

JOURNALISM THAT MATTERS

A national conversation sponsored by the Associated Press Managing Editors

THE CHALLENGE TO JOURNALISM

The future of mass media is uncertain, but this much we know. People have more ways to get their news and information than ever before. Many, particularly the young, are choosing alternatives to mainstream news outlets to stay informed about what they consider relevant to their lives. Over the last few years, numerous studies and meetings have made this development common knowledge to the people in every newsroom. Beyond occasional experiments with new newspaper sections or online news sites, however, little has changed in the way news stories are assigned, edited and told. Meanwhile, the audience for traditional journalism continues to dwindle.

This loss of audience is major concern of journalists. Yet even as they fret, the traditional practices and assumptions about what it means to be an editor, reporter, or other journalist continue. Particularly frozen in the traditions of the past are those who assign and edit stories.

A key question would seem to come down to this: What do assigning editors in newsrooms need to know about their relationship with their readers, viewers, listeners and users to begin to counteract the distressing trend of journalism's shrinking audience?

The good news: Research by major journalistic organizations and foundations has helped identify some changes in the way journalists pursue and tell stories that can keep existing audiences and reach new ones.

The bad news: These new ways of gathering and presenting the news aren't trickling down very far into the everyday thinking of city editors, features editors, business editors and others who assign and oversee daily journalism in America. Nor are they reaching the journalists who tell the stories.

The Associated Press Managing Editors, a national organization comprised of managing editors at 1,500 American newspapers, believes a new strategy must be employed to help the editors who assign and oversee reporters as well as the journalists who write the stories change the way they practice journalism. That's what this project is about. It targets those who make assignments in newsrooms and edit reporters' copy yet have precious little exposure to new thinking about storytelling and how different stories might gather a larger audience for journalism.

This project is similar to work done in other institutions that have faced similar upheaval. The idea here is to revisit the fundamentals, refine and reinvent these fundamentals and then move forward to new definitions of the core work. To keep newsrooms vital and vibrant, it is necessary, in APME's view, to reconceive journalism's role by revisiting **its**

purpose, its potential to serve the public and how it can best fulfill its promise in this new century. Through this process, day-to-day editors and reporters will discover new ways of thinking and working that will renew the bond between audience and journalist.

APME'S PROPOSAL

The proposal outlined here addresses the plans of Chris Peck, president of Associated Press Managing Editors (APME), to initiate nationwide conversations with working journalists – especially city editors, feature editors, business editors, assigning editors – about the changing nature and definition of news in order to recommit to what is fundamental and to reinvent the means for connecting news with its audience.

APME believes journalism stands at a crossroads. It can adapt to a volatile world and remain a vital and vibrant force, or it can stumble and risk failing as a socially important enterprise. APME believes the time is overripe for a series of national conversations among the people who actually assign and edit the news to engage in a meaningful examination of storytelling. Learning how to tell stories in new ways, APME believes, can lead key editors on a path of discovery that will help ensure that journalism has a compelling and valued future.

THE POSSIBILITIES

For some years now, journalists and others have engaged in sporadic, sometimes contentious, often angst-ridden dialogues about the future of the craft and how effectively it serves public needs in an age of instant communications, corporate amalgamation and technological shifts. Out of these discussions have emerged some important experiments and possibilities, including widespread discussions of professional credibility, centers on journalism excellence, various forms of civic or public journalism, and on-line extensions of newspapers, television stations and other media.

One study, "Telling Stories: Building Community by Improving Communication" (see www.goodnewsgooddeeds.org), found that communities yearn for news media to reassess their role in a community's communication system. Accordingly, journalists might benefit from picturing a time ...

... when journalism serves public needs in a full and interconnected way

... when stories of how and why decisions that affect a community are made are available to citizens in an easy-to-understand format

...when diverse voices and innovative experiments in any community are routinely covered

... when news media show the community possible futures

... when everyone in the community can see the web of relationships among government, businesses and civic organizations that causes projects to flourish or wither

... when journalists hold institutions (of education, arts, government) accountable in ways meaningful to the public and to the institutions themselves

... when stories are told in a way that offers journalists and their audiences time and space for reflection and learning

... when journalists play a role that is seen as vital to their communities.

Imagine some of the possibilities that might emerge from a thoughtful dialogue among journalists:

- * learning from various experiments in new approaches to journalism
- * applying skills of reporting and editing to new media in ways that build newsroom morale and capabilities
- * discovering ways to make coverage even more local and useful
- * connecting more authentically with young people and other traditionally overlooked or underserved populations
- * seeing ways to tell stories with multiple voices that make complex issues more understandable
- * redefining "community" in ways that go deeper than "market segments," yet at the same time deliver more readers to advertisers
- * making newsgathering processes more visible so that community members value this work.

The universe of possibilities is unlimited. By bringing together journalists at the grass roots, APME believes it can tap into considerable energy and insights for improving the practice and practical value of journalism.

THE CURRENT STATE

In some ways, American journalism has never been stronger. Every year, it builds on its traditions and notable moments by preserving free expression, checking otherwise unrestrained power and holding institutions and public leaders accountable for their actions. At this moment, many news organizations are enjoying record returns, even

as dot-coms, once feared, are losing their luster on the stock market. Readers, viewers and listeners affirm that they value the watchdog role of the press.

But all is not well. Readers, viewers and listeners also communicate a broad dissatisfaction with the news media, which is reflected not only in surveys but also in the fragmenting and declining audiences for newspapers and broadcast news. This in turn has created anxiety among owners and managers of news media enterprises, who worry about the financial health of their companies, and among working journalists, who worry about not reaching or effectively serving their readers, viewers and listeners. Meanwhile, the digital world continues to evolve and grow, attracting talented journalists and advertisers. Like the Chinese symbol for crisis, journalism is at the intersection of danger and opportunity. APME believes now is the time to reconceive journalism; when we have the resources at hand and clearly have identified the challenges ahead.

Five Key Challenges

There are at least five challenges facing journalists in every community. A rich, national dialogue on these issues, held at sites across the country, would address:

- **The challenge of purpose:** Journalists speak anxiously about values, the rise of competition, what is happening to their world. At the heart of this anxiety is uncertainty about the purpose of journalism in the current mix of information and technology and amidst social, economic and political transformations.
- **The challenge of audience:** Parallel to anxiety over purpose is anxiety over the appropriate relationship between the journalist and her or his audience. Journalists are anxious about when to treat their users as citizens, when as consumers and when (if ever) as equals and partners in efforts to understand the world.
- **The challenge of craft:** Even as journalists as a whole are becoming more proficient in craft skills of reporting, writing, editing, photography, graphics and design, questions about how each craft skill serves the purpose and mission of journalism keep arising. What are the best ways to report and present stories, given the shifts in society and in the media landscape? How can journalists clarify standards of news judgment – standards that journalists, citizens and communities can fully support as useful and important? As journalists adapt to multimedia platforms and media convergence, will the standards and values of one medium become those of other media? What might be gained or lost with such convergence?
- **The challenge of limits:** Journalists constantly bemoan the limits they face: limited time to work on stories, limited resources for travel or research or staffing, limited newshole or airtime – or unlimited cyberspace with limited resources to fill it. The emphasis on dailyness (and now hourlyness and minuteliness) reinforces the primary roles played by reflexes and routines in shaping a journalist's work, rather than reflection and fresh approaches. How can journalism remain timely and alert to breaking news as it also becomes reflective and inclusive in defining

newsworthiness? How can journalists match their limited resources to news with a global, seemingly unlimited, scope?

- **The challenge of joy:** Where does the passion, spirit and delight of journalism come from now? How can we sustain it? How can journalists measure, celebrate and reap the rewards of their contributions to the individuals and communities they serve?

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

APME believes an effective way to address these challenges is through something journalists know well: storytelling. Indeed, the assigning and editing of stories shapes the purpose and audience of journalism.

The old stories of how things work – the image of life as a giant machine (that just needs fixing), of relationships as "two halves make a whole," of government as the necessary parental authority figure – no longer convey how things really work. Marriages are failing, politicians can never satisfy us, and problems generally can't be solved by any one simple action. Yet these old stories continue to be told and retold by most of our news media. A more sophisticated approach to storytelling that embodies diverse cultures is more likely to reflect what's really going on. The Internet makes it possible for more people to tell their stories directly. But who is there to authenticate those stories – or to draw attention to them? Who can we trust? Where is the truth in an era when nearly everyone (in government, business, and especially the media) is seen as a slippery spin-doctor?

Any culture's storytellers are among its most influential people. Assigning editors and the reporters who work for them have held that trusted role for generations, but now there are questions about who will be the storytellers of the future and how those stories will be delivered. Between the new possibilities and the current state of journalism are at least three creative issues that can be reckoned with in ways that strengthen journalism or diminish it. These issues will provide a jumping-off point for the conversations.

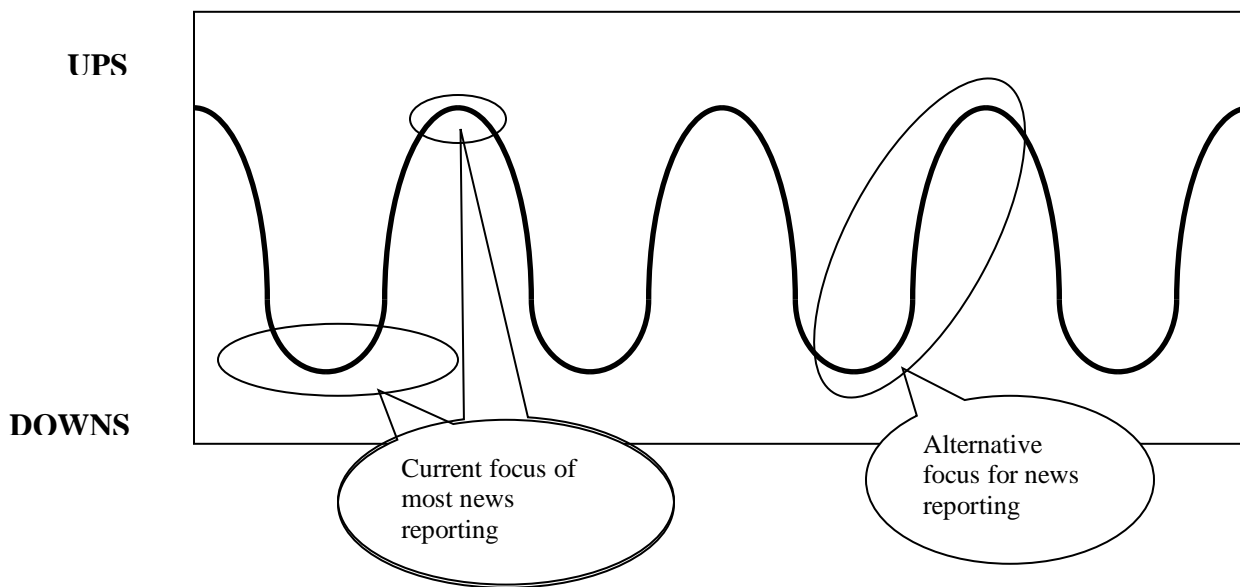
*All journalists know that really good storytelling is powerful. In fact, **the stories that we tell – about our world, about ourselves – shape our future.***

The future-shaping power of how a "story" is framed is evident from recent research in various fields. In medicine, placebo studies show that the attitudes of doctors and patients toward a medication's likelihood to work increases the medication's effectiveness for one-third to two-thirds of patients – even those taking a placebo. In education, the "Pygmalion" studies show that students perform radically better for teachers who are told they are stars (even though such star status was assigned randomly). In athletics, studies have shown that world-class athletes perform better when they keep a strong

image of success in mind. Perhaps most compelling is Polak's¹ study of a variety of cultures through the centuries. When a culture no longer holds a compelling picture of its future, he found, it declines and fails.

Reflecting on the proven power of storytelling, assigning editors in all departments can ask: Are we telling stories in the most productive ways for society? Is our designation of what's newsworthy creating a glossy patina of surface glory or a spiraling well of defeat and victimization? What might it look like if we covered more of the full-spectrum process of life rather than just the highest highs and lots of the lowest lows? What if more journalism read like The New York Times' recent series on race rather than like political horserace coverage?

LIFE



This diagram depicts the public's sense that journalism focuses primarily on life's low spots and occasionally on its high spots rather than on how life progresses between troughs and peaks.

Is the story of journalism itself being told in the most productive ways? Ask most journalists why they entered the business, and most likely you will hear highly personal stories about a desire to make a difference, to unleash truth, to preserve and protect the right by illuminating the wrong. Ask mid-career journalists if they are realizing their passion or goals, and the most likely answer is no.

*As our national storytellers, journalists are at the heart of our society's communications system, essential to a free society. We now know that **telling stories is as much an intervention as "making news."***

¹ Polak, F. *The image of the future* (translated and abridged by E. Boulding from the Dutch *Die toekomst is verleden tijd*). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973.

Just as quantum physicists have learned that the very act of observation affects and sometimes modifies what they see, so journalists telling stories shape the story and what we pay attention to as a community. These stories in turn shape their audience who use them to form images about the truth and make life-affecting decisions based on that.

Journalists abjure "making news" themselves. They want to avoid being accused of triggering newsworthy events the way police want to avoid being accused of entrapping criminals by inducing them to commit crimes. And yet journalists rarely address the fact that their choices about how to tell stories and which stories to tell have as much impact on our sense of the world as the events that naturally catch the journalists' attention and therefore become "news." By acknowledging that there is no such thing as a neutral observer, journalists have an extraordinary opportunity to reconceive their role in helping people make meaning of the confusing shifts in society.

In education, health care, the legal system and every other domain, experiments are testing better ways to live and work. Many are succeeding. These stories of hope and possibility are not told as aggressively as stories of despair. Journalists, as our local and national storytellers, are positioned to be a catalyst toward health in society as they chronicle successes as well as failures, as they show the full complexity of changing communities and apply their skills to new digital arenas such as the Internet.

Despite their skills as researchers, reporters, observers and authenticators of the truth, journalists may lose their place as important storytellers to those with fewer, less reliable skills.

Journalists have considerable street smarts, on-the-job training and often academic preparation related to their work. They know a lot and bring considerable value to the stories they tell. What's more, they have editorial skills that are increasingly in demand in the age of infoglut and infotainment.

Stories that are obsessively negative or irrelevant may be part of what is driving readers, viewers and listeners away. They turn instead to other sources of news and information that may be more emotionally satisfying but less reliable. Furthermore, by doing things the way they've always been done, journalists risk losing out on potential new applications of emerging technologies to enhance their newsgathering and news delivery.

If journalists, particularly those who guide and control content everyday, reconceive the purpose and practices of their craft, they can renew their value to society. The essential purpose of this national dialogue is to reassert their place as our national storytellers. This can be a powerful motivator for journalists to join in these national conversations.

HOW THIS PROJECT FITS WITH RELATED INITIATIVES

The APME proposal outlined here recognizes and builds upon the work of other organizations involved in journalism reform. Several organizations, many underwritten

by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the McCormick-Tribune Foundation, the Knight Foundation, the Ford Foundation and others, have put forward important ideas. The Committee of Concerned Journalists has held a series of meetings around the country on what ails journalism. This proposal honors these initiatives, but is also fundamentally different. By tapping the state AP associations, the APME conversations about reinventing storytelling will reach key assigning editors and reporters from all 50 states. In addition to having ties to all 1,500 AP member newspapers, this project also has the potential of reaching the AP's hundreds of broadcast and on-line members. The APME-sponsored conversations will be oriented to grassroots, working journalists, not just those from metropolitan newsrooms or journalism schools. They will have a direct, practical application, moving from aspirations and values to specific approaches assigning editors and reports can use the next day at work to tell a more meaningful story. These will be workshops that craft useful next steps on the spot rather than issue further calls for changes in how everybody else does his or her job.

DESIGN

APME proposes conversations that cover all 50 states using approaches that have demonstrated success in organizations and communities. The focus of the project is to reconnect participants individually and collectively with the meaning and purpose of journalism so they can reconceive how their work can best contribute in these changing times. Here are the highlights of the proposal:

To ensure broad-based and open participation by members of the journalistic community, APME will:

- Host 2-day workshops through state AP member organizations to discuss new ways of storytelling with those who assign stories and report them. The overarching purpose of the workshops is to help participants reconceive their industry, rethink storytelling, and renew ties with audience. These events could precede regularly scheduled statewide meetings, overlap these meetings, or be the agenda for these meetings.
- Engage a variety of journalism organizations from all media: (e.g., NPPA, SND, RTNDA, and alternative media organizations). It could become a joint project with the AP broadcast news directors.
- Draw on the full diversity and expertise from across the industry (e.g., writers, editors, photographers, camera operators, publishers, academics, industry analysts, consumers), as well as on diversity in ethnicity, age, geography and other critical disciplines (e.g., futurists, organizational development specialists, Wall Street analysts, etc.). We will provide travel grants to members of smaller news organizations that otherwise could not participate.
- Be as flexible as the new approaches to journalism it hopes to stimulate.
- Run several pilot workshops through the Poynter Institute, individual media organizations or the first few AP state meetings.

- Use the Internet as an on-going means to supplement interaction through statewide meetings.
- Conduct a three- to four-day national summit prior to the 2001 national APME conference to reinforce new thinking and behavior in assigning, editing and reporting stories. The summit is a place for assigning editors and reporters to share specific examples and synthesize ideas that emerged from the statewide meetings. The summit would be open to any participants in the statewide or online meetings.
- Engage participants of the national APME meeting with the philosophy and work practices that emerge from the summit.

Workshop practices

Workshops will employ change methods that have proven successful in transforming businesses, organizations and communities. These approaches (see appendix) focus on what individuals find has most meaning and purpose for them. Participants also can adapt them to explore what has most meaning and purpose for their communities and how their work can best serve that.

For example, participants will engage in interviews and affirmative questioning, producing in turn a collection of powerful stories. These will be synthesized to bridge beliefs and actions with a collectively imagined future. Another approach will enable diverse groups of any size to come together around complex, divisive issues and uncover surprising possibilities. And we will use several methods that give groups more capacity to think together productively about complex, important issues.

Support

To keep this series of conversations on point, APME will:

- Create a 10-15 person Advisory Council composed of people from key roles in the industry: journalists, editors, publishers, etc., to make the key project decisions. Ensure that the Advisory Council includes people able to make decisions on behalf of APME. Ensure diversity in multiple dimensions: age, ethnicity, gender, geography, medium (e.g., newspapers, radio, television, new media) and other factors deemed critical to reflect the industry at its best.
- Engage a full-time project director, two organization consultants skilled in the proposed practices, two consultants from the industry, and a full-time logistics person to support the extensive travel and administrative requirements.
- Develop a network of organization consultants familiar with these practices to support the meetings that cover all 50 states and provide counsel to the Advisory Council.
- Invite interested people in the journalistic community to act as an as-needed “sounding board” to the Advisory Council.
- Provide for ongoing participation through the Internet.
- Engage related journalism organizations in ways determined by the Advisory Council

Communication

Discussion summaries will be disseminated via the APME web site, the AP Industry News, and other channels as the conversations unfold. A project summary will also be created.

Evaluation

The APME Advisory Council will develop specific evaluation processes to assess the value of the conversations to participants and the tangible outcomes of this project (e.g., shifts in the nature of stories covered, the relationships between journalists and their local communities, perceptions about journalists by consumers, etc.).

BUDGET

Available upon request

BIOS

Chris Peck is editor of The Spokesman-Review, the largest newspaper between Seattle and Minneapolis. He is president of The Associated Press Managing Editors, a professional association whose membership includes 1,500 daily newspapers that are members of The AP. He is active in numerous other journalism groups, including the American Society of Newspaper Editors and is a founder of the Civic Journalism Network.

Peggy Holman is a writer and consultant who works with organizations to help them achieve cultural transformation. She emphasizes high involvement by participants and a whole-systems perspective in her work. Her clients include AT&T Wireless Services, the Washington State Arts Commission, St. Joseph's Medical Center and the Boeing Company. She is co-editor of The Change Handbook: Group Methods for Shaping the Future (Berrett-Koehler, 1999).

Stephen Silha is a communications consultant, writer and facilitator. He has reported for magazines and newspapers including The Christian Science Monitor and The Minneapolis Star. He has worked with a range of philanthropic and nonprofit organizations, including the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Libraries for the Future, Children's Express, and Digital Partners. He co-convened the first national symposium on the Media and Philanthropy, which spawned the local research project Good News/Good Deeds: Citizen Effectiveness in the Age of Electronic Democracy. He also serves on the faculty of the Institute for Creative Development.

Cole C. Campbell is a Poynter Fellow at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, FL. He has been the editor in chief of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, The Virginian-Pilot, Tar Heel: The Magazine of North Carolina and The Daily Tar Heel, among other newsroom jobs in 25 years as a working journalist. He has taught journalism at Guilford College and

communication skills at the University of North Carolina a Greensboro. He has been active in the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the American Press Institute and a variety of other professional development and journalism education initiatives.

APPENDICES (available on request)

- Sample workshop format
- Whole systems change: an introduction
- A snapshot of 3 whole-system change methods
 - Appreciative Inquiry
 - Open Space Technology
 - Dialogue
- Whole systems change: an example (Washington State Arts Commission)