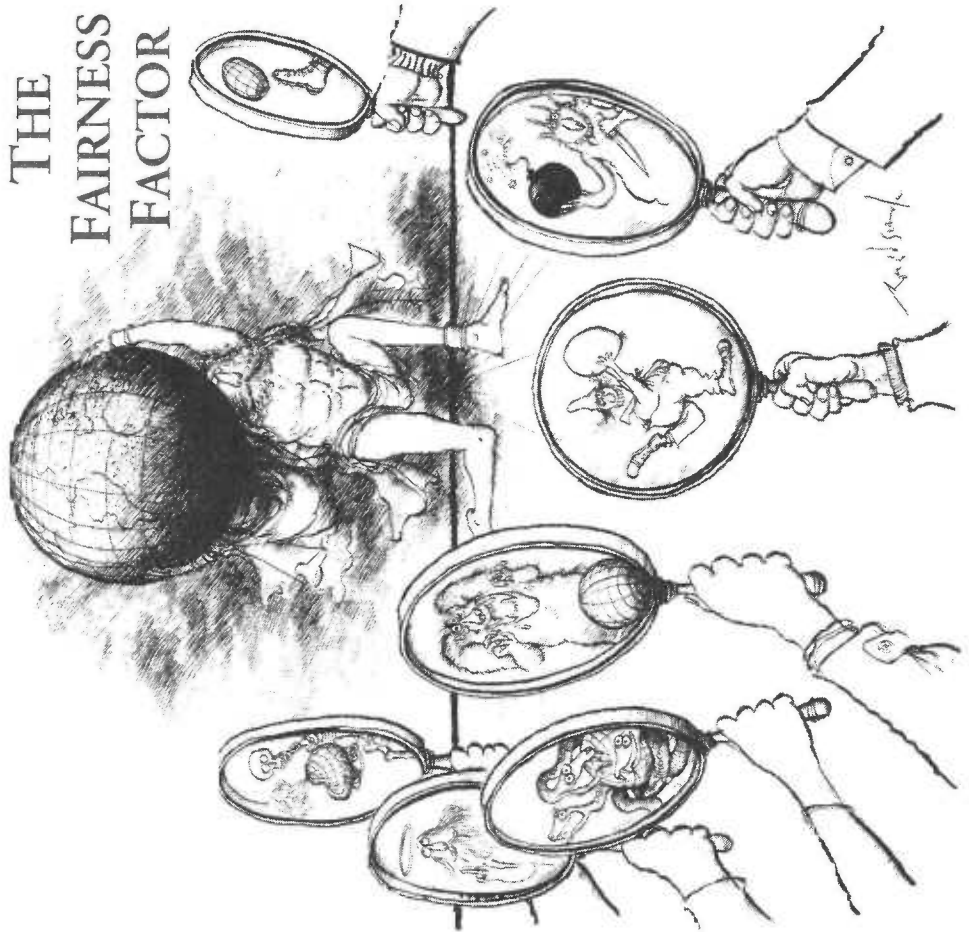


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Case Study—Wichita and Charlotte: The Leap of a Passive Press to Activism

JOHN BARE

IT'S NO ACCIDENT that America's big cities and their daily newspapers fell ill at the same time. The racial violence that tore apart Los Angeles, Detroit and other U.S. cities in the late 1960s awakened Americans to an array of seemingly insoluble social problems, from poverty to crime to failing public schools. More important for newspapers, urban decay and changing inner-city demographics helped trigger a downturn in readership and drained the life out of the urban retail trade that was so crucial to newspaper advertising.

While the unrest did make for dramatic news, it is cruelly ironic that newspapers such as the *Detroit Free Press* won prestigious awards for coverage of the events that devastated their own markets. Newspapers were deeply involved in covering the very events that contributed to the decline of their environs. But at the same time, the press was obligated by professional standards of "objectivity" to remain detached from the search for solutions. Traditional rules of journalism that mandate passivity required reporters to document the

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decline and fall of their communities but prohibited them from working actively to solve the disorders that threatened both their hometowns and the health of their jobs and their profession.

Spurred by a desire to reestablish connections between their papers and their communities and to increase voters' voice in the political process, the *Wichita Eagle* and the *Charlotte Observer* turned in 1992 from professional passivity to journalistic activism, from disinterested observer to assertive community leader. Over the past year the *Observer*, and the *Eagle* for the past three years, have experimented with fundamental changes in the role of the daily newspaper. The goal is to reconnect citizens to the political process, their community and their newspaper, using the press's proactive power to return to citizens some control over how their communities are governed. Specifically, using polling data and other methods to gauge community sentiment, the two newspapers let residents set the news agenda in the 1992 presidential campaign. In many ways, it was a new definition of "community news," in which citizens and journalists together decided what was news and then covered it.

IT'S EASY TO UNDERSTAND why editors have been reluctant to adopt such a radical model of activist journalism and why most still won't. The model requires journalists to reject their trade's foundations of professional disinterest and to devise new definitions of fairness, objectivity and responsibility. To do so, journalists must declare invalid much that they previously had espoused. But what many journalists have realized but failed to address is that the fortunes of their newspapers—and their jobs—are linked in large part to the health of their communities. A thriving community will help make for a healthy newspaper; a crumbling community can cripple a newspaper. Once the issue is framed this way, it's easier for editors to embrace the idea of an activist model of journalism in which the only responsible choice for a newspaper is to promote democratic ideals such as civic participation and voter registration and seek to solve, not just cover, problems confronting the community.

In Charlotte, the first step was to get readers into the political dialogue that previously had been monopolized by the news media

and politicians. The *Observer* used polling data to identify which issues to cover during the 1992 elections. In a January 1992 front-page column, *Observer* Editor Rich Oppel kicked off the paper's "Your Vote in '92" project, pledging to let local residents set the newspaper's agenda and promising to emphasize issue coverage over horserace polls.

"We sought to engage readers in developing the agenda for the campaign and to help readers assert that agenda throughout the campaign," Oppel said later. "We tried not to pursue our own agenda via eight editorial writers sitting around a table."

The efforts by the *Eagle* and *Observer* mark a dramatic reversal in newspaper philosophy. Instead of covering community meetings, the *Eagle* and *Observer* organized them. Instead of relegating reader comments to the letters-to-the-editor page, the newspapers invited their readers to mail, fax or phone in questions for reporters to ask candidates. Instead of reporting voter registration statistics, the newspapers tried to convince citizens to participate in elections. And instead of quoting local experts on issues, the newspapers opened up full pages to list organizations residents could contact for assistance or advice.

Most notably, the *Eagle* and *Observer* discarded that traditional journalistic icon, the tenet of detached passivism in which reporters are satisfied to watch events from the grassy bank as a river of troubles rush past. The *Eagle* and *Observer* moved instead toward a model of activism in which editors can offer up their newspapers as a good citizen willing to work with the rest of the community to improve the quality of life there. Rising crime is a problem? Voter apathy is increasing? The newspapers explained the problems to readers, explored solutions and served as a convener of community, giving citizens a chance to brainstorm solutions on their own. Instead of watching the decline of their communities from the river bank, *Eagle* and *Observer* editors have leapt in feetfirst to help rescue them.

IT WAS AN AMBITIOUS AND RISKY BREAK from tradition. In the old days, publishers who followed *Chicago Times* publisher Wilbur F. Storey's motto—"Print the news and raise hell!"—raked in profits without having to worry about the people in their community. Lord Thomson (among others) observed that own-

ing a newspaper was like having a license to print money. Put simply, publishers could ignore their customers' needs and still prosper. As Philip Meyer explains in his *Newspaper Survival Book*, "A reader needed the local newspaper more than the publisher needed any given reader. Even in competitive markets, organizational survival depended more on keeping advertisers happy than on nurturing contented readers."

Leo Bogart was among the first to recognize that newspapers could not afford to ignore their communities. In 1964, he tried unsuccessfully to convince directors of the Newspaper Advertising Bureau to hold a two-day seminar to discuss the troubles that were weakening America's cities and, in the process, many daily newspapers. He pitched the idea again in 1967, but the Bureau's directors still did not believe urban crises were the newspaper industry's concern. "What we need is less sociology and more selling," said a Bureau director in rejecting Bogart's proposal.

Although newspapers have become more receptive to change, they have clung too tightly to the boys-on-the-bus style of political reporting. Readers searching for more responsive news sources have turned elsewhere, primarily to cable television and radio and television call-in shows such as Rush Limbaugh and "Larry King Live."

CONSIDERING THE INERTIA of the newspaper industry generally, the Wichita and Charlotte experiments seem especially progressive. In Charlotte, the *Observer* unveiled the "Your Vote in '92" program as the presidential primary campaign began. In Wichita, the *Eagle* has conducted "Your Vote Counts" projects in state, local and national elections since 1990, and more recently initiated "The People Project: Solving It for Ourselves." In this effort, the newspaper synthesizes sets of issues, explains advantages and disadvantages of various policy solutions and asks readers to participate in discussions aimed at ferreting out answers.

On any given day, the form and content of political campaign coverage in the *Eagle* and the *Observer* might not have seemed so different from that found in other newspapers nationwide. Many papers publish special election-year packages and many editors have called

for structural changes in the way newspapers communicate information to their readers. The most profound changes in Charlotte and Wichita occurred behind the scenes in the newsrooms, as *Eagle* and *Observer* editors redefined and refocused their newspapers' intentions, objectives and motivations. The changes touched all elements of the news organizations, not just special projects teams, and were intended as permanent features of a new, coordinated news-gathering style.

"We're talking about changing a system that's been grinding down now for 40 years," said *Eagle* Editor Davis "Buzz" Merritt Jr. "We've got to make a generational, cultural change in the way we look at our jobs.... We've got to reevaluate our role in the country."

Results are expected to come slowly, as editors fight a 25-year trend of declining readership. In 1967, roughly 73 percent of the adults in the United States read a newspaper every day, falling to about 51 percent. Part of the problem has been the way publishers have gone about the business of trying to fix things. Typically, they have hired market researchers to spearhead redesigns and repackaging of the news to improve the appeal of their product; they added a particular comic strip or dropped another, or created tabloid inserts devoted to neighborhood or youth news.

In one of the more elaborate and thoughtful projects, Knight-Ridder redesigned *The News of Boca Raton, Fla.*, in 1990 with a bent toward baby boomers. There, research produced notable accomplishments, particularly with the structure of indexes and classified ads, but the changes were market driven and intended to attract the kind of affluent, yuppie readers that please advertisers. As with most redesigns, Boca Raton editors hoped to find out what made the newspaper more appealing to the most desirable customers. Unlike the work in Wichita and Charlotte, redesigns are not intended to change the primary mission of the newspaper or to alter the traditional relationship between newspapers and readers. In Wichita and Charlotte, the test of success is not whether readership increases, though editors certainly hope that occurs, but whether the newspaper can convince citizens to get out and vote and help empower them to solve public problems.

THE PROJECTS in both North Carolina and Kansas came about in response to exasperating political campaigns in 1990. Opper and the *Observer* hoped to avoid a replay of the miserable Senate race between incumbent Republican Jesse Helms and challenger Harvey Gantt in which mudslinging and charges of media bias overshadowed any discussion of issues. In Kansas, the *Eagle's* "Your Vote Counts" project was born out of frustration over the gubernatorial race between Democrat Joan Finney and Republican Mike Hayden. Less than two months away from election day 1990, Merritt realized that no one had forced either candidate to enunciate specific policy positions and neither candidate wanted to volunteer such information. He believed his newspaper owed it to voters to squeeze the details out of Finney and Hayden.

"We ought to be able to make candidates answer our questions or tell people they won't answer our questions and get away from this stenographic work we used to do," Merritt said.

Merritt had been exploring reform possibilities well before the *Eagle* changed course. In a November 1988 column, he proposed some of the same changes that would become part of the *Eagle's* "Your Vote Counts" project two years later: Instead of sound bites, give readers longer excerpts of speeches that explain policy positions; de-emphasize campaign one-liners that carry sizzle but no substance; and downplay poll stories that make one candidate appear to be leading when the margin actually is no greater than the sampling error. Journalists "stand between candidates and the voters," Merritt said, and therefore must use their position to see "that the American people are informed at a meaningful level."

OTHER VOICES called for changes in the way the media approach and report politics. At a 1989 symposium in Key Biscayne, Fla., Knight-Ridder CEO James Batten fueled newspaper reform efforts when he urged papers to devise compelling methods of communicating political information. "We need to root out the mindless assumption that our pages will be read—and that people will care about their communities—just because such things are 'important,'" Batten said. Moreover, Batten challenged newspapers to become increasingly responsive to the needs of their communities.

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The Charlotte Observer

Memo Final (4) Sunday, January 12, 1992 \$1.25

We'll help you regain control of the issues

No, you don't need national representatives to help you with your political issues. You can take control of your own destiny through local action. We'll help you...

People and politics. Charlotte better know how to control its own destiny. For years, the city has been controlled by a handful of politicians...



People and politics. Charlotte better know how to control its own destiny. For years, the city has been controlled by a handful of politicians...

So, media are changing coverage. People are angry and alarmed. Our younger people are angry and alarmed. Our younger people are angry and alarmed. Our younger people are angry and alarmed...



Other groups are trying different methods. For example, the N.C. Public Safety Council is trying to get more coverage among lawmakers by getting their names on the list of candidates to get away from "horse race" politics...

"Newspapers have an urgent obligation to find better ways to draw people into greater involvement with their communities," he said. Others at the symposium reinforced the need for change. Rockefeller Foundation President Peter Goldmark said newspapers must serve as "a vital, involved, important local citizen" and must "make a difference in what a community does, not just what it reads."

David Broder told an audience at the University of California at Riverside that the news media "have colluded with the campaign consultants to produce the kind of politics which is turning off the American people." Reporters, Broder said, should move "closer to the people [they] write for—the voters and the potential voters."

Merritt wanted the *Eagle* to move closer to readers and to serve as something more than an outlet for venting anger against politicians. He wanted the newspaper to address the complex choices that make problem solving difficult—environmental regulations vs. economic growth, civil rights guarantees vs. crackdowns on crime—and

to work with citizens on solutions. In the resulting effort, "The People Project: Solving It for Ourselves," the *Eagle* took its biggest step toward an activist model of journalism.

To Merritt, using the newspaper to bring about positive change is the key to improving the quality of life in the community and regaining the faith of readers. "Newspapers, to get readers back, have to take a very small and calculated step away from that razor's edge of value neutrality," Merritt said. In its "Your Vote Counts" projects and "The People Project," the *Eagle* based its editorial decisions on two core values. The first, "People should vote." The second, "This should be a better place to live." This isn't really new; Merritt argued, pointing out that, even if newspaper industry traditionalists don't acknowledge it, newspapers have always made decisions according to accepted values, such as, "Politicians should not lie" and "Government employees should not steal." These are agreed-upon value judgments that have led many newspapers to take up causes and work for change.

In launching "The People Project," Merritt said the *Eagle* would serve as part of "a huge and accessible marketplace where ideas can form and be exchanged. Not simply ideas about what's wrong, but ideas about solutions." His goal was a new model for public affairs coverage, one in which the newspaper provides a comprehensive package of information about sets of related problems and fosters discussions among local residents that lead to solutions.

"Newspapers' traditional role has been consciousness-raising, and we do it real well," Merritt said. "What we don't do is help the public to the next step. We don't help them focus on steps that need to be taken. We've got to get to solutions; everyone knows what the problems are."

THE MOTIVATION BEHIND THE ACTIVIST model is admirable, but the implementation is not without risk. Editors of the *Eagle* and the *Observer*, in their efforts to turn the news agenda over to readers, must guard against freezing the agenda, with the bulk of resources devoted to the issues that rank highest in citizens' polls.

If newspapers emphasize only the topics readers think are most important—education, crime and taxes, for example—they may

neglect less publicized or less popular problems. In subsequent polls, citizens may continue to name the same issues as most important because they have been bombarded with news stories on them. The result of slavish adherence to reader input without independent judgment can result in readers' and the newspaper's setting and reinforcing each other's agendas. In allowing readers to set the newspaper's agenda, editors may create a system that requires issues to gather a powerful and vocal constituency before these subjects can be considered worthy of intense news coverage, or in which highly charged and dramatic topics may crowd more entrenched problems from the paper. This establishes an impossibly high threshold for other issues, such as prenatal care for unwed mothers, that affect a disenfranchised minority of citizens unable to push their concerns to the top of the newspaper's agenda. Such an *à la carte* method of dealing with public policy issues might further fractionalize a society already stuck in a gridlock of competing interests, and place in power groups best able to organize their efforts.

Editors, in formulating editorial policy by community referendum, also risk losing control over news decisions. Editors often have been alone in believing an issue is important, and their persistently unpopular stands have helped change society for the better. Two decades ago, outspoken newspaper editors in the South who denounced Jim Crow and endorsed civil rights were hated in their communities. Speaking out against racism was a noble but dangerous tactic, yet the progressive writings of these editors eventually helped bring about change. If those editors had established their news agenda by survey research, however, they certainly would have found that citizens wanted something else. If new activist models of journalism require reporters and editors to relinquish their right and responsibility to take unpopular stands, the new methods will be rejected by the fair-minded folks in the newspaper industry.

Merritt himself admits that the radical changes are unwelcome by those who would rather see newspapers bird-dogging politicians, not helping them shape the community for the better. The changes, he says, are "pretty scary for the Woodward and Bernstein types that tend to populate our newsrooms."