledge about issues and ballot measures that are arguably more important, and often more complicated (Bowler & Donovan, 2003), than the national races for their communities. Attention to local and state issues turns viewers away from the spectacle of the horserace in favor of their communities where the most consequential work of democracy takes place.

Once a news station decides to emphasize state and local issues, it should follow a deliberative process having two steps: convening a “priority conference” of citizens to decide what issues to cover (Gastil & Richards, 2013, p. 266), then assembling and televising citizen deliberations about the issues. For the first step, we suggest that news producers convene what Gastil & Richards, 2013) refer to as “priority conferences” (see also Gastil, 2000). Made up of citizens randomly selected from the viewing area, these conferences will judge the salience of issues competing for public attention. Thus, citizens would be involved in the very beginnings of the production process by helping set the issue agenda.

Once a group of citizens has chosen the issues, news producers should engage citizens in building content from these selections. The content that we envision would center on citizen deliberations, such as mediated versions of the “legislative” or “referenda” panels and Citizen’s Initiative Reviews (Gastil, 2000; Gastil & Richards, 2013). These panels would require a random sample of citizens, stratified for demographic representativeness, in the viewing area to be selected to learn about and deliberate over those issues identified by the priority conference. Those citizens, with the help of a moderator, would deliberate over issues and policy proposals after hearing evidence from each side, cross-examining experts, and calling for additional testimony when necessary. As a result, the panel would form a range of opinions about the issues and policy proposals that can be integrated into the news coverage.

These secondary, issue-specific deliberations should use the 2010 Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) pilot project as a guide (Knobloch et al., 2013). The Oregon CIR brought together citizen panelists, trained moderators, and advocates from either side of two proposed ballot measures. During the process, the groups were trained in deliberation, heard and discussed testimony, and deliberated in order to arrive at statements for and against each proposed measure that were included in the official Oregon State Voters' Pamphlet. In their discussion of the CIR, Knobloch et al. (2013) conclude that carefully structured events lead to more effective deliberations than less structured processes, especially when training, multiple discussion formats, extended question-and-answer, moderators, and panelist agency were taken into consideration.

After convening and recording the second-stage issue deliberations, the proposed program should utilize the appeal of soft news by formatting the information in a news magazine format. This stylistic choice may attract viewers who do not watch hard news *or* audiences who have turned to cable news networks for their alternate formats.¹ In this way, the coverage should include excerpts of the citizen deliberations, portions of the expert testimony that influenced panelists' decisions, citizens' reflections on the deliberative process and outcomes, and additional reporter packages to provide context for understanding the panel's opinion statements.

Finally, since we focus on developing *content* based on citizen deliberations, we offer three flexible options news outlets can use to implement that content in their programming. First, the content could be developed into a weekly stand-alone program with each episode focusing on a new issue. Some local news stations already have shows dedicated to politics, such as *In Session/In-Depth*, a Sunday morning program broadcast by KXAN, an Austin, Texas NBC station. In these broadcasts our proposed content would emphasize issues and citizen deliberations rather than politicians and officials. Second, news outlets can create regularly occurring segments for broadcast in traditional news programs. While this may not be useful for the entire news year, it would be particularly salient material during election-cycle coverage. Third, this content could open doors to *substantive* Web- or app-based interactivity. While Tambini (1999) argued that new media would have a positive impact on democratic processes, the utility of such media is not so cut and dry because the users most likely to participate in Web-based interactions tend to be those who already have high levels of political information efficacy (Warner et al., 2012). Therefore, we would not suggest implementing the deliberative content *solely* in an online format. On the other hand, Web-based interactivity can reduce barriers to political

¹ According to the Pew Research Center (2012), Cable News Network now finds itself at the very top of the list as the primary source of campaign news.

participation and encourage collaboration and the creation of new—even user-generated—content that would otherwise be unavailable to televised news media consumers (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). At minimum, posting content online and allowing users to interact with the material could give citizens better information than is currently available in online interactive tools (Stroud et al., 2013). The adaptability of our content proposal may further the discussion of the deliberative potentials of news content in both televised and online formats.

Deliberative television can repurpose the television newscast as a public forum—as Rosen and Merritt (1994) attempted with newspapers in their public journalism project. The content we propose should benefit local democracy by increasing the quality of news coverage of issues and characterizing citizens as more than passive consumers of political news.

The Potential of Deliberative News Coverage

The programming changes we propose address the failure of news to meet citizens' information needs, come with flexible implementation plans, may provide potential funding opportunities, and may help build news audiences. Unlike previous efforts, a deliberative approach to news based on the guidelines offered by Gastil (2000; Knobloch & et al., 2013) provides a structure for media organizations to follow in order to include citizen perspectives. Further, unlike most citizen journalism projects (Friedland & Nichols, 2002), our proposal focuses on television rather than newspapers and can be implemented in both large and small markets. Because citizens use television news more often than newspapers for political information (Pew Research Center's Project, 2013), our project should reach more people than previous public journalism initiatives.

Additionally, deliberative programming is adaptable. Our proposal maintains the agency of the news producers in ways that public journalism projects may not. It permits flexibility so that the content could be edited into short packages, repurposed as online or app-based content, or expanded into stand-alone programming with little additional cost on the part of the news outlets. Our proposal thus provides directors the ability to cover issues in a variety of substantive ways.

The potential cost of deliberative programming may seem unmanageable because citizen panels require compensation, time, and training, but there are alternative sources for funding such programming. News organizations can partner with universities that have existing centers for deliberation (e.g., Penn State, Carnegie Mellon, Colorado State, Stanford), as well as governmental and nonprofit agencies and organizations (such as the Federal Communications Commission and the Knight Foundation) dedicated to journalism projects. The Oregon CIR, for example, was implemented by the State of Oregon and supported

financially by Healthy Democracy Oregon, a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing democratic engagement. These governmental, nonprofit, and educational organizations, particularly the university centers, have the means to recruit citizens and train moderators and can offset the costs associated with citizen panels in the name of research. Such partnerships would give news outlets the resources to create deliberative content and provide researchers opportunities to explore the deliberative potentials of our existing media.

Moreover, the cost of deliberative programming would be acceptable if audience ratings and revenue increase relative to costs. Providing quality content that more accurately reflects the needs of the community could bolster viewership, as several studies have indicated that quality news yields more viewers (e.g., Belt & Just, 2008). Although the evidence to date does not *prove* that deliberations will lead to more audience and revenue, it is nonetheless worth exploring whether a larger audience and higher revenue could follow citizen-driven content.

Additionally, the panel members, upon returning to their communities, become extensions of the deliberations. To be sure, some scholars, such as Pincock (2012), express skepticism of claims that deliberation produces “better citizens” because the concepts that ground these claims tend to be either inadequately specified or lacking in empirical support. Yet participation in deliberations has been shown to have a positive effect on citizens’ trust in both fellow citizens and public institutions (Gastil et al., 2008) and citizen panels can be valuable as cynicism-reducing initiatives (Berman, 1997). By positioning the news provider as a public institution serving the public good, deliberative programming, we believe, should lead to a reduction in audience cynicism and increased trust for the news organization itself.

Evaluating Deliberative Television

The deliberative programming we propose is worth widespread adoption only if it diminishes the problems with news content. In this section, we sketch three levels of evaluation—organized from the least to the most difficult to enact—to measure our proposal’s effectiveness.

First, researchers and practitioners need to measure long-term audience patterns. Evidence suggests that quality programming increases long-term, rather than short-term, viewership for local news stations (Patterson, 2000). A quality broadcast of deliberative news may not increase viewership immediately, but the series of broadcasts during an election may increase viewership by the end of an election cycle or for subsequent cycles. News organizations can examine the audience ratings for the deliberative news broadcasts compared to other programs and other networks. They can also look to Web site traffic patterns to see if the

number of site users or the amount of time spent on the site increases after posting deliberative programming online. If, after controlling for factors such as seasonal viewing variations and contiguity to other high-viewership content, the news outlets' ratings, Web site use, and other audience measures rise after broadcasting deliberative programming, there would be evidence that deliberative news can help local stations gain viewers.

Second, journalists and academics interested in measuring the success of deliberative television should examine the *content* of the coverage. Two questions arise: Is substantive issue coverage more frequent in deliberative programming than in other news (e.g., Lawrence, 2000)? And are citizens depicted as having greater agency and are citizens' views represented more frequently in deliberative programming than in other news (e.g., Jarvis & Han, 2011; Lewis et al., 2004)? If the deliberative programming uses substantive issue coverage and engages citizens' perspectives more than other news broadcasts produced concurrently, the deliberative programming should be considered effective.

Finally, it is important to determine whether innovative journalism changes news users' perceptions of the media and politics. Researchers can evaluate deliberative news using surveys of randomly selected citizens who live in the viewing market. The survey we suggest would measure the effects on people who have access to the final product, rather than only the people who helped produce it. The surveys should ask about citizens' (a) news-viewing habits (e.g., Dilliplane et al., 2013), (b) confidence in stations that broadcast the deliberative news program and other area stations (e.g., Wanta & Hu, 1994), (c) knowledge about the topics covered in the broadcasts (e.g., Barabas & Jerit, 2009), (d) trust of politicians covered in the broadcasts (e.g., Mutz & Reeves, 2005), and (e) belief that citizens can play an active role in politics (e.g., Valentino et al., 2009). If—after controlling for such factors as years of education, political interest, and amount of exposure to other news—a survey indicates that citizens who watch deliberative programming have more confidence in the media, higher levels of political knowledge, more trust in government officials, and a stronger belief that citizens should play an active role in politics than people who did not watch, the results would reflect positively on deliberative programming.

Evaluations are costly for news organizations. By offering three methods of analysis, however, we provide news outlets options, with a range of cost implications, for evaluating deliberative news programming. Examining ratings and Web site usage, for instance, involves analysis of data that most news organizations already have. The content analysis and survey, although important, would involve more time and effort. Once again, partnering with university researchers and/or organizations dedicated to promoting quality local news would allow news stations to create strong evaluations without funding them entirely on their own.

Though other methods of evaluation are available, the questions driving the research are important to keep in mind: Can media organizations improve the content of the news? Can better news broadcasts improve citizens' attitudes toward the media and politics? Can quality news increase audience ratings? We hope that implementing and testing deliberative news programming will provide some evidence that answers these questions in the affirmative.

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