

# Take a Stand

*How journalism can regain its relevance*

BY BRENT CUNNINGHAM

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, as the press faced criticism for failing to use the catastrophe to initiate a national conversation about race (or class, or infrastructure, etc.), Jonathan Klein, the president of CNN/U.S., defended his network's coverage to Eric Deggans, the press critic at the *St. Petersburg Times*: "We go in looking for stories," he said, "not issues which need to be raised." It reminded me of something Steven Weisman, a former

*New York Times* correspondent, said to me in 2003 as we discussed whether American journalism's awkward embrace of objectivity had helped stifle a robust discussion in the run-up to the war in Iraq about what might happen in the aftermath of that war: "Journalists," Weisman said, "are never going to fill the vacuum left by a weak political opposition." In other words, if the Democrats weren't going to challenge the White House on the complicated issue of the war's aftermath, neither was the press.

The idea at the heart of both of these statements—that journalists are little more than bloodless keepers of the record—which has served and protected but also severely hamstrung the press in this country over the last hundred or so years, increasingly feels like a cop-out. And as the so-called legacy media—the mass, mainstream media—struggle to survive and remain relevant as their business model fails and their competitors multiply, it is a cop-out that could

have dire consequences for the future of public-service journalism.

The rhetoric of American journalism describes an adversarial fourth estate, a redoubt for professional skeptics who scrutinize authority in the name of the public and help keep the public discourse honest. As long as our newspapers enjoyed quasi-monopolies and the evening newscasts were a national touchstone, the moth-eaten reality of this self-image was easily ignored. But the hard truth is that the press mostly amplifies the agendas of others—the prominent and the powerful—and tends to aggressively assume its adversarial role only when someone or something—a president, a CEO, an institution—is wounded and vulnerable. (Even some of the most important journalistic work of recent years—the exposures of warrant-less wiretaps and CIA ghost prisons—came after the Bush White House had begun its precipitous slide in the polls.)

Such straightforward record keeping is still, of course, a legitimate part of the press's role—tell us what our leaders say; tell us what happened today. But it is the easiest role for the press to fill (even easier now that technology has made *everyone* a potential keeper of the record), and one that is aggressively catered to by a public-relations apparatus that permeates every public and private institution, emitting an endless stream of incremental developments and story frames and pegs that keep deadline-driven reporters busy, busy, busy. This equation leaves far too little room for the

press's other, more important, roles: investigator, explainer, and, I would add, arbiter of our national conversation—the roles, in other words, that will not be filled in any comprehensive way by the swelling ranks of amateur or part-time journalists.

For evidence of how this kind of reactive coverage can lead the press (and the nation) astray, consider the coverage of the economy—not over the last year, which has seen some important work in a time of crisis, but reaching back to the 1990s, when investment regulation was quietly dismantled (Glass-Steagall), NAFTA was enshrined without a thorough public airing of probable consequences, the World Trade Organization protests were treated as street theater, and first the Internet wizards and then Wall Street's titans were elevated to the altar of infallibility.

Yes, there were exceptions. There always are. The debate that simmers still over whether the press properly raised



the alarm about subprime mortgages, derivatives, and the rest is largely built around those exceptions.

But what was the broad economic narrative, and the assumptions beneath that narrative, that was driven home day after day, year after year, in ways large and small, subtle and overt, in the news columns and on the opinion pages, on the relentless loop of cable news? A belief in the power of unfettered markets to make our lives better. The New Econ-

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## The hard truth is that the press mostly amplifies the agendas of others—the prominent and the powerful.

omy. The End of History and the Triumph of Free-Market Capitalism. The Ownership Society. It was the celebration of men who make money, who master those markets, and of the citizen as consumer and nothing more. This was the agenda of power in the U.S., from Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton to George W. Bush, from Martin Feldstein to Robert Rubin to Alan Greenspan; and it was the agenda that the mass media broadcast and, directly and indirectly, endorsed—even if they did, on occasion, manage a piece that cried foul. As my colleague Dean Starkman ably demonstrated in our May/June issue (“Power Problem”), the business press failed to challenge the conventional wisdom that prevailed at the institutions that so damaged our economy.

If ever there were a moment for our press to begin to change this dynamic, to embrace a mission more in keeping with the ideals of public service and an adversarial fourth estate, it is now. America is at a perilous juncture in its history, but one that is ripe with opportunity, too. The mythology of the nation—exceptional, above the taint of history—has been undercut by a terror attack, two botched wars, the reality of torture, a flooded city, a wounded economy, staggering inequality, a shameful health-care system... the list is long. It has been undercut, too, by the emerging realities of the twenty-first century: a multipolar world, transglobal problems that no amount of debt-funded escapism can keep at bay, a realization that America must lead, but cannot dictate. America has created systems—legal, political, educational—that have much to admire, but they are not sacrosanct. In short, many of the ideas that we take for granted are not the only good ideas, or necessarily the ones best suited for every set of circumstances. On many fronts, the circumstances are decidedly different from those that allowed this notion of American exceptionalism to persist, fundamentally unchallenged, for so long.

The expression of this opportunity, this need to, as *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert wrote, “stop being stupid,” was everywhere last fall and earlier this year, as the financial crisis deepened and President Obama took office. Thomas Friedman—not exactly a thorn in the side of conventional wisdom—wrote, “We don’t just need a bailout. We need a reboot. We need a build out. We need a buildup. We need a national makeover.” Matt Miller’s new book, *The Tyranny of Dead Ideas*, promised to “illuminate where today’s destructive conventional wisdom came from and how it holds our country back.” Yale economist Robert Shiller, writing in September 2008 in *The Washington Post*, said, “Whenever the public endures a crisis, ordinary citizens start to wonder how—and whether—our institutions really work. We no longer take things for granted. It is only then that real change becomes possible.”

Such moments, born of crisis, tend to pass quickly, however. During the oil shocks of the 1970s, the air was thick with talk of weaning ourselves from foreign oil. I remember writing a school report on all the fabulous new sustainable sources of energy that were in the offing—wind, hydro, etc. And following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, America vowed to set aside the narcissism of the 1990s and pay more attention to the wider world. And after Katrina we were going to really do something about all that poverty we were surprised to discover in our midst. Indeed, once the Dow begins nosing back toward ten thousand, the window of opportunity for fundamental change may close.

Barack Obama was ushered into office as a president who “got it,” who understood that many of our systems were in need of fundamental change. But already there are signs that he may not have the stomach for the conflict such change requires: his failure to address the skewed incentives at various levels of our financial system that helped to produce the current crisis; the timid cost-containment strategies in his health-care agenda; the lack of a bold vision on infrastructure, etc. Time will tell.

Meanwhile, American journalism, too, is in a protracted moment of painful change. Both its business model and its sense of mission are in full retreat. Much experimentation is under way, with different financial-support structures, narrower editorial missions, collaborative projects, etc. There is an urgency, a humility, at news outlets about the need to rethink things that is long overdue.

So the press needs a new mission, and the nation needs someone to help initiate and lead the discussion of what kind of place America will be in the twenty-first century. It is not at all clear that our best news outlets have the will to become true arbiters of our public discourse, but given the increasing inadequacy of the journalistic status quo, and the nature of the challenges facing the country, such a mission shift could offer a crucial way forward for both the press and the public.

### A Different Dissent

For the press to lead that discussion will require that it make a form of dissent more central to its mission. Not the tedious

dissent of partisan rhetoric, but rather dissent in the sense of refusing to accept that the range of possible solutions to the nation's problems must necessarily come from the centers of power and influence—the White House, Congress, the think tanks, corporate America. As we have seen time and again—on issues like campaign finance, health care, agricultural policy, and social welfare—these institutions are too wedded to the status quo to lead a discussion that is broad and fearless enough to challenge the systems and assumptions that shape America's politics, its economics, and its civic and social life.

Such a mission would mean radically realigning a newsroom's resources and priorities toward the goal of broadening the discourse on important issues—even if it required narrowing the scope of what it covers. The press would have to pay less attention, for instance, to breaking, event-driven news and more to sustained coverage of ideas and—crucially—solutions. It would have to stop reflexively marginalizing ideas and voices that come from the fringes simply because no one “official” is embracing them. It would have to rekindle the notion that journalism is not just a check on power, but, when necessary, its adversary. It would have to crusade for some things, and denounce others. News outlets would have to explain themselves and their decisions, and be clear about what they stand for and what they stand against.

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## Does the press have the will, and the means, to become a true arbiter of our discourse, to help set a national agenda?

In short, they would need to convince the public, by words and deeds, that they are on its side.

Not every news outlet would aspire to help lead the national conversation—or the various regional and local conversations—but some would. Such an effort could be a way for our most ambitious news outlets to distinguish themselves in an increasingly cacophonous and uneven information culture.

Take mass transit, as just one example. During the public debate over the auto-industry bailout—and in the protracted effort to pass the stimulus package—precious little was said about what role public transportation might play in our future, even though it was an elephant in the room. Among the circumstances that make this issue so difficult for the press—and the politicians—is that it taps into our national

mythology: modern America was built around the automobile, and the car is central, for better and for worse, to our sense of ourselves as a nation of free agents. But the reality is that we have less than 5 percent of the world's population and yet we are the second-largest producer of carbon dioxide behind China—and our automobile culture is at the center of that unwholesome picture.

On January 5, *The New York Times* published a short editorial, A PITCH FOR MASS TRANSIT, that urged President Obama to “give mass transit—trains, buses, commuter rails—the priority it deserves and the full financial and technological help it needs and has long been denied.”

That just isn't enough from our most important news outlet on such a crucial and complicated issue. Why not a crusade for mass transit? Why not an ongoing narrative—in the news columns and on the editorial page—that attempts to force the issue, in all its complexity, into the national consciousness and onto the national agenda? The kind of thing that newspapers do so well in projects and series—the stories that win awards—but with regular installments over months and years, however long it takes for the nation to figure out the best and most thoroughly considered course of action on mass transit. It wouldn't work perfectly, but it could work.

The crusade could introduce us to the most creative thinking from the rest of the world on how to design and execute communities around pedestrian traffic and public transit. Even though French President Nicolas Sarkozy's ambitious (some would say fantastical) notion to re-imagine Paris and its suburbs as “Le Grand Paris,” an integrated, sustainable city knitted together by green space and mass transit, has shrunk in the face of political and financial roadblocks, the very boldness of it is instructive in light of the baby steps being contemplated in the U.S.

The crusade could bring us the ideas of Bill Mitchell and his colleagues at the Smart Cities research group at MIT. Mitchell, writing last fall in *Building Design*, a U.K.-based magazine for architects, argued that the real issue is not cars, but personal mobility and how to provide it effectively and efficiently:

First, separate intercity and in-city mobility. Cars, designed to serve both, are great at neither. Let high-speed trains and the like handle intercity travel, while ultra-lightweight, simplified, much lower speed, battery-powered electric vehicles deal with short-range urban mobility. There are no significant technological barriers to moving quickly in this direction.

Second, rethink energy distribution. Petrol has high energy density, but in batteries, it's much lower. And that's what, so far, has killed the electric car. But ubiquitous electric grids in cities offer the possibility of recharging cars in their parking spaces. This vastly reduces battery requirements and enables much lighter, cheaper, simpler electric cars, without unacceptably sacrificing performance.

Third, organize urban electric cars in mobility-on-demand systems like the Velib bicycle system in Paris. Racks of public-use cars would be provided at closely spaced sites across the service area. If you want to go somewhere, you walk to a nearby rack, swipe a card, pick up a car, drive it to a rack near your destination, and drop it off.

Closer to home, such an effort could explore, for instance, the idea of converting General Motors from a “purveyor of private transportation hardware to a planner, fabricator, and supplier of a renewed, nationwide public transportation system,” as described in a short op-ed, published in *The Oregonian* last December, by Tim Smith, an architect in Portland.

Between July 10, 2002 and May 25, 2003, *The New York Times*, under the leadership of editor Howell Raines, published sixty articles (three on page one) and editorials about Augusta National Golf Club’s policy forbidding women members. To me, the lesson of Raines’s Augusta crusade is not that it was an ideal case study—it was, in fact, the kind of personal jeremiad that is exactly what we don’t want from our serious journalists. The lesson is that the stodgy mainstream press is in fact capable of forcing an issue onto the national agenda and keeping it there. One of those front-page pieces carried the headline CBS STAYING SILENT IN DEBATE ON WOMEN JOINING AUGUSTA. Why couldn’t our newspapers and TV news outlets have some regular way of reminding the public that President Obama, or House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, or whomever, is refusing to address the mass-transit questions? Or the immigration questions? Or the campaign-finance questions? Perhaps, along the lines of something Matt Miller suggested in these pages in 2003, there could be a box in a lower corner of the front page, or a short recurring on-air editorial: DAY 25: OBAMA STILL MUM ON LIGHT-RAIL.

Maybe the mainstream press is at this point too beaten down, too spooked by the prospect of its own demise, to manage such a bold overhaul. It’s true that even in its decades of dominance, the modern American press struggled with how far it was willing to stray beyond the narrow confines of the conventional wisdom that it helped to create. In his 1973 book, *Radical Visions & American Dreams*, for instance, Richard Pells examined the tortured effort by intellectuals on the left to fundamentally change the national conversation during the Great Depression—to place public welfare above private gain (sound familiar?). Their forum was opinion magazines such as *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. Pells barely mentioned the mainstream press.

*The Nation* and *The New Republic* are still with us, of course, and some will argue that the mission I describe is more at home in their pages—and in other idea magazines and the proliferation of agenda-driven Web sites and blogs—than in the mainstream newspapers and broadcast outlets. But I would suggest that, while opinion publications do publish deeply reported investigations and analyses, such outlets will not be the birthplace of the kind of wide-ranging, practical, and sustained discourse that we need. Part of the reason is that—like the informational silos of the blogosphere—they too often preach to the converted. But part of it, too, is that the political debate in this country is too polarized to allow it. Rightly or wrongly, there are great swaths of the citizenry who just won’t hear it if it comes from *The Nation*, and others who won’t hear it if it comes from the *National Review*. Plenty of people won’t hear it if it comes from *The New York Times*, either, but the paper’s reach and authority are con-

siderably broader—both at home and abroad—than that of these partisan outlets.

There is a way to lead the conversation without being politically partisan—to initiate the debate, shepherd it, report out the various positions, ideas, and arguments; to reach conclusions based on the understanding and expertise that are developed in this process, about what ideas and policies make the most sense for the collective good. Then make those ideas and policies, and the assumptions that support them, dominant narratives in the day-to-day coverage. Through it all, let the public see how those conclusions were reached.

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## Objectivity is a trap that allows demagogues on the right and the left to dismiss the press as hopelessly biased.

Our best bet for such a process is via a professional press that strives (even as it repeatedly fails) to adhere to an ideology that is more reformist and progressive than politically partisan. Plenty of people have attempted to define this journalistic ideology. In his 1979 book *Deciding What’s News*, sociologist Herbert Gans described a series of “enduring values”—such as “altruistic democracy” and “responsible capitalism”—that unconsciously shape what we think of as news judgment. In his memoir, *Somebody’s Gotta Tell It*, Jack Newfield put it in more plainspoken terms than Gans:

Pick an issue. Study it. Make yourself an expert so you won’t make any stupid factual mistakes. Figure out who the decision makers you want to influence are. Name the guilty men. Make alliances with experts. Combine activism with the writing. Create a constituency for reform. And don’t stop till you have achieved some progress or positive results.

People of good faith can have dramatically different definitions of what constitutes, say, “responsible capitalism.” But the point is that there is an important set of values between feckless attempts at objectivity and unbridled political partisanship.

The values of such a reformist mission are very much alive in many of the journalists who inhabit our mainstream newsrooms, if not in the newsrooms themselves. And it is crucial that the DNA of investigative, public service journalism be central to the experimentation going on both within and outside the mainstream. It’s not a coincidence that some of the most ambitious experiments designed to revive a muckraking posture in the press right now are in the hands of refugees from the mainstream: Paul Steiger (former edi-

tor of *The Wall Street Journal*) and his crew at ProPublica; Charles Lewis (*60 Minutes*) and his Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University; Andy Hall (*Wisconsin State Journal, Arizona Republic*) at the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism; Joe Bergantino (ABC News) at the New England Center for Investigative Reporting—even Josh Marshall at Talking Points Memo began in the tar pits of old media, writing for magazines, including this one.

## Of the People

Yet the mainstream press seems far removed from this ideal. Public ownership has proven incapable of supporting public-interest journalism—let alone adversarial journalism—as the press’s central purpose, and the pursuit of objectivity has become a trap that sets the best-intentioned reporters and editors up for the failures of false balance and he said-she said story frames. Furthermore, it allows demagogues on the right and the left to dismiss the press as hopelessly biased when it fails to achieve “objectivity.” The homogeneity of the mostly white, middle- and upper-middle-class decision-makers in our newsrooms, meanwhile, coupled with the offend-no-one ethos of their corporate managers, have smothered (publicly, at least) the kind of outrage that one should expect in the face of betrayals of public trust—such as the one on display in our current financial crisis.

Even if the will to assume a leadership role in our public discourse existed, and we had owners who encouraged it and accepted its costs, financial and otherwise, it seems unlikely that the press could execute this new mission alone. Much of the experimentation under way envisions some sort of collaboration, either with other news outlets or with the public, or both. The press needs help; it needs the people. It needs to engage with the public broadly and persistently—to be on the public’s side in an obvious and fundamental way.

In the early years of this country, the press and the public were organically connected—the press literally emerged from the conversation in the public houses and squares. “The ‘public;’” wrote the late media scholar Jim Carey, “is the God term of the press, the term without which the press does not make any sense.”

Of course, it’s easy to romanticize this notion. In the Colonial town square, not all members of the public were created equal; there were elites (educated, wealthy) and non-elites (uneducated, non-white, female), and their opinions did not have equal weight in the public discourse. But the point is that the press was, at one time, very much a part of its communities, and as our nation grew more populous and more complex that connection began to break down. By the middle of the twentieth century—with the advent of the notion, pushed by Walter Lippmann and others, that the workings of government and society had grown too complicated for the common man—American journalism had abandoned its God term. The relationship with the people was replaced by a one-way conversation, from the press to the public, which persisted until digital technology turned that conversation on its head. Again, Carey: “Journalists primarily serve as conduits relaying truth arrived at elsewhere . . . . They transmit the judgments of

experts, and thereby ratify decisions arrived at by that class—not by the public or public representatives.” Having embraced Lippmann’s philosophy, Carey suggested, “the press no longer serves to cultivate certain vital habits: the ability to follow an argument, grasp the point of view of another, expand the boundaries of understanding, decide the alternative purposes that might be pursued.” He published this essay, “The Press, Public Opinion and Public Discourse” in 1995.

Jim Amoss, the editor of *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans, understands this need to connect with the public. Much has been written and said about how, after Hurricane Katrina nearly destroyed their city, the staff at the *Times-Picayune* got angry and began fighting to save southern Louisiana with a sense of activism that was atypical in the cautious mindset of modern American journalism. They became advocates for their community. Amoss is quick to insist that the story of his newspaper during and after Katrina has been mythologized a bit, and yet, “I think the lesson in what happened to us is that newspapers must exude a sense of being of their communities,” he says. “To want for it what you want for yourself and your family. The opposite end of that spectrum is that readers sense when a newspaper is detached and not really of the community. Even before Katrina, this newspaper tried to achieve this, but it really came to the forefront after Katrina. And the readers have not forgotten it.” (It’s worth noting that this activism has brought a degree of financial success, too, as the *Times-Picayune* has one of the highest market penetration rates in the country.)

Issues of coastal restoration and storm protection are central to the paper’s coverage. “We are constantly championing them and finding new ways to bring them to the forefront of the public discourse,” Amoss says.

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## The press needs help; it needs the people. It needs to be on the public’s side in a fundamental and obvious way.

It isn’t that the *Times-Picayune* has become a thunderous voice of dissent in any classic sense—in most ways it remains a fairly conventional newspaper. But the narratives on these core issues are driven by the paper’s commitment to figure out what is best for its city and region, and as a result the narratives are central to the public discourse in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast, regardless of whether the mayor’s office, or the oil companies, or the state legislature are providing pegs for the stories. The *Times-Picayune* drives the agenda.

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## OffTheBus demonstrated that there are thousands of people (at least) who have a genuine interest in improving journalism.

How might a newspaper do this without a tragedy like Katrina to force the issue? One way to think about what happened to the *Times-Picayune* is that circumstances overtook it, left it with no choice but to refine and reassert its mission. In a sense, the same thing is happening to journalism broadly: a storm of change is blowing away the old ways.

We have an opportunity, then, to build a twenty-first-century version of that Colonial-era connection between the press and the public. But it's going to look radically different. In our March/April issue, Amanda Michel wrote about her experience directing OffTheBus (OTB), a national citizen-journalism project that covered the presidential campaign, and more specifically about what the professional press might learn from OTB. I remain extremely skeptical of the notion that "citizen journalism" can ever replace professional journalism. Doing serious journalism well is difficult and time-consuming. It is not a hobby; it is a job. To suggest that people will just squeeze it in around other jobs, kids, meals, sitcoms—around life—is absurd.

But unlike most citizen-journalism efforts, in which the focus of the participants is on throwing in their proverbial two cents, OTB was about collaborative reporting, and as such it contained the seeds of something that might be useful. It took twelve thousand volunteers—doctors, lawyers, teachers, students, etc.—and coordinated their various skill sets to gather and analyze information that writers then turned into articles. It was like the Time Inc. model of journalism writ large. And it worked, if unevenly, breaking some stories but more important, adding narratives and perspectives to the campaign discourse that we didn't get from the professional press. The editors at OffTheBus—the professionals in this pro-am equation—supplied the editorial judgment and set the priorities, deciding which stories to pursue and then enlisting legions of volunteers to help them report those stories. But they also listened to their members and let the information that came from the ground up shape their editorial judgment—just as the best editors listen to their reporters in the field.

Of course, this all happened around the most dynamic presidential election in decades, and so it would be easy to dismiss it as something impossible to replicate, in an ongoing way, in a professional newsroom. And it *would* be difficult to replicate, but not impossible. OTB's success—and

more important, the ways it succeeded—challenges the debilitating notion that the public has nothing but disdain for the press, and is largely uninterested in quality news and information.

It demonstrated that there are thousands of people (at least) in this country, of various political leanings, who have a genuine interest not in becoming journalists, necessarily, but in improving journalism—in gathering news and perspectives from beyond the Beltway, beyond Wall Street, beyond officialdom at all levels. Michel says that what became clear over time was that, for many of OTB's volunteers, the interest in improving journalism ran deeper than their role in the campaign. "The mainstream media narratives are very powerful, and early on many of our volunteers emulated the style and approach of the MSM," she told me. "But the longer they participated in the project, the more they pushed back against those narratives."

There are significant managerial differences, of course, between leading a group of trained reporters on a big story and leading packs of amateurs, however smart and motivated they are. But the potential upside is hard to deny. In a time of shrinking resources, such a press-public network could extend the newsroom in significant ways.

By definition, for instance, it would alter the top-down flow of news, countering—at least a bit—the press's over-reliance on official sources. As a result, it would help to broaden and diversify the coverage. The perspectives of nurses, for example, are largely excluded from press coverage of the health-care debate, as the writer Suzanne Gordon has documented and expounded on over the past twenty years. This is true despite the fact that nurses, much more so than doctors, are the ones most closely connected to the patients' (and news consumers') experience. "When reporters cover the latest developments in experimental cancer treatment," Gordon wrote in *The Nation* in 1999, "they will routinely question the doctors on the impact such treatments have on cancer cells, but never the nurses who can talk about their impact on patients' lives."

The opportunities here seem limited only by our imagination. Michel, who now works at ProPublica, said that, while OffTheBus didn't specifically track the demographics of its volunteers, her sense is that they skewed toward middle-class professionals. But she also said that it would be possible, over time, to "really target your demographic." Think of how difficult it is for the press to cover the poor or the working class in sustained and meaningful ways—ways that get beyond single dimensions and the middle-class assumptions that dominate our newsrooms. Imagine how different the coverage of the economy in this country could have been over the last thirty years if more of the press narratives had been coming from the ground up, rather than the top down.

The promise of the OTB experiment is not only that it could help extend the reach of the emaciated American newsroom, but that it could create an alliance between the public and the press. So that when a news outlet concludes that some important mass-transit ideas are not being addressed by the leadership in Congress or the White House, for instance, it would have twelve thousand—or one hundred

thousand—engaged citizens (née consumers) adding to its crusade with e-mails and Tweets and phone calls and Facebook pages of their own. Such a scenario has the potential to radically change the decision-making dynamic at the federal, state, or local level.

The vast majority of Americans, of course, won't want to participate in such an alliance. But let's say instead of twelve thousand, *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* got twelve hundred volunteers around the country from a broad range of backgrounds. They could be organized into reporting teams around issues, or specific stories. There could be journalistic boot camps akin to Camp Obama, or an expansion of programs like the *Savannah Morning News's* now dormant Neighborhood Newsroom program, which identified citizens from underserved communities and trained them to be neighborhood correspondents.

Such pro-am collaboration is under way in other professions, notably scientific research. Galaxy Zoo, for instance, used unpaid volunteers to classify images of galaxies into various types, in an effort to help astronomers understand how galaxies evolve.

It would be crucial that the professionals not simply view their citizen partners as free labor—twelve thousand interns there to do what they're told. They would need to embrace the entire public as potential colleagues and fellow citizens.

In other words, journalism would need to begin to change the narrative about itself. It is a narrative that has been created by the press's own failures, its arrogance and shortsightedness, but also by a forty-year campaign by segments

of our information environment each day. Early News Literacy efforts are centered on the classroom, but, as Megan Garber suggested in our July/August issue, an obvious next step is to invest in a broader public-education campaign on how good journalism affects our individual and collective lives, and what our communities would be like without that journalism. It's baffling that the press has never really attempted to make its case to the public. Now it can't afford not to.

### **Toward a New Critical Culture**

In 2000, Marshall Berman, writing, appropriately enough, in *Dissent*, bemoaned the lack of a vibrant critical culture in America, and longed for a way to connect the various strands of grassroots-level ferment—in politics, music, literature, etc. By “critical culture” he meant “one that struggles actively over how human beings should live and what our life means.” He was dismissive of the mainstream press's ability to lead such a culture, but he also had no answer for who else might lead it. “One big problem for any critical culture to come is, how will its concerns and its ideas be transmitted and shared?” he wrote.

Nine years on, with blogs and social networks, Twitter and Facebook, we have the connectivity that Berman sought; but for that connectivity to be in service of a critical culture will require a committed arbiter—a leader—of the cultural conversation. Part of Berman's critique was that “too many ideas, coming through too many channels” was a bigger problem than the banality of so much of what was produced each day by our mass media. “As communications technologies metastasize,” he wrote, “it will be even harder not to be flooded out.”

The spirit and strategies that drove OffTheBus will continue to evolve, and someone—or many someones—will eventually get it right. In that 1995 essay, Jim Carey suggested that “we must turn to the task of creating a public realm in which a free people can assemble, speak their minds, and then write or tape or otherwise record the extended conversation so that others, out of sight, might see it. If the established press wants to aid the process, so much the better. But if, in love with profits and tied to corporate interests, the press decides to sit out public life, we shall simply have to create a space for citizens and patriots by ourselves.”

We need the established press to not just aid this effort but to lead it. The marriage of all this connectivity with an activist mission of public-service journalism could cut through the layers of banality that clog not just the mainstream media but also the rest of our sprawling information environment. Such a marriage could organize and lead the kind of critical culture that Berman and Carey sought. It could begin to establish a public agenda that reflects the struggle over how America should live—over what America means—in this new century. **CJR**

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## **We need a public agenda that reflects the struggle over how America should live, over what America means, in this new era.**

of the political right to vilify the press as a “liberal” cabal, and a more recent and less coordinated effort by elements on the left to portray it as a corporate stooge. Changing this narrative will not be easy. There is considerable hostility and distrust toward the mainstream news media, but some of it is the result of ignorance about what the press does and why. The partisan press-haters will always be with us, but the nascent News Literacy movement is attempting to rectify the pervasive ignorance about the values and methods of journalism—to instill in young citizens the importance of the best kinds of journalism, and how to distinguish it from the less-reliable, less-intellectually honest stuff that floods

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