Community Policing and Civic Journalism: Same Wine, Different Bottles?

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ABSTRACT

Community policing and civic journalism are strikingly similar, current movements within the social organizations of law enforcement and mass media. Defining civic journalism, best thought of as “community-focused journalism,” has been problematic for the field of mass media but shapes the starting point for discussion. Identifying, analyzing, and contrasting commonalities within these two movements are the topics explored within this work. While the precepts of each movement are shaped by the respective organization, the inherent processes and goals remain notably similar. What are the comparative connections that shape community empowerment? How does each organization partner with its shared “community client” to identify and solve problems? Of special interest to law enforcement is the issue of how police departments can make use of the civic journalism movement to further their agency’s community policing efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Defining Civic Journalism

There is no universal definition of civic journalism. Ask twenty different media practitioners or twenty journalism professors to define what has been called a “new movement” (Corrigan, 1996, Keep, 1996) and you will receive twenty different answers. Civic journalism is the industry’s recognition that newspapers need to be more responsive to readers” says Alexander (1998). Rodding Carter (1995) terms it a “combination of solid reporting and public participation” needed because “many citizens have lost touch with each other and many news organizations have lost touch with their communities” (in Pew Center, p.4). Further, journalists and academics hold conflicting views of just what civic journalism is and often fall back on describing how it is practiced as...
opposed to how it is defined.

Quoting from Black (1996, p.1A), a staff writer for the Minneapolis Star Tribune, "Public (civic) journalism is hard to define succinctly. It has arisen in response to various signals warning that democracy and public lives are in trouble and that journalism is in disrepute, and in response to the belief that certain bad habits of conventional journalism have contributed to these problems" (p.1A). Black notes these bad habits include: (1) that "overreliance by journalists on politicians, experts and celebrities as the only ones worthy of being quoted, consulted, or covered has encouraged public passivity by assigning the average citizen no role other than recipient of the news, (2) the legendary cynicism of journalists that has helped create a public that mistrusts major public institutions, and (3) journalists, who because they are obsessed with maintaining their detachment, give the impression that they don't really care whether society thrives or falls apart"

According to Edward M. Fouhy, Executive Director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, the bad habits mentioned by Black, include "the communications revolution that has changed the way people get their news and results in a threat to the media's existence" (1995, p. 2). Fouhy refers to electronic advancements in news delivery and how these advancements have resulted in a disconnection between journalists and citizens. Resulting from this disconnection is the recognition that "civic life and journalism are inextricably bound together" and that journalists must "stimulate citizens to reengage with their communities by fostering journalism that includes the public voice"

At the center of the civic journalism or public journalism concept is the idea that the press should help communities improve. Within what Paul Keep, former Editor of the Bay City Times, terms " a movement" in journalism, is found the press acting as "catalysts for change within their communities (1996, p.12A). According to a survey developed Don Corrignon, Editorial Board, St. Louis Journalism Review, the following attitudes and practices are suggested for journalists: (1) "journalists should offer solutions to the community problems they write about in their stories, (2) journalists should see their jobs as that of initiators of public debate, (3) journalists should get directly involved in helping solve the problems of the communities that they report in, (4) journalists should see themselves more as participants in the democratic process, rather than as watchdogs of democratic government, (5) journalists should write more on what affects ordinary citizens rather than on the major news events of the day... similarly, civic journalism relies more on intense local coverage than on news from national and international bureaus, and (6) journalists should not view people as potential customers of news, but as potential actors in the democratic process who can solve community problems (p.4).

Typically, civic journalism involves a media affiance: "ideally a newspaper, a commercial television station, and one or more radio stations" (Fouhy, in Pew Center, 1995, p.3). Even though some have successfully personalized the concept, others still do not understand it. As might be expected, not everyone embraces the tenants of this new journalism concept.

Conflicting and Critical Views of Civic Journalism

By 1994, the definition problem was gaining momentum and, by default, ambiguity. Rosen "made it a point to introduce public journalism as a work in progress...were still inventing it. And because we're inventing it, we don't really know what it is', (in Glasser,1999). Killenberg and Dardenne (both journalism professors) have stated that "journalists hate it because they don't know what it is, and academics love it because they don't know what it is and they like not knowing because it generates more study, ..easily defined subjects don't often generate study" (in Stein, 1997, p. 31).
Advancements have resulted in a connection between journalists and citizens. Resulting from this connection is the recognition that "civic life and journalism are intrinsically bound together" and that journalists must "stimulate citizens to reengage with their communities by fostering journalism that includes the public".

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Like community policing, some critics have charged that too much falls under the rubric of civic journalism. Corrigan quotes Davis "Buzz" Merritt, who concedes that many public journalism projects go far beyond what he finds acceptable as an editor" (1997, p.9). Loosely using the term "theory" and referring to practitioners, Merritt cautions "...because their understanding of the theory was so shallow, and their hunger for immediate change so great, many of them overshot, which meant that what they labeled 'public journalism' became a huge, fat, almost unmissable target for would-be critics".

Black and Stein both imply that civic or public journalism is nothing more (to coin a community policing phrase) than old wine in new bottles. According to Black, "...it's much ado about nothing, something in which old-fashioned journalistic virtues are given fancy new names so that newspapers and broadcast stations can claim to be doing something about the perceived rising tide of customer alienation (1996, p. IA). Thus, there is some inherent market-modeling" or economic value to civic journalism; cultivating more readers via civic journalism equates to more advertising and more advertising equates to increased newspaper profit. Stein mentions, as do other practitioners, that civic journalism is "nothing more than good journalism" and involves what journalists "have
been doing all along" (1997, p.31).

Evidently there are those who view civic journalism as a different breed of animal, for journalism practitioners raise the ethical dilemma of whether it is a reporter's job to report about problems or to solve them. Black (1996, p.1A) contends that "a small group of would-be reformers" has achieved success selling the concept of civic journalism to editors and to publishers, "but they have met a wall of suspicion and resistance among large segments of the working press". Liz Chandler, a practicing civic journalism reporter at the Charlotte Observer, a newspaper that ran a nationally acclaimed and highly successful civic journalism effort to fight crime and neighborhood deterioration in that city, mentions that public journalism is only one tool reporters use, and hesitates to embrace investigative journalism (in Waddell, 1997).

In contrast to the ethical issue posed above, Jay Black, editor of Mixed News, cites Rosen (1996, p.34), identified as the leading theoretician of public journalism, who discusses the press as an active and natural participant in American life: Public journalism is thus a confrontation with a long-suppressed fact: the press is a participant in our national life. It suffers when the quality of public life erodes. And when the performance of the press deteriorates - as it has in recent years - then public life suffers as well. This means there are limits to the stance of the observer in journalism; but the American press has no philosophy that takes over when those limits are reached. Public journalism provides one. A certain degree of resistance to
civic journalism has been experienced among reporters. Black (1996, p.1A) contends that "a small group of would-be reformers" has achieved success selling the concept of civic journalism to editors and to publishers, "but they have met a wall of suspicion and resistance among large segments of the working press". Liz Chandler, a practicing civic journalism reporter at the Charlotte Observer, a newspaper that ran a nationally acclaimed and highly successful civic journalism effort to fight crime and neighborhood deterioration in that city, mentions that public journalism is only one tool reporters use, and hesitates to embrace investigative journalism (in Waddell, 1997).

In the definitional information and current criticisms related to civic journalism, those readers familiar with community policing have likely noted a variety of similarities between civic journalism and community policing. The concept or movement of civic journalism is strikingly similar to the community policing movement within law enforcement. Those commonalities are now explored and expanded.

Comparing Civic Journalism and Community Policing Reasons for the Emergence of Civic Journalism

The issue of civic journalism shows promise of remaining in the media forefront and has been called a reform movement stalled, in Glas (1999). Chronologically, it appears to have started well after the onset of the community policing movement. Thus far, it has developed in mirror-like fashion when compared to community-oriented law enforcement. In abstract form, the underlying reasons for the emergence of both movements are similar. Spearheading both concepts are the issues of reconnecting with citizens and encouraging rebuilding a sense of community responsibility among the public. For law enforcement, this means shifting a share of the responsibility for crime to citizens - for more community crime is one piece of a larger participation "pie".

Recalling earlier discussion, civic journalism emerged in response to the media industry's recognition of the need to be more responsive to readers" (Alexander, 1998) as well as because "citizens had lost touch with each other and with their communities" (per Carr, 1995). It was further recognized that "citizens across the nation are shunning the media... and the health of democracy depends on citizens' participation" (Pew Center, p. 1). Some, such as Pauly, the death of Americans engaged in the civic enterprise is the result of dissatisfaction with themselves and their poor (non-sensationalism and over-covered) journalism practices during...
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Recalling earlier discussion, civic journalism emerged in response to the media industry's recognition of the need to be more responsive to readers (Alexander, 1998) and because "citizens had lost touch with each other and news organizations had lost touch with their communities" (per Carter, 1995). It was further recognized by media that "Americans across the nation are shunning the civic enterprise... and the health of our democracy depends on citizen participation" (Pew Center, p. 1). To some, such as Pauly, the death of Americans engaged in the civic enterprise is the result of dissatisfaction with media themselves and their poor (read sensationalism and over-coverage) journalism practices during the 1988 and 1992 elections (in Glasser, 1999, p.140). According to Pauly, as apathy and cynicism peaked, "the public felt disconnected from all its institutions". While it would be speculation to connect this media identified peak in apathy and cynicism to crime and the public's perception related to law enforcement's ability to deal with crime it is worth considering.

The Issue of Proper Functions

From a police perspective, the community oriented movement raised the question of what the proper role or function of police should be in terms of how police services are delivered. Many officers have viewed community policing as a replacement (rather than an expansion) for traditional policing and such views have contributed to resistance within police agencies. Expanding the crime fighting function of the police that took precedence during the professional or reform era (Per Kelling and Moore, 1988) and reconnecting with citizens to remedy the resulting reform era isolation between police and public have not always been easy "sells." The "theory" of civic journalism brings with it comparable concerns and resultant resistance at the reporter (line) level.

Within a media framework, and again referencing Keep, the issue is "whether helping communities
improve” is a proper role or function for newspapers. Keep muses that the overall debate is one that emerges from absolutists who believe that “newspapers should play no direct role in helping their communities” and activists who argue that “newspapers have a responsibility to be more involved participants in the future of their communities” (1996, p.12A). The absolutists claim objectivity is lost by activist approaches whereby journalists and newspapers become “friends” of the community. Keep disagrees with both the absolutists and activists, citing (essentially) that community improvement results from, and is inherent within, the traditional news and entertainment functions of newspapers. Or, as Carter puts it: “It’s (civic journalism) based on the public’s right to know - one of the principles guiding good journalism. Add that to the public’s right to participate...” (in Pew Center, 1995).

Media function - is such activist reporting a proper function for journalists?

It has been charged that the concept of public journalism merely allows a news organization “to prove that they do more than publish just the bad news” (Elliott, 1997, p. 221-24). Where news media in democratic countries fulfill a social function to tell people what they need to know for self-governance, such social function should not be replaced by “stories of human need (that) tend to be reported in a way that is ultimately one sided and heroic rather than critical and thoughtful.

Journalists should tell and expose the underlying policy story. In fact, “telling the policy story is the moral responsibility of the journalist.” However, it is believed that journalists “should not tell the stories of individual need” as this type of “compassionate reporting results in unjustified harm when news organizations participate in the same kind of institutional unfairness they are often seeking to expose” (for instance, assisting one particular citizen by virtue of drawing media attention to some newsworthy problem the citizen is experiencing when other individuals with similar problems have no access to such media recourse).

According to Allavan-Majid (1995, p.30), “the (media) pendulum appears to have swung back in the direction of greater community and civic involvement by newspaper organizations, in the context of a movement that reflects a new, and somewhat unexpected, convergence of economic and intellectual motivations”. Latent economic motivations result from personal interaction with local ‘political elites who function as major sources of news and advertising revenue for the newspaper”. A similar latent function of community policing is enjoyed by law enforcement agencies that receive governmental funding and grant money, additional hiring of police officers. Whether either institution, pre-police, takes to heart the core of these civic & community movements, or simply uses these latent benefits, is yet to be determined.

The Issue of Community Empowerment

Trojanowicz and Bucqueur (1994, p.9) couch the aspect of community empowerment within an underlying theoretical basis of community policing. As one of the three core aspects of critical social theory, occurs when people “take action to improve their conditions. For empowerment to occur, citizens must first be enlightened about” the circumstances before they lobby for change”. Within the community policing model, police facilitate enlightenment. The same is true in civic journalism where reporting is “reoriented... away from the sources of news toward the recipients of news... away from description and toward a better alternative (alternative) solve a problem or issue” (Campbell, in Glasser, 1999, p. 46). Like police, media can be conceptualized as a factor of the enlightenment stage of critical social theory. The media bring about and promote citizen awareness of a problem, suggest solutions to remedy...
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In a case study of media’s function in community policing, Ziembo-Vogl found that empowerment emerged out of media coverage (1998, p.259). However, she found that both police and community became empowered. “Media coverage serves as a reward mechanism that can elicit jealousies among some officers and that serves to empower others. Likewise, media coverage is a prestige and reward factor for neighborhood citizens and maintains momentum for civic activism... neighborhood stories are best, they generate energy among officers and neighbors”. Sustaining momentum, in turn, fosters increased empowerment among citizens.

The Ps: Proactive, Personalized, Philosophy, Partnership and Problem Solving

The Trojanowicz Paradigm entails “Nine Ps” of community policing: (1) that it is a philosophy, (2) that it is personalized - accounting for why it looks different from site to site, (3) that it maintains a strong law enforcement focus (policing), (4) that community police officers patrol from a (5-6) permanent place (beat area), and that (7-9) police work in proactive partnership with citizens to identify and solve problems (see also Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux, 1994). Several of these Nine Ps are evident within the civic journalism
First, Rosen (1994) and others (Steele, 1997) now define civic journalism as a philosophy, suggesting it will take time to achieve a cultural shift within media organizations that is conducive or reflective of this new philosophical model. As part of the cultural shift, the “philosophy” of civic journalism is now discussed in terms of how to teach it within university Schools of journalism (Killenberg and Dardenne, 1997).

As with community policing, “there’s no one model... no template to provide the framework for... successful civic journalism. What works (in one location) may not work somewhere else” (Carter, in Pew Center, 1995). Thus, it is a concept that requires “personalization.”

Just as proponents of community policing claim it retains and maintains a strong focus on law enforcement (the traditional police function and model), proponents of civic journalism are quick to point out that the traditional and time honored aspects of journalism are not being replaced — rather, this new model of journalism requires thinking about news gathering in a new way and the public’s right to participate in addition to its right to know. The “Ps” of permanent, proactive, and problem solving are strongly evidenced when one examines the operational aspects of civic journalism. Journalists speak of “spending time in the neighborhood,” dealing with stories in a problem solving fashion by “fostering discussion about solutions” as opposed to dealing with stories in an “episodic fashion” (reactive reporting), and tackling the thing (the problem) in a more broad context” (Pew Center, 1995).

Partnering with citizens, once issues and problems are brought to the attention of the public, is central to addressing the root causes of a problem, especially in civic journalism projects that have addressed crime and crime-related issues. But the aspect of partnership is broader in civic journalism than just work with citizens. Inherently, it means partnering with other media entities toward the resolution of a common problem. As highlighted earlier, ideally this requires a newspaper, a television station, and a radio station or two. Those who study competition between various media will understand the enormity and uniqueness of competing media (especially when all are local media) entities partnering together to resolve a community problem. Yet, in many public journalism projects, partnership become broader still as media pinpoint and lobby for assistance from those government agencies they have identified as key players (or key obstacles) in a problem’s solution. Oft times, this can mean law enforcement.

The Issues of Corruption and Objectivity

Like community policing, civic journalism suggests that journalists refrain from viewing people as clients and think of them more in terms of actors or partners. For media, citizens are partners in the democratic process who can solve community problems. While some have worried about the potential for increased police corruption via closer contact between police and citizens, journalists conceptualize and debate the appropriateness of this “community-reporter partnership” in terms of its impact on reporter objectivity.

Steele (1997, p.162-63) sums up the media ethical debate inherent within a reporter’s new role as partner with the public: “Should reporters be investigators of system failure or initiators of solutions? Should journalists be detached observers or activist participants? Should newspapers be independent watchdogs or conveners of public forums?” These questions encompassing the ethical debate are not easy answered for they strike at the heart of traditionally held journalistic values: objectivity and the watchdog concept (also termed the “fourth estate” or as a check and balance on government abuses). The suggestion of a proactive partnership between reporters and citizens is further developed in materials disseminated by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism.
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Using Civic Journalism to Enhance Community Policing

It is not as though one can walk into any newsroom and ask, "Hey, do you practice civic journalism?" Although, in certain instances, this might be exactly what one should do as some media (newspapers specifically) are quite open about...
their practice of civic journalism. This might be especially true in cities promoting community or civic-oriented government. Anecdotally and from case study research related to community policing and media (including civic journalism) there appears to be two modes of civic journalism practice, both dependent on the degree of organizational commitment to the concept. The first involves an organizational mantra promoting the use of civic journalism that is strongly promoted within the news organization (referring here specifically to newspapers). The second is an organizational mantra that is weakly promoted with only rudimentary guidance provided for its practice. Whether overtly supported in strong fashion or covertly promoted in weak fashion, the identified components of civic journalism's practice mesh, by default, with community policing initiatives and police agencies have reaped latent rewards.

As mentioned, the news organization does not always do a good job of explaining civic journalism to the line level. This was the situation at the Midwest Journal a newspaper examined in a case study performed by Ziembo-Vogl (1998). Midwest is a Gannett-owned newspaper and although the corporate mantra loosely espoused civic journalism (as the concept was understood at the time of the study) via increased focus on the community, and in spite of the lack of clear direction, the Midwest Police Department's community policing initiative still enjoyed positive results from newspaper coverage. As one Community Police Sergeant remarked: Media played a big role in making things happen. Articles in the Midwest Journal built positive morale in community police officers and in the neighborhoods; it was a reward for their creativity. Coverage brought out a lot in the officers and was a reward for their good jobs. (1998)

Newspaper coverage as a reward mechanism for community volunteers and neighborhoods, in general, was often observed during field research by community residents who often offered scrapbooks and photo albums proudly displaying articles clipped from the Midwest Journal (1998).

At the Midwest Journal, the loosely defined concept of civic journalism proved to be a catalyst and mechanism for one civic-minded editor who developed a year-long series of feature articles focusing, to a large degree on community policing efforts in the city and titled "Neighborhoods in the 90s." These articles served to maintain momentum for civic activism among the neighborhood residents via the reward mechanism served by media coverage, and provided positive coverage for the city's police agency (1998). However, when compared to the precepts of civic journalism described earlier, the editor's efforts were singular and not civic journalism, per se.

In contrast, the Bay City Times an East Michigan newspaper that openly espouses civic journalism While still in the data gathering stage, a case study of the newspaper and the city's police agency preliminarily indicates a strong association between civic journalism precepts and increased positive coverage of police community policing efforts. This increase is striking when one considers the overt history of conflict in police-media relationships between these two organizations. In addition to the positive community policing coverage realized, the practice of civic journalism served as catalyst and facilitated a successful multi-media partnership aimed at building community awareness related to gang activity spreading North up the I-75 freeway corridor.

Conclusion

The comparison at hand is a skeletal representation of complex issues. The method of comparison is first dependent upon the conceptual framework one chooses to use for diagnosis. One could analyze from within the framework of democracy and what democracy means in terms of civic journalism (see Campbell, 1999; Peters, 1999). Or one could examine from a social control aspect, combining vestiges of...
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The comparison at hand is a skeletal representation of complex issues. The method of comparison is first dependent upon the conceptual framework one chooses to use for diagnosis. One could analyze from within the framework of democracy and what democracy means in terms of civic journalism (see Campbell, 1999; Peters, 1999). Or one could examine from a social control aspect, combining vestiges of symbolic interaction. Further still, there is the economic perspective steeped within enhanced competition due to what is termed cyberspace journalism, where it is now possible for a newspaper to "scoop itself" by posting a breaking story first on its website before hardcopy newspapers roll off the presses and hit the stands. Within the present discussion, civic journalism has been examined and compared to community policing predominantly from an operational standpoint.

Operationally, the core concepts of civic journalism reflect many core aspects of community policing. Case studies are beginning to indicate that where news entities (primarily newspapers) espouse civic journalism, there tends to be increased positive coverage of a department's community policing efforts, enhanced reward mechanisms (and thereby, empowerment) for community residents and community police officers, and sustained momentum for community policing. While it is too simplistic to state that civic journalism and community policing are the same wine in different bottles, it does appear that the first enhances the second.
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<td>Requires long-term problem solving</td>
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<td>Focus on empowering citizens</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has been met with resistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Old Wine/New Bottle&quot;</td>
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<td>Belief that traditional policing is replaced</td>
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<tr>
<td>Requires a cultural shift - Must be built into the organizational culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allows citizens to present problems and solutions to problems</td>
<td>Citizens set agenda after made aware of problem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shift some responsibility for crime back onto citizens’ shoulders</td>
<td>Fosters civic involvement - reduces public apathy and cynicism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address the root causes of crime</td>
<td>Address the root causes of crime and attack within a broader context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalized approach necessary</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhoods are central to future of a civil society - community building</td>
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</tbody>
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