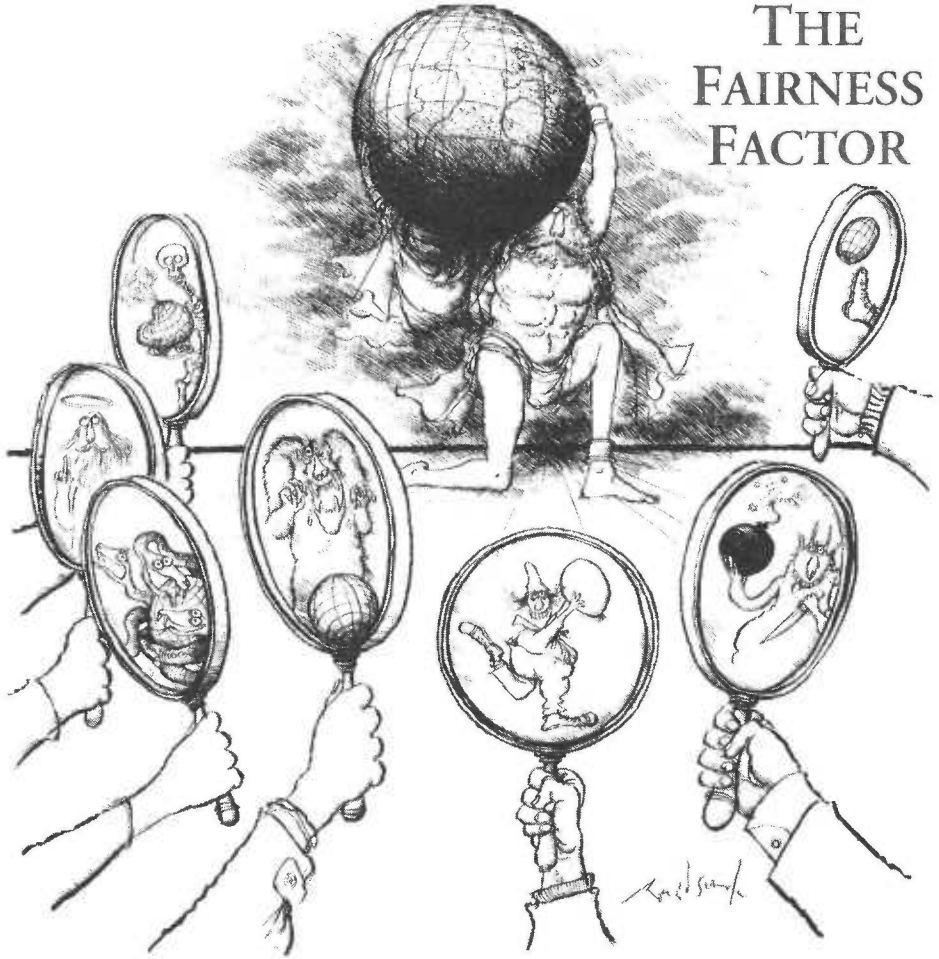
FALL 1992

MEDIA STUDIES Journal

THE FAIRNESS FACTOR



The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center
At Columbia University in the City of New York

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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 repackage 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. Oppel 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.

Gardening calendar for 1992 / Living 1E Learn to like how you really look / Parade

The Charlotte Observer

Metro Final (4) Sunday, January 12, 1992 e $1.25

We'll help you regain control of the issues

Who decides the 1992 campaign agenda in our part of the Carolinas? You do. For the color.

The Observer will help you, with improvements in coverage of the races for president, Congress, governor, city and county boards, school boards and other offices.

The reporting of the campaign trail also will be there. But this year — through exhaustive polling — we know far more about what the voters of our region think, and will be telling you. The emphasis will be on the issues, not which candidate is ahead.

The power of computers linked to national data bases will allow us to check the statements of candidates, and to rapidly background readers with authoritative pieces that set campaign claims into context.

Why are we doing this? We are concerned about what is happening to the election process.

In recent decades, the percentage of registered voters who actually participated in general elections has declined. David Broder of The Washington Post has said voters see "no connection between their concerns in their daily lives and what they hear talked about and see reported by the press in most political campaigns."

We think that is dangerous.

How will this improved coverage work?

■ **Intensive polling.** Over the holiday season, we called more than 1,000 voters in Anson, Cabarrus, Catawba, Chester, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Lancaster, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly, Union and York counties. As a group, they are representative — a valid, random sample — of the people who live in your area. They told us what they felt the issues are for 1992. Of those interviewed, 530 agreed to serve on a citizens panel. We will be

Editor RICH OPPEL

Please see Observer/page 8A

People and politics: Davidson barber Kenneth Norton has been cutting hair for years, and talking politics: "How many statesmen do you know who are concerned about the country, the county, the state?" More voices/page 8A

GARY DINEEN/Staff

People more and more upset with politics

So, media are changing coverage

By JIM MORRILL and DAVID PEARLMUTT Staff Writers

You don't need national Expertsetelling you that Americans are increasingly disillusioned with politics.

Just talk to the experts back home.

People like:

■ Davidson barber Ken Norton, 63: "Seems to me politicians do just what they want to do. They don't care about the general public."

■ Auto parts dealer Darrell Wilson, 58, of Mooresville: "So many of these fellows are so far away from the people . . . they forget why they're there."

■ And Chester County, S.C., salesman Bob Strong, 47: "I don't think my vote counts for anything. . . . If I had plenty of (money) . . . politicians would listen to me. But to small people like me, they don't listen."

In metro Charlotte and throughout the nation, people are tired of trite "read-my-lips" campaigns and what they perceive as do-nothing politicians. They're tired of mudslinging, rhetoric and failure to solve problems.

Some turn to taxes such as term limits. Some simply turn away.

Even in a highly charged race like the 1990 U.S. Senate race between Democrat Harvey Gantt and Republican Jesse Helms, 58% of N.C. adults did not vote at all.

"You've had a progressive disaffection from politics," says Curtis Gans, director of a Washington-based group called the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate. "Older people are more cynical, angry and alienated. And younger people are more indifferent."

In response, much of the media are changing the way they cover politics. By paying more attention to what voters say, the media want to make candidates more responsive and voters less dependent on the sound-bite, push-button politics of campaign professionals.

Other groups are trying different methods.

Friday, for example, the N.C. Public School Forum hosted an early debate on education among those running for governor. Executive Director John Dornan called it a move to get away from "bumper sticker statements."

Many applaud.

"It's a big problem . . . and there isn't any silver bullet," says David Matthews, president of the Kettering Foundation, which studies public attitudes about poli-

Please see Upset/page 8A

YOUR VOTE IN '92

INSIDE

■ Tell us what you think/page 8A

■ New Hampshire bitterness/front page

■ The voters' calendar/page 8A

COURTESY CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

"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 referenda, 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."

BUT ALTHOUGH THE CHANGES involve risk, the activist model also holds great promise for communities and the newspaper industry alike. First of all, the Wichita and Charlotte projects help to drag the newspaper from its status as an old communication medium into the world of new media.

New media—including cable television, fiber-optic networks and computers—differ from old media such as newspapers because they give consumers more control over information they receive, allow for interactive communication and can transmit more information more rapidly, on consumer demand. New media make possible opportunities such as electronic town meetings and call-in shows that liberate voters from the constraints of old media and permit greater public participation in the process of governance. At best, the new media can help "tighten the fit between public opinion and public policy," analysts say.

By adopting features of new media, newspapers can increase involvement of a generation of readers and potential readers increasingly habituated to the electronic media and may tighten the fit between public opinion and newspaper performance. By allowing readers to decide which issues newspapers cover and by giving readers opportunities to interact with their local newspaper through citizen panels, phone banks and electronic bulletin boards, editors of the *Eagle* and the *Observer* are working to elevate newspapers to new media status. By rejecting the role of passive observer and leaping into community problem-solving efforts, newspapers have an opportunity to move beyond the role of town crier and toward the role of town healer.

It's difficult at this point to judge the success of the efforts in Wichita and Charlotte. Ongoing university research efforts are aimed at answering several key questions: Did *Observer* readers know more about the issue positions of presidential candidates than readers of other North Carolina newspapers? Does the use of horserace polls, which Oppel and Merritt have criticized in their reforms, help readers learn about issues? Will a comparative analysis of both papers' 1992 and 1988 political coverage reveal that they did, in fact, perform differently and in better 1992? Additional studies will focus on other questions, but this work will not satisfy everyone. Both Oppel and

Merritt doubt whether such studies are sensitive enough to pick up on the subtle, even anecdotal, changes that are just beginning to occur in their newspapers and in their communities.

Oppel and Merritt are more interested in tangible signs of progress, including feedback from citizens and community leaders and fresh news pages that put forth solutions and feature reader input. A common goal for both newspapers is increased voter participation, and while registration and turnout did increase dramatically in Wichita and Charlotte in 1992, it is impossible to determine whether the changes were due to newspaper efforts or simply part of the nationwide trend.

AT THE LEAST, Oppel and Merritt and their newspapers can claim credit for developing innovative methods of communicating political information at the very moment voters and presidential candidates collectively turned away from old news sources. MTV landed interviews with Bill Clinton, Ross Perot and George Bush, but mainstream media figures such as Peter Jennings and Dan Rather couldn't get interviews with the presidential candidates between Labor Day and Nov. 3. Through radio and television talk shows, citizens could question the candidates directly, free from media filters; and Arsenio Hall, Larry King, C-SPAN and morning news shows joined mainstream outlets as primary sources of campaign information.

The *Boston Globe*, noting the ascendancy of the new media, declared that in 1992 "Dan Rather was replaced by Phil Donahue, the *New York Times* by *Spy* magazine and 'Meet the Press' by MTV." Reporters and commentators generally agree that the changes were positive, with issues, not fluff, moving to the forefront of campaign coverage. The *New York Times* said, "Voters provided a merciless reality check on the candidates" and "the process of campaigning itself was transformed, turning talks shows into primaries." In 1992, the 2,500th anniversary of reforms by Kleisthenes that gave birth to democracy in Athens, politics became America's favorite spectator sport; on election day, voters reversed a 32-year trend of declining voter turnout.

Regardless of whether the *Observer* and the *Eagle* experiments helped increase voter participation or nudged the newspaper industry toward a more activist model of campaign coverage, they can claim a place among the new, more activist media. The model offers the prospect of a more involved, less detached role for newspapers that carries with it the potential for a press perceived by its public as more interested in the community's needs and concerns and, thus, more fair and responsive.

The real measure of the success of the Charlotte and Wichita experiments will have to wait for months and years, as editors find out if they can work with their neighbors to help their communities resolve pressing problems. "Did the People Project work?" Merritt says, "Ask me in 10 years."