

Servants of Citizenship:

Understanding the Basic Function of Newspapers in a Democracy

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There are many ways of thinking about the functions of newspapers: investigator, commentator, informant, entertainer, agitator, etc. Another way is to think of the newspaper as a servant of citizenship. While that function sounds abstract, there are quite a few newspapers that primarily fulfill this function while supporting a staff as well.

One of these papers is The Home News located in the small Wisconsin community of Spring Green (pop. 1,600). The paper is a weekly that usually has 16 pages.

An analysis of its August 28, 2019 edition's coverage of Spring Green* demonstrates the nature of a citizen serving press.

There are six kinds of information contained in this edition:

1. Providing information about legislative bodies.

Articles include the agenda for the next Spring Green City Council meeting as well as an extensive report (minutes) on the last meeting. Another article is an extensive report (minutes) of the County Board which has jurisdiction over Spring Green.

2. Providing Information about public institutions.

Three articles include reports from the school superintendent, the police chief and the librarian. They discuss issues, programs and opportunities.

3. Providing useful, non-partisan information about public issues.

The local public utility company has proposed installing a major electric transmission line across the area covered by The Home News readership. During the last year there has been considerable citizen activism opposing the transmission line. The paper has regularly reported on these citizen actions. In August, the State Public Service Commission voted to allow the transmission line to be built. This Home News has a major article reviewing the history of the citizen engagement. The article includes

* The newspaper also covers, in a similar manner, four smaller surrounding communities – Plain, Lone Rock, Clyde and Arena.

extensive statements from advocacy groups and legislators on both sides of the issue.

4. Providing opportunities for a citizen forum debating public issues.

In this issue two citizen letters give extensive information and argument regarding redistricting and gun law reform.

5. Providing information regarding activities of citizen associations.

The basic democratic vehicles for citizen action are the local association – small, face-to-face groups that collectively create the common good without being paid. In this issue the work of 14 associations are reported:

- The Community Garden Committee contributed a significant amount of produce to the local Food Pantry.
- A group of citizens held a “brat fry” to raise money for the Community Garden.
- The Rural Musicians Forum will hold a concert.
- An association of gardeners, Blooming Buddies, seeks advice on plantings around the library.
- The Local Arts Council created an artistic display at the library.
- The Alzheimer Society will hold a discussion on communication with people who have dementia.
- A group supported by a local family trust has organized a series of lectures at the Octagon Barn. The next lecture will be a report on peace-making.
- The local Arts Council has organized a hymn sing at a local church each month during the summer.
- The LMP Club is presenting a gathering for people who enjoy Lego, Minecraft and Pokémon.
- The Harrisburg Historical Society has restored the old Harrisburg School and it will be open on Sundays during the summer.
- The Art Fair Committee raised considerable money and is seeking proposals for grants to local associations.
- The Care Givers Club will hold its monthly meeting.
- Alcoholics Anonymous will hold its regular meetings.
- ALANON will hold its regular meetings.

6. Other Spring Green Information reported in this issue:

- There are three columnists with weekly articles about nature, gardening and local happenings.

- There are two pages of sports reporting on the first high school football game and the four summer little league teams' results.
- There is the weekly report of the menu at the senior center.
- There is an obituary column.

In summary, five of the six categories of reporting are articles that either provide information needed by an informed citizenry or document citizen opinions and report the collective action of local citizens. From a functional perspective a majority of the non-commercial print in the Home News is specifically citizen serving.

This analysis documents the visible functions of the Spring Green newspaper. However, there is a less visible function which is the fact that the paper is a mirror in which the residents can see themselves and their community. The mirror shows them a government that is theirs, public institutions that are accountable, citizens speaking up and numerous citizen associations creating the community's common good. This mirror reflects a town where residents are authoritative, responsible and creative. It is this image that is essential to creating a culture of contribution and democratic participation.

On the same day that the Home News was published, August 28, 2019, The Chicago Tribune, a major metropolitan newspaper, also mirrored that city in its daily Chicagoland Section. There were nine articles:

- Four articles documented crime and drug issues.
- Three articles reported on public issues:
 - A major review of the first 100 days of the new mayor's administration.
 - A suburban Representative announces support of impeaching the President.
 - Initial steps to sell the State office building in Chicago.
- Three articles reporting on local activities including the closing of a drive-in restaurant, a railroad schedule change and a school dealing with lead in its water.

A comparison of the two newspapers' particular content is not appropriate because of the geographic scale they cover. It is possible, however, to compare the mirror they provide that shapes citizen perceptions of the community and actions they have taken or can take.

From a citizen perspective, citizens first see mirrored the crime, deviance and even “evil”^{*} around themselves. Instead of information that reflects and engages citizen power, the mirror creates fear.

The second set of articles mirror public life as actions taken by officials. There are no stories of actions taken by citizens. Their associations are absent. They see themselves as dependents.

The third set of articles are about localities and each reports bad news: a business closes, railroad gives less service and school experiences lead poisoning. The mirror reflects the community as a place of troubles.

The Chicagoland Section reflects a city where residents are fearful, dependent and troubled. It is this kind of mirror that promotes a disabling culture where citizens pull back from public life and grow cynical about their society. However, in Spring Green, once a week, the residents see themselves in a different mirror. It is a mirror that reflects citizens who are not fearful, dependent and troubled. Instead the Home News reflects citizens who are informed, engaged and, above all the creators of their community.

One might conclude that we should reform the big city newspaper so that it can be a mirror enabling citizenship. That is an improbable proposal. Every journalism school teaches and every big city journalist believes that bad news is the news. Good news items are thought of as “puff pieces.” High scale journalists act on the hidden assumption that the large institutions of government, corporations and agencies provide the important news. However, as Alexis de Tocqueville reported in his 1835 masterpiece, “Democracy in America” the vital center of America’s unique democracy is not these institutions. It is the citizen power created by its associations. As long as the high scale journalists remain captives of their institutional illusion, their mirror will continue to disable a citizen powered democracy. There is, however, a remedy. It is not reforming big newspapers. It is the proliferation of citizen mirrors like the Home News and hundreds of other small-town papers.

These citizen mirrors are desperately needed in the neighborhoods of big cities. There was a time when there were many urban neighborhood papers. Most have died and without a citizen mirror, the power of community creativity and responsibility has dissipated. Urban neighbors are left to see themselves in the distorting mirror of the mainline press.

^{*} The lead headline under “Chicagoland” news reads, “Nurse Sentenced in ‘Evil’ Plot to Kill Romantic Rival.”

So, can there be a new movement that will resurrect citizen-centered local newspapers. Perhaps a movement could emerge if there was a coalition in every city where neighborhood activists, local businesses and journalism schools could create a renewal process where local neighborhood papers can be viable once again. Who is interested in the rebirth of a local neighborhood press that is a servant of citizenship and community?