AEJMC Presentation

“The Journalist as an Advocate for Quality Public Discourse”

Urban Communication Foundation Panel

5 – 6:30 p.m. Friday, August 9, 2013

National Press Club

Washington, D.C.

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Gary Gumpert has asked us to discus the Journalist as Urban Advocate. In response, I will just say it right out: The journalist is, must be, and cannot help but be an advocate. The urban journalist is an advocate for the quality of public discourse--the semiotic environment of built spaces. Where we live and get together and make decisions about how we want to live. Where we create the meaning that is the built environment.

I.

Twentieth century philosophers from John Dewey to Jacques Derrida have described the critical role discourse plays in the life of communities.

Hegel pointed out that language thrusts private perception into the public scrutiny.

Dewey said discourse is how people share problems, forge joint solutions, and build the social institutions to take joint action.

Hans Gadamer said individual thinking is shaken up and transformed when discourse confronts us with how differently other people perceive, experience, and think.

Habermas said communicative understanding emerges from dialog and argumentation.

Rorty describes a “solidarity” that emerges when people see how their language shapes perception.

And Derrida argues that “texts” are reinterpreted with each “reading.” That produces a constantly receding horizon of new thinking that’s always emerging and never finished.

The lesson is that ideas and innovation evolve in interaction not in isolation. Discourse means new ways of seeing problems, new kinds of solutions, new ideas about acting.

The voice of the urban journalist should be strong and unequivocal. But it’s not just about information. It’s not about objectivity, the inverted pyramid, or any of the other "rules" of journalism. The "rules" are just shortcuts. The voice of the urban journalist is about the quality of public connection and public conversation. It is about how to empower public discourse.

It involves pointing out fallacious spin, deceit, and manipulation for personal gain. It involves telling the public when it is being misled or misinformed.

II.

I recently read journalist Steve Lackmeyer’s coverage of the light rail issue in Oklahoma City. The coverage was clearly advocacy--not so much of light rail (although it may have incidentally been that, too). It was advocacy for the quality of the discourse about light rail. He pointed out when officials and private interests were manipulating the public, withholding information, misleading an independent citizen’s board and the public. He pointed out when the quality of the discourse was too poor for sound decisions.

Public discourse is advocacy for what Habermas called "communicative understanding." Good quality public discourse in the built environment helps people understand each other so they can work out a way to take joint action that solves problems.

Today too much of what passes for journalism is what is called instead "strategic communication." It is carefully designed to get the public to go along with some particular plan—usually one that will profit one group or another. Strategic talk is about winning through designed manipulation. Journalists who narrowly define "objective" or "balanced" are too often manipulated by their own rules. In the process the public is manipulated, too.

The odd thing is that the public often knows it and resents it. “Journalists” have become part of the manipulation machine. Public trust declines, as it has in legacy media for forty years.

Of course, journalists are urban advocates. They advocate discourse that leads to understanding and shapes the meaning of the city.

III.

The 21st century no longer depends solely upon legacy journalists for its discourse. Writers like Manuel Castells, Clay Shirkey, Mark Deuze, Henry Jenkins, Brian McNair, Jay Rosen, and many others have described the flood of new media surging through urban settings today. They describe the myriad of ways new media empower us to “mass self publish.”

We have almost a decade of using social media. We’ve learned that it’s not about technology. Online journalism can be just as flawed as legacy journalism. The blogger who abandons authenticity and quality discourse is not a journalist. He or she is part of the strategic manipulation machine of a business, interest, ideology, or party.

Matthew Fuller has described today’s urban environment as “media ecology of materialist energies.” He points that new media have joined legacy media to create a semiotic synergy. The technologies feed off each other. Meaning emerges from the interplay. Marshall McLuhan long ago suggested the “Medium is the Message.” New media theorists say technologies have indeed joined the conversation. They form a network of relationships that create meaning. Technologies like “search algorithms” have joined bloggers, posters, politicians, lobbyists, strategists, “experts,” and dozens of voices asserting, arguing, and reinterpreting--a swirling semiosis of liquid meaning and reinterpretation. They are strategic advocates aimed at winning.

Journalists speak into this mix. What sets the true journalist apart is that the journalist is an advocate for sense making—quality discourse—rather than strategic discourse.

Journalists are and cannot help but be urban advocates. True journalists advocate discourse for understanding: the discourse of the common good.

IV.

The latest study in a long line of studies on “urban sprawl” spilled onto the pages of our newspapers again last month. The study from economists at Harvard and UC Berkley found that poor children in cities with MORE urban sprawl are less likely to move out of poverty than children in cities with LESS urban sprawl. The authors added that: “Some of the strongest predictors of upward mobility are correlates of social capital and family structure.”

These measure how connected people are in built environments. They measure the quality of public discourse. Isolation is not good for economic health. Cities that work are cities that connect people.

Good journalists connect people and empower quality discourse. In its public spaces and material technologies, the built environment also connects people for quality discourse.

We Americans certainly value our individualism. It’s part of our mythology. We celebrate it in books and film and politics.

But we also value community. We love our freedom to talk, to assemble, to protest, to KNOW.

This tension over individual liberty and community action in built environments is not new. It is at least as old as German idealism. Hegel traced the “dialectic” between individual freedom and community norms, a kind of argument between individual will and community demands. He said it is resolved by discourse into “community spirit.”

In the United States, the mythology of individualism is interlaced with ideals of “Wild West, “American Frontier,” “Manifest Destiny,” and “American Exceptionalism,”

It’s tantalizing to imagine an individual, standing alone to resist compromise and community pressure. It’s the myth behind suburban sprawl. Get out of the cities. Get your own place. Get away from crowds and regulation.

We tried it in the 20th century. Books like Leigh Ghallager’s *The End of Suburbia,* Elizabeth Ewan’s *Picture Windows,* Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck’s *Suburban Nation* and evenBill Owens’ newly re-released *Suburbia* describe the isolation and disconnected lives of suburban sprawl: transportation failures, big box auto parks, and disconnected ghettos. Most of all they describe isolation, community decline, and a poor discourse.

Journalism reflects this tension. On the one hand journalism informs each of us. Walter Lippmann said it helps us individually make good voting decisions.

On the other hand, journalism empowers our discourse. John Dewey said it helps us work together to solve problems as a community.

It played out in the sprawl of newspaper circulations and the megamergers of newspaper groups. Community newspapers morphed into “repeater stations” disconnected from communities.

C. Wright Mills describes how the Power Elite used reporters to transform community discourse into strategic messages that manipulate mass audiences of isolated, disconnected, anonymous individuals.

V.

Journalists are urban advocates. But cities have always housed multiple media voices, showing us new ways of seeing.

Today we have lots of material traces of these voices. Radio, television, newspapers, newsletters, employee publications, mobile aps, Facebook, Twitter, Linked-in, Email, YouTube and Penterest, Blogging and posting, etc., etc.

But the last 10 years of networked media have taught us something. Posting is not always discourse. Linking is not always connecting. Too often they are manipulating.

Built environments can promote connection, listening, understanding, problems solving, and community action. But they can also promote disconnection, passivity and helplessness in face of an overwhelming flood of manipulation.

Zygmant Bauman describes how the material structures of built environments too often separate people, urging them through empty spaces devoid of cover, benches, or assembly points and into their cars or trains for their isolated homes in the suburbs.

Quality discourse connects and empowers. Strategic discourse isolates and weakens.

Journalism IS urban advocacy—advocacy for quality discourse and understanding--quality discourse in media, in technology, and in public spaces.