Mere projects or rebirth of a profession? An analysis of power and power structures in civic journalism

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Abstract
This paper seeks to analyse the achievements of civic journalism in the light of a possible application within Australasia.

Once the foremost guardians of the ‘fourth estate’, journalists struggle. Newspapers have suffered from a significant loss in circulation and decreased public trust. Cross-media ownership, and horizontal and vertical integration are increasing dangers for the effectiveness of media; especially the print branch. In the United States this shift in power has led to the civic journalism movement. At its core is the attempt to relocate journalism to its very roots. It calls for more orientation towards the public, seeing it as an active participator, source and audience for news stories. Stronger ties between journalists and the communities they work in are encouraged to regain accessibility for the reader and cover relevant issues in a meaningful way. Several civic journalism projects have been conducted and the movement has gained significant momentum within the last few years. It has also attracted a huge amount of criticism, though. Nonetheless it seems to be a promising tool to reinvigorate journalism. This holds especially true for countries like Australia or New Zealand, where the print media are predominantly owned by huge conglomerates (News Corp, Fairfax Group). However appealing civic journalism might seem; a closer analysis is necessary. The paper aims at accomplishing that by conducting a careful case study. It applies recent, mostly theoretical, criticism towards the featured high profile project to extract the movement’s merits and mistakes. By combining the comprehensive literature and projecting it on a best practice example it provides a new, holistic perspective on the shortcomings of civic journalism. The paper concludes by providing a perspective for practitioners and scholars alike, including a recommendation for the possibility and sensibility of further civic journalism projects in Australia and New Zealand.
Introduction

Nearly everywhere in the world newsrooms are in upheaval. Despite the global recovery (World Newspaper Association, 2007 in circulation, the overall picture painted for newspapers is seldom positive (Rosen, 1999; Seelye, 2006). The high art of journalism is in trouble. Journalists have one of the lowest reputations of all professions in most countries and nobody knows what to do about it (for examples see Donsbach, 1993 [Germany] and Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996 [U.S.A.]). Nobody? Not quite. A few withstanding scholars and practitioners have aimed at reinventing the art of investigation, reviving journalism and returning to the very core of the profession’s beliefs. They are the developers of civic journalism, also called public journalism (Rosen, 1999, Merritt, 1998). In suggesting new ways of working on a story, doing investigations and writing for the people, they have put forward a concept that might be a true alternative to mainstream journalism as we know it. Indeed, over 600 civic journalism projects have been conducted since its introduction and the last official number is from 2002 (Nichols, Friedland, Rojas, Cho & Shah, 2006). However, voices have been raised that doubt the efficiency of civic journalism. They accuse the projects of being merely superficial and the resulting articles to be not substantially different from those produced by mainstream journalism. Furthermore they blame their defenders for an insufficient theoretical concept and lacking continuity (Haas & Steiner, 2006). If that is true, civic journalism cannot claim the recent increase in circulation in, for example, Australia (Herman, 2008).

This paper reviews the literature to elaborate on the allegation. Most importantly it will apply the comprehensive criticism to a best practice example of civic journalism. In this way, it seeks to analyse, possibly validate, and consolidate the current objections. It is reasoned that if a best practice project is still subject to the presented criticism, than it needs to be addressed on a general level. The analysis thus provides a concise source of relevant concerns within the field and serves as a basis for improvement, useful for practitioners and scholars alike. While Pandora’s chest has been opened for civic journalism, the current criticism is loose and unrelated. It needs to be collapsed and presented in a coherent way to avoid a making it a pile of valid concerns that civic journalism is buried under before the movement is able to properly respond. Thus it is attempted to introduce criticism step-by-step and create a walk-
through for the case study. Problems will be identified where they arise and discussed by linking their appearance in a logical way.

Afterwards, civic journalism achievements in Australasia will be briefly discussed. Finally, as its conclusion, the presented paper brings forward suggestions on what the region can learn from the American approach if the criticism holds true.

In accordance with this directive, this paper will argue that while civic journalism projects have significant impact upon the story to be reported they do not contribute to a lasting change in investigation habits and thus fail to truly lead to a shift of power.

**Civic journalism: A concept and its roots**

Before we can analyse the merits and flaws of civic journalism, a clear idea of what civic journalism actually is needs to be provided. Before we dare going into the depths of this, it has to be stated that it is difficult to find a precise definition of the term (Davis, 2000). The Pew Centre for Civic Journalism (2007, para. 1), a leading NGO in the field, describes it as follows:

> Civic journalism is both a philosophy and a set of values supported by some evolving techniques to reflect both of those in your journalism. At its heart is a belief that journalism has an obligation to public life; an obligation that goes beyond just telling the news or unloading lots of facts. The way we do our journalism affects the way public life goes. Journalism can help empower a community or it can help disable it.

This definition is based on the view that journalism is not only a mere occupation but much more a calling. As such it reflects on the very roots of the profession. The main aim of civic journalism is to develop a closer relationship with the readers and to use them as a source rather than only recipients of the statements of government officials or other commonly quoted persons. The participation of the reader, and a stronger involvement are asked for. This is by no means limited to news production but expands to the whole democracy they live in. The community is to become a vibrant hub of communication among its members, including the journalist. He is part of this community, an active member though not yet leader of the discourse. The new view of the reader gets especially apparent in a post title in Jay Rosen’s (2006) blog Press
Think: “The people formerly known as the audience.” Journalists no longer spoon-feed people with news from up above. The public is much more to be included in the democratic processes of news generation and participation in the construction of public opinion for the agenda. To understand the attractiveness of this concept, one has to understand where this view on journalism hails from.

The National Press Club answers the question by a tag which is displayed at its gates, the journalist’s creed of Walter Williams:

I believe in the profession of Journalism. I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of lesser service than the public service is a betrayal of this trust. […] I believe that advertising, news and editorial columns should alike serve the best interests of readers; that a single standard of helpful truth and cleanliness should prevail for all; that supreme test of good journalism is the measure of its public service. [Journalism is] cementing world-comradeship, [it] is a journalism of humanity, of and for today’s world (Farrar, 1998, p. 202f.).

It is an exact display of the values civic journalism puts forward. If so, why did it emerge as an opposite of mainstream journalism, when both are obviously bound to the same values and beliefs? It might be due to the notion of the ‘fourth estate’. As such, journalism is mentioned in the same breath with the usual separation of powers in democracies (Montesquieu, 1977). The term exemplifies the influence that has been attributed to journalism by authors such as Carlyle (1907). However, others (for example Herman & Chomsky, 1988) see it more as a mouthpiece of those who are in charge and hold the power. And indeed, journalists depend on the information that politicians and business leaders provide for them. However, journalists are not prone to its influence.

They themselves are gatekeepers (Lewin, 1947) and decide on what is news and what is not. It is a reciprocal process that ultimately encompasses the reader too. Thompson (1990) provides valuable insight on the topic:

[…] it should also be emphasized that this situation [mediatisation] greatly increases the visibility of political leaders, and limits the extent to which they can control the
conditions of reception of messages and the ways in which these messages are interpreted by recipients. […] Hence the development of mass communication has not only created new stages for the carefully managed presentation of leaders and their views; it has also given these leaders a new visibility and vulnerability before audiences which are more extensive and endowed with information and more power (however intermittently expressed) than ever before. (p. 115)

As fourth estate the media has a watchdog function; simultaneously they are dependent from those they monitor. Those, in turn, need the media to reach their target audiences.

This interdependence is influenced by the recipient who actively decides what information to use and what to cast aside (Katz, Blumer & Gurevitch, 1947).

Summing this up, it can be stated that journalism is able to exert an enormous influence on the daily affairs of politics and business and thus our democracy. Nonetheless it is subject to mechanisms that estrange it from its audience. An example for this is that the news agenda and peoples’ personal agenda often do not match (Funkhouser, 1973a/b). They perceive only the overall, societal aspects of the media agenda as generally relevant (McCombs & Shaw, 1993).

Notwithstanding, it is this powerful influence and the dangers that arise with them that made civic journalism possible and necessary. Before we now give an example of what civic journalism means not only to scholars but practitioners, a short history will be provided to make the following easier to grasp.

The rise of civic journalism
Nordenstreng (1995) identifies the MacBride Report published in 1980 as first indicator for the problems of journalism. The report claims journalism to have the:

[…] capacity to influence and even to shape ideas and opinions. [That] makes journalism both a profession and a mission. [Its task is to] supply objective, truthful and unbiased news. [It is] essential to the workings of any democratic system. (p.233).

It reflects the high degree of responsibility which is bestowed upon journalism.
Five years later Postman (1985) writes:


Although his approach is pessimistic it holds an important truth. The consequences of the negative analysis are explained by Rosen four years afterwards, when he talks about the change within the public sphere. He talks of a public that is tired of politics and mistrusts journalism. The agreement Rosen earned encouraged him to enquire further on how to combat the phenomenon. By 1993 there was “a new warrior on the battlefield. Its name is civic journalism” (Rosen, 1999, n.p.). But what led from MacBride to Rosen? The answer lies within the structure of the U.S. journalism system. Journalists in the United States saw themselves in the roles of neutral observers (Donsbach, 1993). Thus they were antagonists towards political agents at best. They perceived themselves as defenders of truth and providers of facts. This point of view was especially reinforced by scandals like Watergate (Rosen, 1999). On the one hand they added to a stronger active understanding of a journalist’s role, on the other hand they were more interested in the search for mistakes and, indeed, scandals, than journalists elsewhere in the world (ibid.). Moreover, this heightened awareness did not last long (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). The idea of being an antagonist to politicians required a thick skin. This culminated in a kind of “fortress journalism” (Nordenstreng, 1995, p.118). Ironically exactly that attitude made journalists into puppets time and again. Politicians adapted to the cage and used it to their advantage (Katz, 1992). Events were staged as mere media events, for an example see Rosen (1999). They were prepared to exactly fuel the needs and restrictions of the media and journalists (Thompson, 1990). Rosen (1999) describes the corresponding problem:


By continuing to see themselves as outsiders, journalists fell victim to some dangerous illusions: that they had no investment in the health of the political system, that they could continue to
watch the craziness, and feed it, without substantial cost, that their intention to be in no one’s pocket meant that they were free of politics, when the reality was they were implicated in everything politics had become. (p.35)

In order to fight this, he introduced a new journalism based on the values of democracy, community, citizenship, deliberation and public life. They stood as antipode to the declarations of mainstream journalism: “objectivity, accuracy, fairness, credibility” (Rosen, 1999, p.32f.). But what does it mean to conduct journalism under the guidance of those values? The following paradigm example will tell us.

Case study
In 1992 white police men brutalised the Afro-American Rodney King in the streets of Los Angeles. The event was coincidentally filmed and broadcasted by the media within mere hours. According to its news value (Lippman, 1946), it was rapidly consumed and forgotten as fast as the outcry was loud. Not so in Akron, Ohio, U.S.A. A local newspaper, the Akron Beacon Journal (ABJ), decided to run a series about racism in its next few issues. The result was ‘A Question of Colour’. The series was awarded the Pulitzer prize (Rosen, 1999). It consisted of several parts: The initial ‘A Question of Colour’, then ‘Coming Together’ and finally ‘A Struggle for Balance’.

During the 12-month news coverage, the ABJ showed statistics about the gaps between black and white people in the region, did surveys which revealed huge differences in the perception of the racism problem and led focus groups and interviews with citizens of both skin tones. The results were published afterwards. They showed that blacks and whites had a decidedly diverging opinion on housing, work choices and quality of education. In areas that were primarily inhabited by white citizens, black people had a de facto lower income, less education and weren’t as eligible for bank loans. In addition they were more fearful of crime than their white neighbours. Those, in turn, were isolated from black citizens and more optimistic with regard to education quality and work choices. What is even more important: they assessed the chances as good for black citizens as for themselves.

Over the year the newspaper encouraged community groups to join and make suggestions on how to improve the situation. It offered a room and hosted first
discussions. But the paper wanted to venture no further. It declared that it was still bound by the values of good journalism and intended to start but neither lead nor influence the discussion.

Finally the ABJ asked its readers to publicly confess that they will act against racism in Akron.

Meanwhile the campaign ran over three years and the resonance was unexpectedly high. The ABJ decided to push onward with ‘Coming Together’. It arranged for a meeting of all interested groups. ‘Coming Together’ became an umbrella association for the various initiatives and later an independent NGO. A radio programme was started, churches with a set clientele held joint services, study groups were founded and pupils worked on a project which enabled round table discussions in their schools and encouraged exchange programmes between them.

Now that the ABJ had not only reported but had made an effort to bring together readers and journalists to solve the problems they wrote about, it even went one step further in the last part, ‘A Struggle for Balance’. The paper focused on itself as part of society. The editors brought white and black journalists together to discuss the newsroom climate and the perception of important topics in Akron. The result was an article which showed the community that the journalist themselves were divided, perhaps even more so than everyone else.

As a conclusion it can be said that the ABJ lost part of its neutrality but in exchange did not only report a problem that persisted in the region; much more, it paved the way for improvement:

[…] by taking on a charged issue without waiting for a dramatic event to erupt; by going beyond a description of the problem to an attempt at generating civic action; by using the power of the press to connect citizens to one another […], by seeing “hope” as a resource the community badly needed; by giving visibility to those willing to stand up and do something […]; by sparking discussion and social contact among citizens who might otherwise never meet – the Beacon Journal showed that it wasn’t neutral about everything. It wanted public life to go well, to yield an atmosphere in which mutual understanding might here.
and there arise. And it saw no necessary conflict between telling hard truths about the racial climate and making a better climate possible (Rosen, 1999, p.97).

‘A Question of Colour’ is a paradigm example for civic journalism; the Pulitzer prize speaks for itself. As a result this case study will be used as the main example in the following critical reflection of the merits and flaws of civic journalism.

**Critical reflection**

Now that we have a thorough account of the conceptualisation and practice of civic journalism, it is time to assess its effectiveness. While the ABJ example is impressive at first sight, it deserves a closer look.

First of all it might be best to ask: If civic journalism focuses on the public interest, is what interests the public also in the public’s interest? Not necessarily. In the United States, *USA Today* made an example of radically orienting itself towards what the public demanded. Most journalism scholars and journalists condemned the reporting approach as being bare of facts and thus devoid of a good journalistic style (Barnhurst, 2006). After *USA Today* went that way, journalists raise their heads in fear when their editors talk about declining circulation and necessary changes (Rosen, 1999). However, the case study has demonstrated that this danger is not inherent in civic journalism when it is taken seriously and not as a market-oriented approach to simply increase the readership for the sake of making profit. However civic journalism can be prone to the influence of the economy. Rosen himself has repeatedly said that civic journalism is a strategy to regain readers. However, this is also a problem: “[Civic journalism is] a public practice housed within a media industry devoted to private gain.” (Rosen, 1996, p.372). To some degree it might be a simple extension of the corporate social responsibility wave (Sacconi, 2007, 2006) which was financially lucrative and thus susceptible to corruption. That of course hollows out such concepts and leads to even more disappointment and perceived detachment on the recipients’ side.

Another substantial question is whether there is truly a difference between civic and mainstream journalism (Arant & Meyer, 1998). As implied in the journalist’s creed, the ideas of civic journalism are not new. Moreover the value sets of both varieties are
not substantially different. Civic journalism’s values seem to complement rather than really substitute the traditional principles of mainstream journalism. The key is how to understand the inherent values of journalism, no matter what prefix it might bear (Nordenstreng, 1995). Accordingly Nordenstreng (p.114) criticises the MacBride report: “It failed to see the contradictions involved in the very nature of journalism as a profession and a mission.” The battle between civic and mainstream journalism partly seems to be a struggle over hegemonic interpretation rights. It seems due to note that although values are strong forces in their own right, they are not always reliable indicators of behaviour (Esser & Weßler, 2002). Civic journalism circumvents this problem by not only comprising a set of values but being an active set of practices that follow these values.

This shifts the issue to the procedures and work practices. From what we know about the ABJ there clearly seems to be a difference. Nonetheless, scientific enquiry is required.

Authors like Parisi (1997) and Woodstock (2002) have not only claimed that the values of public journalism lack discriminatory power but that the results, the published articles, do as well. Both scholars have analysed the inherent structures of public journalism articles and the conclusions are disillusioning. No difference between civic journalism and mainstream journalism has been revealed (Parisi, 1997). The reason is that most journalists have gone through a similar education and cannot easily break with what they have learned. As a consequence the rhetorical and narrative frames stay the same regardless of what and how information is acquired (Woodstock, 2002). This is detrimental to change since “[…] the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964, p.7). The structure carries information regarding the author’s attitude towards the audience as well as towards itself (Schudson, 1982). By maintaining old presentation habits the impact of civic journalism is lessened.

But what about the most important feature, the already mentioned content? The case study indicated a very impressive example of civic journalism with a variety of projects that were run. It is time to analyse whether it had an effect or not. In order to gain a thorough view on the topic, we have to return to the roots of civic journalism.
As could be seen in the section entitled civic journalism: a concept and its roots, the definition of civic journalism lacks a coherent theoretical framework. However, its idea of the public does not. Rosen was greatly inspired by Dewey (Rosen, 1999) and Habermas (ibid). His vision of the public essentially follows the conceptualisation of the German philosopher and civic journalism has been repeatedly attacked for it (Compton, 2000).

Habermas’s (1996) discourse theory has as a precondition that every participant is equal. With regard to journalism this is supported by authors like Sparks (2000), who aims at enabling journalists to reach the comprehensive community. Nancy Fraser on the other hand is a critic of this idea, saying it is unachievable. According to Fraser, differences cannot be equalised a priori by any means. Consequentially it is much more important that the differences are kept in mind (Fraser, 1992). Merritt (1998) says that communities are defined by their common goals and shared problems. But those communities are segmented by ethnicity, income, sex, age and many other factors. This leads to diverging opinions what is best for the community. Some authors (i.e. Hacket & Yuezhi, 1998) criticise that civic journalism advocates overestimate the possibility for consensus in communities. They do not believe that there is always an easy way to compromise and that it is not always a lack or a failure of communication that makes for problems. In other words: Sometimes talking is not enough (Schudson, 1982).

Haas & Steiner (2001) give an example using the ABJ project. They say that the newspaper did not mention how the inequality of the citizens impacted the discussion process. As a result it is unclear whether some citizens did not voice their opinion sufficiently or maybe did not even try to participate in the project due to established social discrimination. The problem is commonly referred to as the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 2001). Minority groups do not raise their voice as they fear retribution. Those groups could theoretically gain the upper hand (majority) without even noticing as they stay mute. While this problem does not really arise for the survey the ABJ did, it does for all following endeavours. To avoid this, the ABJ for example could have searched and asked for further factors that create imbalance, apart from race. Common variables that are also known to cause this are gender, age and income. Maybe black women feel differently about the situation than black men. A
very special factor that was not mentioned until now, are the journalists themselves. In ‘A Struggle for Balance’ journalists successfully conducted a self-analysis. The problem is that they did so under perpetuation of their special position. They did not reflect as part of the community but as journalists, isolated from their fellow citizens and absorbed with themselves (Dyer, 1993). Fraser (1992) suggests that public spheres are comprised of multiple social groups that constitute subordinate social environments. Membership in one of them does not disqualify for membership in another. The simple fact that the public sphere is diasporic should not lead to isolationism and will not do so (Dayan, 1998). It rather means that those subordinate entities should have separate discussions at the beginning to create a voice for themselves without the fear of being punished or muted by another group. In doing so each group is able to argue for and defend their view when it comes to a community debate (Fraser, 1992). This culminates into a more pluralistic form of public opinion formation and the possibility for weaker groups not to get annihilated by the social hierarchy before the discussion even started. For journalists this is especially valuable since the dictate of neutrality makes them vulnerable to protect the status quo as they fear to advocate splinter groups instead of the majority or display their opinions at the same quantity that they put forward the majority’s vote on the matter (Glasser & Ettema, 1994).

A further problem is the ‘do it yourself’ attitude of civic journalism. Authors like Iggers (1998) and Parisi (1997) rightfully fear that the ‘empower’ mentality that is advocated leads to ample disappointment when the public sees that it is probably able to discuss things but not to change them. The authors criticise that civic journalism creates the illusion that the community is capable of solving all its problems on its own. This view can be used by the ruling elite to argue in favour of steep cutbacks on social issues. That would be in mockery of Kennedy’s (1961) famous inaugural address: “Ask not what your country can do for you, but rather what you can do for your country.”

To elude this consequence Haas & Steiner (2001) once again apply Fraser’s theory. The philosopher puts forward that the public sphere should work on solutions and utilise them when applicable. But in case of more difficult decisions and starker problems journalists should enable their readers to access the officials in charge, a
form of lobbyism. This, in consequence, highlights a much larger problem: civic journalism implies that journalists should respect and look out for the need of their audience. This requires a local context. As has been mentioned, agenda setting studies often reveal that the agenda of the media is seen as the agenda of the whole society but not one's own (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Kepplinger and Noelle-Neumann (2003) provide a possible explanation. The bias may be due to the selection criteria of the mass media, as negative events have a higher news value (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

In other words: our daily life and media coverage are significantly different. ‘Actual experience’ and ‘proximity’ are the two most important news factors to explain this phenomenon. Many effect models (i.e. Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) assume that prior knowledge has an influence on the processing and impact of mediated information. This does however not imply that the problems indicated by the media do not exist or that there are no negative trends in current events. While this might be the case, it would be negligent to engage in reverse engineering.

But that leaves us with the question how civic journalism can be effective in larger communities, for example nations. There is no proximity and no easy way to get in touch with high-ranking officials. To face such difficulties would ask for a more active journalist; at least. They would have to see themselves not only as moderators but as an institution that itself has democracy as a goal and actively works towards it. An example on how not do it can be found in ‘A Question of Colour’. In ‘Coming Together’ the newspaper ensured that black and white teenagers would be able to talk about their situation, but the problem was not a lack of communication or respect towards each other. The problem was the school system and the inequality it promoted (Haas & Steiner, 2001). So as a conclusion it can be said that in this case only the symptoms were battled, not the cause. The raised awareness was certainly a worthy aim but the roots of the racism problem were still untouched. The ABJ should have not only hinted at the problems of the school system but also introduced alternatives and urged the officials to eradicate its flaws. But that means balancing between pure interventionism and detached neutrality. It is a fine line to be walked, as has been said by the initiators of civic journalism time and again (Rosen, 1996; Merritt, 1998).
But maybe it is this line that has not been crossed often enough by public journalism practitioners. While its critics allege that actually stepping beyond has harmful consequences (Corrigan, 2003a), it seems to be necessary. Civic journalists sometimes seem to abandon their role as gatekeeper and narrator of stories. By handing a topic over to the public they do not lose their responsibility for reporting (Woodstock, 2002). It is they who initiate and end the project. And what happens when such projects end? Once again the ABJ may serve as an example. Its editor said that once the campaign was over “the newsroom returned to its old habit of reporting on race relations only as newsworthy events arose” (Charity, 1995, p.140f.). Civic journalism seems to chase its own tail, caught in a dilemma to dare much and maybe yet not quite enough. Whatever the solution might be, it has to be stated that as it stands, civic journalism is not enough. As Ettema & Peer (1996) put it:

As a newsroom activity, civic journalism often takes the form of a special project – a candidate forum, an opinion poll, or an interpretive series. But as an unfolding philosophy, according to Rosen, civic journalism is [...] a reconstruction of journalism that would emphasize community connection over objective detachment. (p. 837)

As a conclusion it can be said that how impressive the achievements of projects like ‘A Question of Colour’ might be; they obviously lack the capacity, framework and/or daringness to ensure that civic journalism values and goals are ensured on a long-term basis.

Civic journalism in Australasia

While there was an early and recently increasing interest for civic journalism (Ewart & Massey, 2005; Romano, 1999) in Australasia, scientific data about implemented projects is limited; especially when it comes to newspapers. It is clear though, that there is a gap between journalists and their readers when it comes to the perception of the profession and its product (Brand & Pearson, 2001). Journalists need to change their investigation and reporting habits. However, researchers have made the point that simply copying the American model could be futile (Richards, 2000). The fact that good intentions alone are not enough is supported by a careful analysis of a newspaper’s civic journalism attempt in Wellington (Venables, 2001). A study conducted by Haas (2003) in Denmark though has stated that civic journalism can
bridge the cultural gap if successfully adapted towards the country’s needs. Indeed, the very first Australian project alone has shown significant positive results (Ewart, 2002). The same goes for an analysis of New Zealand’s election coverage by means of civic journalism (McGregor, Fountaine & Comrie, 2000). It is unclear whether the success of such projects is subject to the same objections as the ABJ’s approach. Most of the research focuses on the same criteria for excellence that the ABJ fulfilled (Ewart, 2002; Romano, 1999). Thus it seems feasible to state that Australasian newspapers’ projects need further scrutiny and offer potential for improvement. It follows that taking advantage of the combined criticism of the American design is a promising approach to improve the practice and provide scholars with further insight on the state of the profession.

**Conclusion**

It has been illustrated that despite the best intentions and true effort, civic journalism has not led to significant changes in investigation habits and falls short of truly achieving what it has been designed for on a long-term basis. Accordingly we can conclude that, while civic journalism projects have significant impact upon the story to be reported, they do not contribute to a lasting change in investigation habits and thus fail to truly lead to a shift of power.

Does this mean that civic journalism is spurious? Not at all. While even some of its most valiant defenders cannot deny that the aforementioned criticism strikes true (Haas & Steiner, 2006), even the harshest critics admit that it is a reform and that it had a reawakening effect on the journalism debate (Parisi, 1997).

Nonetheless civic journalism needs improvements. After the application of Fraser’s theory Haas & Steiner (2001) recapitulate:

> Public journalism has primarily been defined in terms of how it manifests in practice or [...] in the belief systems of its practitioners. [...] This descriptive approach may have been necessary during the movement’s early years [...]. To assess the democratic viability of public journalism practice, and so stipulate [...] requires normative standards [...]. (p.139)
If public journalism is to emerge as a fully developed journalistic theory and practice, public journalism advocates must therefore take their point of departure in understandings of publicness, public life, politics, and citizenship. Public journalism needs a coherent, guiding public philosophy.

Only such an understanding of itself will allow civic journalism practitioners to venture further down the road without abandoning the laws of their profession for worse. While practitioners (Coleman, 2007) and scholars (Corrigan 2003a) alike get tired of the buzzword that civic journalism has been for the past few years and as most think it has exceeded its half-life a long time ago (Jagmohan, 2000), the concept has survived despite its several funerals (i.e. Corrigan, 2003b). Moreover, research (Heider, McCombs & Pointdexter, 2005) proves that especially muted groups embrace the ideals of civic journalism. Notwithstanding they still wish it to report with accuracy and neutrality. While this dilemma seems to be inherent, the sheer number of civic journalism projects and their short-term impact (see Nichols et al., 2006) make it impossible to deny the appeal of civic ABJ show that civic journalism is by no means at its end. Its best chances seem to be to explore its limits and in doing so creating a theoretical framework that can serve as a basis for future endeavours. As Rosen has pointed out the strength of civic journalism lies in its power as a change agent (Rosen, 1999).

Australasia is currently in the unique position to have first-hand experience with the idea, yet at an early enough stage to implement significant changes. It has the chance to closely scrutinise the shortcomings that supposed best practice in the United States reveals. This offers the chance to design and install a new, adapted type of civic journalism. By looking back and keeping close watch of the regional development, scholars and practitioners alike could have the chance to free civic journalism from its lack of theoretical frameworks (Haas & Steiner, 2006) and make it a finally sustainable practice.
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