

JOURNAL THAT MATTERS: The Memphis Sessions
Jan. 11-12, 2007

The Work of Cole Campbell

Cole Cambell, a co-founder of the Journalism That Matters collaborative, [died Jan. 5, 2007](#), in Reno, Nev., of injuries suffered in an automobile accident. He was dean of the University of Nevada-Reno's Donald Reynolds School of Journalism. He was formerly editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. In an essay commissioned in 2005 and published in the Kettering Review, he argued that it is not as much economic cutbacks as a change in journalists' role in society which has been responsible for declining interest in news that makes a difference to democracy.

In October, 2005, Bill Densmore contacted Campbell, and obtained permission from him to reprint and distribute to Densmore's "Journalism Issues" class at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts copies of the short Kettering essay, "Journalism and the Public: Three steps, three leaps of faith." In the essay, Campbell argues that journalists should work to "sustain inquiry that can lead to action," rather than just serve as a passive source of information. And he wrote that journalists should include the general public as a reporting source.

In Densmore's class, several students argued that most the public has neither the time nor the inclination to become active, engaged citizens, and that Campbell was naïve to think they wanted to be called to action. In the class, we introduced and explored a new concept: "Climate of readership," to suggest a process by which the journalist must stay in touch with reader, view or user's interests and needs. This was viewed as a step toward the kind of connectedness to readers that Campbell says modern journalism has lost.

On the next pages, you will find Kettering's intro to the Cole Campbell piece, a review of the Campbell essay by Jamie Schuman (which originally appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*) and then the essay itself. We have underlined portions of the essay to emphasize points which seem likely to be most relevant to the discussion at "Journalism That Matters: The Memphis Sessions."

(For another view on Campbell's key premise -- that journalists focus too much on the concerns of the elite -- view or read Tom Stites' speech June 30, 2006 at The Media Giraffe Project summit in Amherst, Mass.:)

http://newshare.typepad.com/mgp2006/2006/07/how_americas_ne.html

-- Bill Densmore



The Kettering Foundation works on strategies to strengthen democracy. The primary focus of Kettering's research is "What does it take to make democracy work as it should?"

SEP 01, 2005

Journalism and the Public

Leaps of Faith

By Cole Campbell

For a brief time after the attacks of September 11, 2001, journalism regained a nobler profile. News reports offered solace and reassurance to a nation in mourning.

When journalism serves to notify people about what's going on, and further bears witness to the unfolding of events, it serves people well through its "news and information" emphasis....

Why is this service not enough to sustain journalism against the slings and arrows of its current, outrageous fortune? Because most of the time, we need more than notification and witnessing. The problems of democracy are seldom problems of information. They are instead problems of political will and of what Daniel Yankelovich, the public opinion pioneer, calls public judgment. These problems can be resolved only through public action and public inquiry—not simply through reading, watching, or listening to news and information...Journalism's essential work is not simply providing information. It also must sustain inquiry that can lead to action—helping citizens sort out the contested facts, frames, claims, (and) values.

Kettering Review, Summer 2005, Vol. 23, No.1

OPINION: Ex-Post Dispatch editor says journalists need to accept some blame

ORIGINALLY REPORTED IN THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Wednesday, September 28, 2005

HEADLINE: A glance at the current issue of The Kettering Review: Fixing journalism

Reviewed by Jamie Schuman, Chronicle of Higher Education

To offset criticism about their profession, journalists need to do a better job of relating the opinions of everyday citizens, writes Cole C. Campbell, dean of journalism at the University of Nevada at Reno and a former editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Many critics say that the quality of journalism and the public's regard for the field have dropped in recent years, and they often attribute the decline to corporate influences. But journalists need to start blaming themselves -- and not business pressures -- for problems in their profession, writes Mr. Campbell. After all, newspapers have long been for-profit entities.

"The economic explanation of journalism's failings takes journalists off the hook," Mr. Campbell writes. "It makes journalists victims, not agents."

Mr. Campbell criticizes journalists for focusing too much on opinions of the "political and social elite," failing to place isolated events in a broader context, and wrongly believing that their stories are objective and their voices are authoritative. Instead, journalists should trust everyday citizens to be sources and contributors to their publications. They also should help people become players in the political realm. To accomplish that goal, he asks reporters to:

- Provide more context in their stories to show how events are tied to larger political, economic, and social systems.
- Stop believing that journalism is a "form of unshakable empirical observation," and experiment more with story forms and reporting practices.
- Stop limiting their sources to elite opinion makers and instead regard everyone as equal actors in shaping the public realm.

To Mr. Campbell, the function of journalism is not just to provide information, but also to "sustain inquiry that can lead to action." He writes that one of his first bosses, Claude Sitton, who worked at The New York Times and The News and Observer, in Raleigh, N.C., epitomized the notion of the journalist as a public steward. Mr. Sitton's articles on the civil-rights movement saved the lives of activists and encouraged political action -- which rarely are effects of the news media today.

The article, "Journalism and the Public: Leaps of Faith," is available to subscribers or for purchase at:

http://www.kettering.org/programs/article_detail.aspx?progID=&workID=78&catID=78&itemID=1099

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**JOURNALISM AND THE PUBLIC:
Three steps, three leaps of faith**

**By Cole C. Campbell, Dean
University of Nevada-Reno,
Donald Reynolds School of Journalism**

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Sometime after 2 a.m. on Monday, June 22, 1964, Claude Sitton got a telephone call in his motel room in Jackson, Mississippi. He was among the first people Mary King of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee roused from sleep to put on alert. Three SNCC workers – James Chaney, Andy Goodman and Mickey Schwerner – were missing outside Meridian, a town whose cluster of black-owned businesses was supposed to be “a rare and wispy beacon of progress for all of Negro Mississippi.”¹

By that afternoon, Sitton was in Meridian, asking questions about the missing civil rights workers. In the rotunda of the county courthouse, just outside the sheriff’s office, an angry crowd accosted Sitton and told him to get out of town. An insurance executive threatened him with bodily harm. Sitton and a colleague, Karl Fleming, sought refuge across the street at the Turner Furniture Store, run by the family of Sitton’s boss back in New York City. Sitton pleaded with his boss’s uncle to intercede with the crowd, to explain that Sitton was a Southerner, too, just doing his job.

“I’ll tell you what,” the uncle said. “If that mob gets you and Mr. Fleming down in the street and is kicking the hell out of you, I wouldn’t participate in that. On the other hand, I wouldn’t lift one damn finger to help you.”²

Sitton, who grew up in Georgia, was a reporter for The New York Times. Doing his job had put him outside the protective kinship network often obliged by his fellow Southerners. Doing his job meant staying put in Meridian and covering what became the story of the abduction and murders of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner.

For years, Claude Sitton crisscrossed the South covering the civil rights movement. His reporting gave solace to those who submitted to manacles, fire hoses and German shepherds. It enraged “realists” insistent on keeping things as they were. It pressured the president to act. And it offered all who read his dispatches a means for reckoning with how state actions diverged from Americans’ professed values. Sitton’s work undoubtedly saved lives, as civil rights activists besieged in country churches learned that a call to him would lead to a call to their oppressors (often in law enforcement), who might think twice about maiming or killing them with the Times on the story. He was courageous, and he was clever. He invented the now-ubiquitous reporter’s notebook by trimming a stenographer’s pad so it would fit – inconspicuously – inside his coat jacket. His civil rights coverage was the foundation of a distinguished career, as a reporter and national editor for the Times and then as editor in chief and Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist of The News and Observer in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Claude Sitton was my first newspaper boss. Working as an obituary clerk, reporter and editor, I learned my craft in his newsroom. His newsroom was imbued with the qualities Sitton demanded – exactness, fairness, tenacity, the timely pursuit of the news, and an itch for justice. In the twenty-five years since I moved on from the N&O, I have learned an incredible amount from other colleagues – and have seen how journalism, well done and well directed, can advance the common good.

But I also have watched journalists become increasingly dispirited and news enterprises become flummoxed about their futures. Worse yet, I have witnessed citizens becoming increasingly alienated from both. Thomas Frank, founding editor of The Baffler, a magazine of cultural criticism, calls the past decade “a time of humiliation and cataclysmic decline for journalists.” His sweeping summation is at once sobering and sly:

The news legitimacy crisis could be described in any number of statistical or metaphorical ways, depending on the reporter’s requirements: Circulation was declining; Generation X was scoffing; other media were encroaching on the turf of network and newspaper; and journalists themselves were blundering wherever one looked, getting it wrong, falling for hoaxes, inventing hoaxes themselves. Then there was that terrifying statistical fact of nature, that mounting tidal wave of public disgust with the press reflected by poll after poll, by the popularity contests that journalists seemed always to lose – whether they were matched up against politicians, salesmen, phone solicitors, TV preachers, dogcatchers, prison guards, Mafia chieftains, computer moguls,

second-story men, whoever. Journalists were at the bottom of the heap. They were sensationalists, distorters, and liars, Americans believed, as universally corrupt and untrustworthy as the elected officials with whom they were supposed to be perpetually at war. Their social position no longer secure, their power to shape public discourse no longer irresistible, and their traditional prerogatives now the right of any drudge who spoke html or knew how to run a photocopier, journalists were in danger of being demoted altogether, of embarking on that long slide from profession back to mere job. If the Internet was threatening to put the daily newspaper out of business, most of us couldn't wait.³

Critics attribute these fundamental flaws to a wide variety of paradoxical explanations. Journalists are under-educated generalists, too ignorant to cover complexity, *and* they are over-educated elites, too out of touch with ordinary people to know what matters. Journalists pander to the masses with sensationalism, *and* they pander to political elites with "insider baseball" stories glorifying their savvy. Journalists are horribly biased by 1.) personal liberalism, 2.) corporate owners' conservatism *and* 3.) the implausibility of anyone seeing the world objectively. Journalists love change because it makes news, *and* they love the status quo because they like their standing in it. Journalists are anti-social loners *and* members of a peer-driven pack. Journalists suffer from tunnel vision because they pursue only one thing: Truth. Audiences. Profit. Prestige.

Journalism and the Problem of Knowledge

What's causing journalism's troubles? Within journalism, the predominant explanation is that money is the root of all journalistic evil. A wide swath of journalistic heavy hitters argues that a new corporate focus on profits is stripping journalism of resources needed to maintain professional standards.⁴ Profit goals impose genuine constraints, and the concentration of media ownership bears careful study. But news companies have always been for-profit commercial enterprises, even during the golden heyday (whenever that was). In fact, only after newspapers became financially successful could they shake free of political patronage and undertake independent reporting.

The economic explanation of journalism's failings takes journalists off the hook. It makes journalists victims, not agents. *We can't do our jobs well because bean counters won't give us the beans we need.* The predominant explanation has the air of a fairy tale, featuring wide-eyed innocents yearning for rescue from wolves or trolls or giants. *If only we had enough geese that lay golden eggs ...* And that's another problem. The predominant explanation does not offer a workable alternative to journalism-as-a-business. Government and non-profit agencies have a host of structural and cultural barriers to producing journalism of consistent reliability.

One core issue does arise from journalism's status as an information business: the way it slices and dices time. C.P. Scott (1846-1932), the editor of the Manchester Guardian in England for 57 years, set out an admirable, and much-quoted, standard when he declared, "The function of a good newspaper, and therefore a good journalist, is to see life steady and see it whole."⁵ Unfortunately, journalism does not see life steady and whole. It chops up reality into discrete units marked off by weeks, days, hours and even minutes – whatever the news cycle is for a given news medium. "There can be news without its being daily, but if it were not daily, a news *industry* could never develop," writes historian C. John Sommerville of the University of Florida. "The industry's capital assets would lie idle waiting for news of significance to print. ... Early editors learned very quickly how to make knowledge *disposable* to insure a steady market."⁶

Journalism exists in the perpetual present, which downgrades the past and cannot anticipate the future. When all time is compressed into the present, immediacy and novelty become paramount – *It just happened! It's just about to happen! It's never happened before!* Context adds weight to a story when there is room for it or is jettisoned when there isn't. News "*decontextualizes* everything it reports," Sommerville notes.⁷

Essentially, daily publication cuts things out of a larger reality in order to dispose of them and clear the decks for tomorrow's edition. There can be little historical or philosophical scale in such reports, because every day's events must be presented as deserving of equal attention. Each day's edition costs the same, after all. You wouldn't buy it tomorrow, because tomorrow's news will supercede today's. Much of the population shares a sort of addiction to this process, which is what news industry profits depend on.⁸

Sommerville argues that fixating on the present has had a profound effect on culture and consciousness. Making news periodical – and thus perishable – means: 1.) *pushing change*, to have more to report; 2.) *giving the*

news a forward spin, to orient readers to the next edition; 3.) *breaking down events* into units of fact that seem complete and into narratives that have closure, even if the events themselves are not complete or closed; 4.) *relating everything to politics* as the modern domain for addressing all misfortunes; 5.) *highlighting conflicts*, “which will insure further reports”; 6.) *adopting an anonymous, institutional voice*, to increase the authority of the news organ; 7.) *focusing on social norms* rather than social values, because norms change more rapidly; 8.) *treating each day as equal* “whether the world turned a corner or not”; 9.) *favoring statistics* for their brevity, and 10.) *keeping news reports simple, short, entertaining and emotional* to encourage their routine consumption. In summarizing books of literature, history, theology and philosophy, journalism makes the rest of culture “all a matter of fashion.” Periodical journalism treats all ideas as time bound, “so that they need not be refuted, but will expire through neglect.”⁹ The upshot? “What we get is a teeny bit of our world, vastly enlarged to fill our vision,” Sommerville concludes. “You need to go elsewhere for wisdom. Wisdom has to do with seeing things in their largest context, whereas news is structured in a way that destroys the larger context.”¹⁰

Science and other observing professions constantly test and rethink their notions of what constitutes legitimate knowledge and inquiry. Scientists present their findings as uncertain, answerable to a larger body of knowledge and subject to revision as more is learned. In stark contrast, by presenting facts as complete, narratives as closed and journalistic voice as authoritative, journalism has adopted a false posture of certainty. Anthony Smith, a former director of the British Film Institute and president of Magdalen College of Oxford University, says journalism is undergoing an unconscious crisis because it “has not worked its way through the new issues and problems of knowledge.”

There are 10 ways to describe a fire, twenty reasons for an industrial conflict, thirty versions of the reasons why a set of disarmament talks breaks down, countless “causes” of a kidnapping – all the explanations being equally compelling if one adopts a different time frame or asks a different question or looks toward a different range of consequences. That has always been the case, but in the past the available explanations have been narrower. Today we have access to many more of the possible simultaneous reasons for events. The computers are full of data, all equally available, all ascertainably “true.” Journalism has not failed in the sense of being unable to grapple with these or being unaware of them, but in failing to talk to readers, listeners and viewers as if the world were compounded of uncertainties.¹¹

Journalists speak “as if the speaker of news could have no doubt ... in every story there is a fixed point of certainty, as if the reporter were *telling not enquiring*”¹² (emphasis added). Journalism sees itself as a source of information, not as a means of inquiry. Because it atomizes facts and treats each story as a separate entity, journalism also fails to see itself as “a grand text ... reflecting and feeding the mores of a society.”¹³ “A story about an injustice entails a narrative of justice,” Smith writes. “A story of murder is based upon a narrative of the sanctity of life. Stories about corruption are implicitly about honesty, and about the prevalence of dishonesty – they are not just tellings of stories about single events.”¹⁴ And yet journalism has failed “to become self-aware, to sense the taboos and the truths concealed within itself. ... [J]ournalism is encumbered by its own techniques, loyalties and abandoned aspirations...”¹⁵

Journalism and Public Judgment

For a brief time after the attacks of September 11, 2001, journalism regained its nobler profile. News reports offered solace and reassurance to a nation in mourning. When journalism serves to *notify* people about what’s going on, and further *bears witness* to the unfolding of events, it serves people well through its “news and information” emphasis. So the 9/11 coverage and Claude Sitton’s coverage of the civil rights movement both embodied this service function of journalism – notifying people about what’s happening, and bearing witness to how it is happening. Journalists in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania bore witness to 9/11’s horror and heroism. Sitton bore witness to affronts to human dignity – and to the heroism of ordinary people who put themselves in harm’s way in a quest for justice and equality.

Why is this service not enough to sustain journalism against the slings and arrows of its current, outrageous fortune? Because most of the time, we need more than notification and witnessing. The problems of democracy are seldom problems of information. They are instead problems of political will and of what Daniel Yankelovich, the public opinion pioneer, calls public judgment. These problems can be resolved only through public action and public inquiry – not simply through reading, watching or listening to news and information. People must identify threats and opportunities, work through the range of possible responses, make tradeoffs among the alternatives and come to a shared judgment about what will be done.

Journalism's essential work is not simply providing information. It also must sustain inquiry that can lead to action – helping citizens sort out the contested facts, frames, claims, values and other elements that shape public judgment and that guide the formation of political will. We citizens need help discerning the choices as we try to make sense of the world and figure out what needs to be done about it. This higher-level service – *interpretation in service of judgment* – is the area in which people increasingly no longer trust journalists to help them make good choices.

Traditional practitioners see themselves as trustees or guardians of what citizens need to know. They don't seem themselves as collaborators in helping citizens work through information, claims, values and beliefs. They do not confer much with citizens; that would entail granting citizens status as partners rather than as customers or clients. The closed culture of newsrooms – which holds that only journalists can understand journalism and make useful suggestions about how to improve it -- makes it hard for news organizations to learn (beyond accumulating new facts through daily routines).

I believe the root problem confronting journalism is not so much economic as it is professional. We journalists have become captives of our professional standards, rituals and relationships – especially with other professionals, whom we privilege as news sources and news subjects. We define knowledge as something possessed by the few – experts and highly educated elites, people in positions of power – and therefore define our job as finding out what the few know and selectively repackaging that for the many.

In the last quarter of the 20th century, journalists were embraced by and incorporated into the American Establishment. “At that moment,” writes James Carey of Columbia University, the dean of American communication scholars, “the vaunted progressivism of journalism was abandoned; or, better, journalists accepted the role of progressive intellectuals with a mission to participate in the management of society and simultaneously abandoned the populist wing of progressivism with its dictate to ‘afflict the powerful and comfort the afflicted.’”¹⁶ Journalists as a class changed teams, abandoning the craft's partnership with ordinary people and joining other elite, professional factions who would manage public affairs. Journalists now focus coverage on the interests, opinions and actions of the political and social elite. This is done in the name of serving the people – keeping them informed about what people of status and power are up to. But it has the effect of privileging elites to speak and relegating citizens to listening to their betters. It's time for journalists to change teams again.

Journalists can take three bold leaps to make journalism more public.

1. Connect the pieces: See, and show, how events are tied to underlying political, economic, social systems and structures. Connect the aspirations and challenges in people's lives to political discourse – the problem-solving apparatus – of the community. Describe the whole cumulatively, through reports about the parts. Don't break up the whole into disjointed snapshots. Show us panoramas, not kaleidoscopes.

2. Work through the problem of public knowledge: Stop pretending that journalism is a form of unshakeable empirical observation. Most public discourse is not about sorting through news and information, or facts, but about making sense of facts and making sense in the inevitable absence of facts. Journalists should experiment with story forms and reporting processes that help citizens understand common problems, compare tradeoffs and test solutions – to make knowledge, not just receive it. Journalists must be explicit about the frames used to organize facts and humble about what they don't know. They can ask ordinary people to suggest other frames and to fill in the gaps.

3. Regard and treat people as experts in the own lives and aspirations: We need journalism that regards citizens as members of the civic community, as producers of public knowledge and as equal partners with other political actors in creating and shaping the public realm. Public knowledge is generated by the many, in conversations that connect across time, place and identity – and journalism needs to find ways to help sustain these conversations. Professional journalists can notify, even bear witness. But it takes all of us to make meaningful, and actionable, interpretations. Journalists are well positioned to bring us all, and not just elites, back into the conversation.

FOOTNOTES:

¹ Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-65* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), p. 361.

² Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, Chapter 26, “Bogue Chito Swamp,” pp. 361-374; the uncle’s comment is on p.364.

³ Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 307-308. Note the allusion to Matt Drudge, whose Internet political-gossip site first pushed the Monica Lewinsky story into public awareness after Newsweek’s top editors held reporter Michael Isikoff’s story out of concern that the information backing it up – a taped telephone conversation between Lewinsky and Linda R. Tripp – seemed insufficient to accuse President Bill Clinton and his friend Vernon Jordan of possible witness tampering. See Joe Conason and Gene Lyons, *The Hunting of the President: The Ten-Year Campaign to Destroy Bill and Hillary Clinton* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), Michael Isikoff, *Uncovering Clinton: A Reporter’s Story* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1999), and Matt Drudge, *Drudge Manifesto* (New York: New American Library, 2000).

⁴ Many writers advance this argument. Among the most prominent recent critiques of the relationship of profit to journalism are Richard W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication and Politics in Dubious Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), Gene Roberts, Thomas Kunkel, and Charles Layton, editors, *Leaving Readers Behind: The Age of Corporate Newspapering* (Little Rock: University of Arkansas Press, 2001) and Gilbert Cranberg, Randall Bezanson, and John Soloski, *Taking Stock: Journalism and the Publicly Traded Newspaper Company* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001).

⁵ CITATION TO COME

⁶ C. John Sommerville, *The News Revolution in England: Cultural Dynamics of Daily Information* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 4. He renders a more popular version of this critique in C. John Sommerville, *How the News Makes Us Dumb: The Death of Wisdom in an Information Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

⁷ Sommerville, *The News Revolution in England*, p. 8.

⁸ Sommerville, p. 4.

⁹ Sommerville, pp. 8-10.

¹⁰ Sommerville, *How the News Makes Us Dumb*, p. 20 and p. 14.

¹¹ Anthony Smith, *Books to Bytes: Knowledge and Information in the Postmodern Era* (London: British Film Institute, 1993), p. 105. The term “observing professions” comes from Smith.

¹² Smith, p. 105.

¹³ Smith, p. 107.

¹⁴ Smith, pp. 107-108.

¹⁵ Smith, p. 108.

¹⁶ James Carey, “American journalism on, before, and after September 11,” in Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, editors, *Journalism After September 11* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 84.