Public Trust, Media Responsibility And Public Journalism: US Newspaper Editors And Educators' Attitudes About Media Credibility

A survey of media educators and editors of daily newspapers in the United States concluded that the two groups had similar concerns about public trust and media responsibility, and both groups saw public journalism as a potential means for improving media credibility. Educators, however, were significantly more likely to state that the media are contributing to the public's mistrust of government, that responsibility shown by daily newspapers is worse than it was five years earlier, and that public journalism reduces a media organization's objectivity. The authors present suggestions for what the findings mean for journalism educators.

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Public trust in the news media has been cause of concern for U.S. media in recent years. The 2001 First Amendment survey by the Freedom Forum (http://www.freedomforum.org) found, for example, that almost as many Americans say they believe it is important for the government to hold the media in check (71%) as say they believe it is important for the media to hold the government in check (82%) (Paulson, 2001).

Moreover, 41% of Americans surveyed by the Freedom Forum said they were more concerned about the media having too much freedom than about the government imposing too much censorship, and only 36% said they were more concerned about

government censorship than they were about media having too much freedom.

Such numbers suggest that support is weak for the media-related freedoms set forth in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees Freedom of Speech and Press as well as Freedom of Religion and Assembly and the right to petition the government.

Kovach, Rosenstiel & Mitchell (1999) stated about the situation that "a large majority of news professionals sense a degradation of the culture of news – from one that was steeped in verification and a steadfast respect for the facts, toward one that favors argument, opinion-mongering, haste, and infotainment."

Falling U.S. media credibility in the past few years has led media researchers to study the cause of the rise in public distrust for the news media and has led U.S. media educators to rethink the foundations of journalism education.

Surveys show that public trust for the media has been on the decline for years. Public opinion surveys in the early 1980s were showing that U.S. newspapers were losing credibility with readers and that a "credibility gap" was developing (ASNE, 1985; Times Mirror, 1986). The two major U.S. newsroom organizations, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (http://www.asne.org) and the Associated Press Managing Editors Association (http://www.apme.com) established "credibility committees" to study the problem (Gaziano, 1988).

A survey a decade later (Hess, 1996), however, showed that public distrust for the media was continuing to fall. Also, a Gallup poll in the late 1990s found that more Americans perceived the media to be biased than perceived them to be fair and impartial – around 55 percent to 45 percent across the various media (Newport & Saad, 1998).

In a study commissioned by Newsweek magazine (Nicholson, 1998), 76% of Americans surveyed said the news media had gone too far in the direction of entertainment and away from traditional reporting. Overall, 53% of respondents said they believed "only some" or "very little" of what they see, hear or read in the news media. In addition, the credibility rating of all types of news media surveyed had fallen significantly from a poll taken in 1985. The percent of people stating that they believe all or most of what is in network television had fallen to 22% from 32%, and the percent of those believing all or most of what is in the local newspaper had fallen to 21% from 28%. Only 33% of Americans stated that journalists were more influenced by a desire to report the news fairly and accurately

Likewise, a survey by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE, 1998) found that "Americans are coming to the

nearly unanimous conclusion that the press is biased, that powerful people and organizations can kill or steer news stories, and that newspaper accuracy is no longer a given" ("Papers Alienating Readers," 1998).

More recent research, however, suggests that the decline in credibility may be slowing. Stepp (2001) found that two thirds of Americans surveyed thought news stories were "very biased" or "somewhat biased" and slightly more than two thirds stated that newspapers should do a better job of explaining themselves. However, only 12 percent of Americans thought that the news reporting in the local paper they read most often was less believable that it was "several years ago." About 70% of Americans thought it was "about the same."

To stop the slide in media credibility, the Newspaper Association of America (http://www.naa.org) and the American Society of Newspaper Editors (http://www.asne.org) looked at ways to improve media performance. In 1997, members of the news industry and allied foundations began three efforts to find ways to improve media performance and public support, at the cost of millions of dollars: the Journalism Credibility Project (ASNE, 1997), the Committee of Concerned Journalists (http://www.journalism.org/ccj), and the Free Press/Fair Press Project (Hess, 1998). The work of the Committee of Concerned Journalists led to a list of nine principles thought to be basic to journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001).

At the same time that concern over the U.S. media's "credibility gap" was increasing, some professional journalists began to look at "community connectedness" as a means for increasing both newspaper readership and citizenship through the journalistic tradition of public service. Rosen (1993) stated that community connectedness meant "that journalists must play an active role in supporting civic involvement, improving discourse and debate, and creating a climate in which the affairs of the community earn their claim on the citizen's time and attention" (p. 3).

In 1994, the Pew Charitable Trusts (www.pewcenter.org) began funding "civic" or "public" journalism projects as an "antidote to cynicism" (Knecht, 1996). Glasser and Craft (1996) wrote that public journalism has two sets of principles. First, it "rejects conceptions of objectivity that require journalists to disengage from all aspects of community life" and, second, it "calls for a shift from a 'journalism of information' to a 'journalism of conversation'" (p. 154). Craig (1996) stated that the movement seeks to "foster new ties with the public, spur debate over community problems and solutions, and energize citizens to participate in public life" (p. 115).

Some journalists and journalism educators began to see public journalism as a way not only to increase readership but also to close the credibility gap. Altschull (1996), for example, suggested that the aims of supporters of variants of public journalism and journalists looking to improve media credibility share common ground. He concluded that public journalism "marks a serious effort to return journalism to the reputation it once had" and "to restore the role of the press to its original purpose – that is, to serve as a breeding place for ideas and opinions, a place worthy of elevation to the honored position it was given in the First Amendment" (p. 167).

The extent to which public journalism is an antidote for public distrust of the media and the government is a question of importance both for journalism professionals and for journalism educators. Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg (1996) suggested that public journalism's appeal is "at least as wide as public cynicism with present media practices is deep" (p. 165). If that is so, journalism educators not only in the United States but also in other countries need to understand its implications and consider how it can be incorporated into the classroom.

Review of the Literature

The hypothesis that a growing lack of credibility of newspapers was related to the loss of readership was a "popular hypothesis receiving attention in the 1980s" (Meyer, 1988, p. 576). Several academic studies also were undertaken in the mid- and late-1980s and early 1990s to try to measure credibility (Gaziano and McGrath, 1986; Rimmer and Weaver, 1987; Meyer, 1988; Wanta and Hu, 1994).

One study found that journalists were becoming considerably more critical of their profession and concluded that neither journalists nor media executives understood their audience well (Kovach, Rosenstiel, & Mitchell, 1999).

Public journalism entails more reader/audience input into news media content and is thought to lead to an increase in non-expert sources. One study of a public journalism project (Reynolds, 1997) found no change in the use of non-expert sources used, however, and a study of another public journalism project (Massey, 1998) found that the number of non-expert sources was about equal to the number of expert sources used. Haas (2001) concluded from a study of one apparently successful public journalism project that the newspaper's sources were bifurcated: with non-expert sources providing personal anecdotes and expert sources providing technical information.

In addition, some researchers have questioned whether public journalism will reduce or increase public cynicism. Iggers (1998) suggests that the media's encouragement of the public to

participate in discussion on public issues "in a context where there is little prospect that the conversation will have an impact runs the risk of deepening public cynicism toward government and politics" (p. 150). Parisi (1998) wonders whether public journalism might be "hegemonic – a means of accommodating the contradictions of current newsgathering without bringing about genuine change" (p. 682).

Voakes (1999) proposed four dimensions (or indicators) of civic journalism: enterprise; information for decision making; facilitation of discourse; and attention to citizens' concerns. The first two, which Voakes called modest approaches, might better be seen as traditional journalistic approaches. The last two he called bold approaches. Kurpius (2000), on the other hand, stated that approaches to public journalism are "spread along a broad continuum" (p. 341).

Bare (1998) concluded that institutional public journalism beliefs, as well as more conventional belief systems (such as Investigative/Interpretive Journalism), were more important than a journalist's personal public journalism beliefs. Gade et al. (1998) used a Q sort to identify four types of journalists: the Civic Journalist, who believes the media should be more involved in making democracy work; the Concerned Traditionalist, who believes it is not the media's responsibility to make sure democracy works; the Neutral Observer, who believes that journalists should remain objective and not let the public's demands set the media's agenda; and the Responsible Liberal, who sees the media's role as identifying issues and problems for the public and who supports the ideals of objectivity and social responsibility.

Some research has looked at attitudes toward public journalism. Ketchum (1997) found that slightly over half of print and broadcast journalism executives agreed with the following statement: "For many news organizations, 'civic journalism' has become an important means of enabling them to 'reconnect' with their alienated communities by paying much more attention than they have in the past to what people think." Half of the media executives agreed that "Having newspapers sponsor and conduct 'citizens' forums,' at which those in the community can discuss issues of importance to the public, usually results in better reporting of community issues."

Arant and Meyer (1998) determined that U.S. daily newspapers of all sizes were using public journalism practices but that most journalists practiced traditional journalistic values and did not support public journalism values that differed from those traditional values. On the other hand, journalists who supported basic public journalism practices were no less sensitive to traditional ethical issues than were journalists who were not

supporters of public journalism.

A recent study (APME et al., 2001) found that 45% of editors surveyed reported that they used civic (or public) journalism techniques. More editors ranked public journalism-related techniques of "conversation catalyst" and "community steward" as the highest value for a newspaper than the number who ranked the newspaper's investigative role highest.

A little research has compared editors' and educators' attitudes toward public journalism. The St. Louis Journalism Review conducted a national study of U.S. newspaper editors and college journalism educators about public journalism (Corrigan, 1997). Researchers found that 71% of the 143 editors responding and 86% of the 184 educators responding were "very familiar" or "somewhat familiar" with public journalism. They concluded that there was "obvious concern, and division, over any journalistic concept that lessens the importance of the 'watchdog' role of the press" (p. 15). The researchers, however, combined responses by educators and editors and did not compare the two groups' responses.

As Hass (2000) noted, little research has been done on U.S. journalism educators' attitudes toward public journalism. Haas and Steiner (2001) investigated the supposed gap between scholarship about public journalism and its practice and concluded that academic scholarship does offer pragmatic guidelines for journalism professionals practicing public journalism.

This study was undertaken as a preliminary step toward understanding journalism practitioners' and journalism educators' attitudes toward public journalism as it relates to public trust. Such an understanding is important in helping educators improve journalism education by increasing students' understanding of techniques that might improve their performance and, it is hoped, media credibility.

Method

Because no list of educators involved in newspaper journalism education in the United States was available, the authors surveyed a random sample of members of the Newspaper Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. We thought they would be the educators who were most knowledgeable about newspaper journalism education. Because we thought some members of the division might not be involved in journalism education, we asked respondents who did not teach journalism courses or did not feel themselves to be sufficiently knowledgeable about newspaper journalism education in the United States to return the survey after putting a check in the appropriate blank.

We sent surveys to a random sample of 383 AEJMC Newspaper Division members, almost 60 percent of the approximately 650 division members. We also sent surveys to a random sample of 501 daily newspaper editors, one third of the approximately 1,500 U.S. daily newspapers. We also sent follow-up letters to try to obtain the best response rate.

We proposed three research questions:

RQ1: What is the attitude of the U.S. daily newspaper editors and newspaper journalism educators about the level of public trust in the media and in government?

RQ2: What is the attitude of U.S. daily newspaper editors and newspaper journalism educators about media responsibility?

RQ3: What is the attitude of U.S. daily newspaper editors and newspaper journalism educators toward public journalism?

Respondents were asked three questions concerning each research questions. For each statement, they used a 1-to-5 scale with 1 meaning "disagree strongly," 2 meaning "disagree somewhat," 3 meaning "undecided," 4 meaning "agree somewhat," and 5 meaning "agree strongly." To analyze responses relating to the three research questions, we used t-tests for independent samples to identify statistically significant differences between editors' and educators' responses. We used the 95% confidence level as the measure of statistical significance.

We received responses from 167 AEJMC Newspaper Division members (44%) – of which 142 submitted a completed survey and 25 noted that they did not teach journalism-related courses or were not sufficiently knowledgeable to respond.

We also received responses from 149 newspaper editors (30%). The response rate from editors was somewhat lower than desired; however, based upon results achieved by other researchers, it was not unexpected. Editors at newspapers with less than 25,000 circulation were somewhat over-represented in the sample, and editors from newspapers with more than 100,000 circulation were somewhat under-represented. We did not see that as a major problem, however, because we found no statistically significant difference between editors' responses for any question based upon newspaper circulation and because the literature suggested that more public journalism activity was taking place at smaller newspapers.

Findings

To determine whether editors and educators had similar concerns about the level of public trust in the media, we asked three questions: the extent to which the media were creating public mistrust, whether media credibility should be of concern to the media, and the extent to which they thought media credibility

and public trust in the media were related. Responses to questions concerning the Research Question No. 1 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1:
Results of t-tests for respondents' level of concern
about public trust

Whereas editors were undecided overall whether the media were contributing to the public's mistrust of government, educators agreed somewhat with the statement. The t-test indicated that educators were significantly more likely than editors to agree that the media were contributing to the public's mistrust of government.

Both groups surveyed agreed strongly that the level of public mistrust should be of concern to the media. Also, their responses were near the upper limit of "agree somewhat" category in regard to the statement that loss of media credibility is reducing public trust. Both editors and educators were slightly more likely to state that the level of mistrust should be of concern to the media than they were to state that the loss of media credibility is reducing public trust in the media. We found no statistically significant difference in editors' and educators' responses to those two statements.

To determine respondents' attitudes toward media responsibility, we looked at the extent to which they thought media responsibility was declining and whether they thought the media should be more responsible. Responses concerning Research Question No. 2 are shown in Table 2.

Though both groups were undecided overall about whether

Table 2:
Results of t-tests for respondents' attitudes
towards media responsibility

Discussions

responsibility shown by daily newspapers was worse than five years earlier, educators were significantly more likely than editors to state that the responsibility shown by daily newspapers was worse than it was earlier. Both groups agreed somewhat that responsibility shown by television news was worse than five years earlier and that the media should be more responsible in reporting. We found no statistically significant difference in the two groups' responses concerning those two statements.

To determine their attitudes concerning public journalism, we asked whether they thought public journalism reduces media objectivity and improves media credibility and reader interest in the news media. Responses concerning Research Question No. 3 are shown in Table 3.

Although both groups of respondents were undecided about whether public journalism reduces a media organization's objectivity, editors were leaning toward "disagree somewhat." Editors were slightly more in agreement with the statement that public journalism was a good means to improve credibility and that it increases reader interest than were educators, but the difference was not statistically significant.

The first research question concerned the attitude of the U.S. daily newspaper editors and newspaper journalism educators about the level of public trust in the media and in government. Editors and educators disagreed to some extent about the level of public trust. We found that they have similar levels of concern about the media losing public trust, but not about whether the media are causing public mistrust of government. Educators were more likely than editors were to state that the media are

contributing to mistrust of the government. The issue strikes closer to home for editors, and they may be somewhat more biased on that issue.

The second research question concerned the attitude of U.S. daily newspaper editors and newspaper journalism educators about media responsibility. The two groups showed some disagreement. Editors and educators agreed about the need for the media to be more responsible. They also agreed that TV news had become less responsible. Not unexpectedly, perhaps, editors were less likely to state that newspapers had become less responsible. Again, editors likely are too close to the issue to be unbiased in their responses about their own medium.

The third research question concerned the attitude of U.S. daily newspaper editors and newspaper journalism educators toward public journalism. We found no statistically significant difference between editors and educators for any of the three statements. Editors, however, appeared to be slightly more supportive of public journalism. Educators were slightly more likely to state that public journalism reduces objectivity, and editors were slightly more likely to state that it was a useful tool to improve media as well as increase reader interest.

Editors' and educators' high level of agreement in attitude and concern, perhaps, should not have been unexpected. Research has shown that most newspaper journalism educators have professional newspaper experience and likely carry over many attitudes to their teaching. The two areas of disagreement shown on Tables 1 and 2 also are not unexpected. Educators would be expected to be somewhat more objective when looking at the media from outside than current editors would be looking at the media from the inside. The almost identical rating editors and educators gave for the level of responsibility shown by TV news suggests that editors also tend to be more objective about something in which they are not directly involved.

The high level of agreement on questions concerning public journalism was less expected but understandable based upon what we found concerning their acquaintance with public journalism. Nearly three fourths (73%) of the editors stated that their newspapers had participated in at least one civic/public journalism project or activity within the previous five years. Whereas 27% of them stated that their newspapers had undertaken one or two such projects during that time, 12% had undertaken three, and 34% had undertaken four or more.

Educators showed a similar high level of acquaintance with public journalism. Most of those responding (69%) stated that civic/public journalism was a topic for discussion in one or more courses at their institution, and 15% stated that it was taught as a

journalistic technique in one or more courses. The other 16% stated that it wasn't discussed. A small minority of the educators responding, 12%, stated that their journalism program had a specific course whose major focus is civic/public journalism.

That editors are slightly more likely to disagree somewhat with the statement that public journalism reduces objectivity likely is related to their own experiences in actually doing public journalism. It also is interesting for the purposes of this study to note that the two groups' level of support for public journalism as a means for improving media credibility is only slightly less than their support for public journalism as a means for increasing reader interest – it original purpose.

This study suggests that media credibility is a concern for newspaper editors and newspaper journalism educators and that they think public journalism might be one means for improving credibility. Certainly, media educators need to educate their students about the causes of public distrust of the media and ways media credibility might be improved. One such means might be integrating as least some aspects of public journalism into the curriculum.

Studies have shown that the reasons the public tends to mistrust the news media are many: They believe that the media are more interested in higher ratings and profit than news, that they are too powerful; that they are interested in personal fame; that they focus on scandal and "infotainment"; that they are too liberal (or too conservative); and that they are insensitive, biased, inaccurate, unfair and cynical. Some of the criticisms are, perhaps, accurate. Whether accurate or not, all of these concerns need to be addressed by the media and by journalism educators. Certainly, students' understand of "The Elements of Journalism" proposed by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) are important in that regard.

The study also suggests that U.S. editors and educators remain somewhat leery of public journalism, particularly in regard to the extent to which it is perceived to reduce journalistic objectivity. However, framing research and agenda-setting research suggest that journalists are perhaps less objective than they suppose. If journalists are more aware of how they frame their stories and set the public agenda, they are more likely to try to keep their stories fair and balanced.

When journalists state worries about public journalism's impact on objectivity, their concerns may relate more to having to share agenda-setting duties with the public. If readers, listeners and viewers can make a connection with the news media, they are less likely to perceive journalists inaccurate, biased and aloof.

Educators need to teach students about the causes of media bias as well as causes of the public's perception of media bias in

order to prepare them for media jobs. Why, for example, do readers/viewers think that powerful people can kill news stories, that the media are too liberal (or too conservative), and that the media can't be trusted? And are the media inaccurate? If so, what can be done about it? In addition, educators might integrate aspects of public journalism and public connectedness into their courses.

Journalists in the United States have long been seen as arrogant because of the protections offered them by the First Amendment's grant of Freedom of Speech and Press. The media also have been perceived by the public as kowtowing to big business because of chain ownership of most newspapers and the takeover of the major broadcast networks by large corporations. Journalism education has an important role in helping future journalists understand the causes of public distrust as well as the possible solutions.

Some consensus may be evolving that the tools of public journalism may be potentially useful in reducing the level of public mistrust of the media and, perhaps, mistrust of the government. The tools that have been suggested by public journalism advocates include understanding the community and listening to readers. Though those are things that journalists will say they always have done, the techniques being developed through public journalism initiatives offer additional means of increasing reader input. Such techniques may not only be increasing reader interest in the news and the community but also may be assisting in improving some of the credibility that the media in the United States appear to have lost.

Debates over media responsibility and the role of public journalism offer journalism educators opportunities to play an important role in improving journalistic practices. It is, of course, an important role of journalism education to seek to improve professional practice. Journalism educators can lead the way in improving young journalists' sensitivity to the need for public trust while at the same time educating young journalists about the consequences of media sensationalism. Journalism educators should work to produce future journalists who will provide leadership in helping to overcome public cynicism and mistrust of the media while fulfilling their responsibility for public service.

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