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The State of the Public Journalism Network

By [Leonard Witt](#)

includes sections written by [Tom Warhaver](#) from the [Civic Journalism Interest Group](#) workshop July 29, 2003, at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) convention in Kansas City.

First the State of Public Journalism

I am even more optimistic about the state of public journalism than I was in late January when I helped [launch the Public Journalism Network](#) here at [Kennesaw State University](#).

My piece in the [November/December, 2003 issue of the Columbia Journalism Review](#) reflects that optimism. Public journalism is taking place in traditional places, like newspapers, but also as Jan Schaffer points out, it is expanding its tent into places unimagined when public journalism began some 15 years ago.

For example, [Chris Allbritton](#), a former AP and New York Daily News reporter, raised enough money from [his weblog](#) readers to cover the war in Iraq as an independent journalist.

The time is right for the PJNet to expand into a self-sustaining professional and scholarly association. So starting today we are [soliciting dues paying members](#). Our goal is 100 members in the year 2004, which would make us twice the size of the Organization of News Ombudsman and about half the size of the Association of Sunday and Feature Editors.

Is all perfect? Of course not. Let's go back to July at the Civic Journalism Interest Group workshop at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication convention in Kansas City.

Tom Warhaver of the University of Missouri, took notes. Reflecting back, he writes that all innovation, including public journalism, suffers from newsrooms retrenching to the narrow paths set by an industry intent on more and more efficiencies and running scared of stockholders. Newsrooms – even the newsrooms where innovation was once routine-- feel stifled. It's hard to create new journalism, public journalism, when you're worried about the next day's meal ticket.

"In '94 or '95 we talked about creating cultural change, transformational change," said [Steve Smith](#), editor of the [Spokane Spokesman-Review](#). "It isn't happening. We are struggling just to survive." He cited the economy, technology, convergence, and declining recruitment, especially of minorities. "It overwhelms the most sincere of us. Journalists I know have never felt less supported."

Of course, that's another reason for an independent organization like the PJNet. For as [Jay Rosen](#) of New York University pointed out at the same workshop, it is important in hard times to keep the flame alive. To be ready to take off when the market turns around and when the newsrooms become more open to listening, thinking and making positive changes. Public journalists, he said, could set up a series of civic skills training that can be used by newsrooms.

The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism

Then there were those guys from Alabama.

“Well, poop on pessimism,” the Anniston Star’s [Chris Waddle](#) said in one of the more memorable responses of the afternoon in Kansas City. He was interested in the possibilities in the future and especially how public journalists could help the Anniston Star and the University of Alabama create the concept for the Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism.

[Ed Mullins](#), chair of the journalism department at the University of Alabama, said this project was not about perpetuating journalism as it is practiced now, but rather it is about making positive reforms.

After listening, Rosen said, Anniston isn’t trying to set up another j-school program, or another not-for-profit newspaper; it is “making up a new map.” A map that calls for a new curriculum, built from the ground up.

The more than 20 workshop attendees agreed to help the Anniston/Alabama partnership: to form a canon of works about community and about democracy, perhaps to develop a kind of speakers’ bureau, and to create a place for scholarly research that goes beyond just critiquing current conditions.

In the Newsrooms

Even if the newsrooms are at a low point with little or no reflection of the work they do, as Smith says they are, the flames Rosen alluded to are still alive. The Civic Journalism Interest Group (CJIG) received 17 scholarly papers that were reviewed for this year’s Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) conference. At the separate CJIG members meeting there were new faces and new ideas.

And Gil Thelen a long time advocate of public journalism was recently named president and publisher of the Tampa Tribune. Chris Peck, editor of the Memphis Commercial Appeal, is introducing community news sections that are produced at least in part by the readers themselves. The Gannett papers’ “Real Life, Real News” project is all about public journalism. Of course, the question is, as posed recently by [Charles Self](#) of University of Oklahoma: It is just fluff?

Excellent question and that is exactly why the PJNet is needed to identify that which is fluff and that which strives to give audiences a greater understanding of the complexities of community and civic life. That takes me back to [Orange County Register’s](#) Dennis Foley who says we must be watchdogs. We must guard against bad journalism. We also must be guide dogs to show the direction towards better journalism.

We must point to the excellent examples, such as the [Savannah Morning News](#), where the civic journalism concept is played out each day throughout the paper, and because of it, it a wonderful paper to read.

Public Journalism Aboard

Hideya Terashima, who attended the charter meeting of the Public Journalism Network at Kennesaw State University in January is actively seeking ways to incorporate public journalism into his newspaper, [The Kahoku Shimpo](#). It’s a regional daily in Sendai located in northeast Japan.

He has formed a study group of 14 print and online reporters and editors. They are examining how public journalism might make positive reforms at the paper. They also invited Kate Parry, James K. Batten Award winner from the [St. Paul Pioneer Press](#), to conduct a public journalism seminar in Sendai.

Hideya adds, "I believe it could be the beginning of exchange project with colleagues in US." The ultimate goal, he says, will be to have a Public Journalism Network conference in Sendai. So we have a possible site for our second international conference. This first will take place in Toronto on August 3, 2004. Watch PJNet.org for more information.

In Toronto we'll look at the wide-open international possibilities and specifically at civic journalism projects in the Middle East and Africa.

PJNet.org

In keeping the flame alive we cannot forget the exchanges in this web site. All of which have happened with no promotion. For example, Samantha Gonzaga at the [San Gabriel Valley Tribune](#), wrote for suggestions on how to sell a column on the homeless to her editor. Rosen gave a thoughtful response. Afterward Ed Lambeth from the University of Missouri wrote: "I especially liked the exchange between Jay Rosen and Samantha Gonzaga at the San Gabriel Valley Tribune. This type of website has long been needed by the public/civic journalism community."

The PJNet has another email her from an Indian woman who wants to start a popular journal as a way of critiquing newspapers in India. She came to us for help. Paco Seoane of Spain is constantly feeding us sources for these pages.

If things go right, the PJNet will be a dissemination tool for places like the Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism and other places interested in seeing news audiences not just as consumers but as citizens too. We also plan to become a weblog aggregator for all things having to do with public journalism. Think of a site where lots of voices can be heard with a minimum of filtering.

The work we are doing is good and is needed. So in those immortal words of Chris Waddle: Poop on Pessimism. Let's just keep getting on with our work.