Civic Mapping as a Public Journalism Tool

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THE international journalistic reform movement known as "public" (or "civic") journalism emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s in response to two perceived gaps of critical proportions: between news organisations and their audiences and between citizens and politics. In the United States, and increasingly elsewhere, scholars and journalists alike became alarmed by the low level of audience interest in journalistically-mediated political information, as evidenced by declining newspaper readership, as well as by the low level of citizen involvement in democratic processes, as evidenced by declining participation in political elections and, more generally, in the public affairs of the localities in which they reside (see Haas, 2007a for a comprehensive discussion).

While much has been done in the name of public journalism to reduce these two gaps over the past decade and a half, little attention has been paid to which tools news organisations could use to best address them. Indeed, aside from a single effort to classify the various tools applied by news organisations committed to public journalism (see Willey, 1998), no attempt has been made to specify whether there are particular tools news organisations could use to address both gaps simultaneously.

This article introduces a research and reporting tool known as "civic mapping" whereby news organisations committed to public journalism might be able to both enhance audience interest in journalistically-mediated political information *and* citizen involvement in democratic processes, and in ways that overcome the weaknesses of some of the other, more commonly applied public journalism tools. Specifically, it elucidates the underlying principles and practical manifestations of two complementary approaches to civic mapping, which Campbell (2002, 2004) refers to as the "cognitive" and "structural" approaches, respectively. The article concludes with a brief summary of the challenges that civic mapping poses to journalistic practice.

Estudos em Comunicação nº3, 1-11 Abril de 2008

Cognitive Civic Mapping

The cognitive approach to civic mapping dates back to 1996 when the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, public journalism's principal institutional supporter in the United States, commissioned the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, a public policy consultancy led by Richard Harwood, to develop a method whereby news organisations would be better able to tap into and report on the concerns of their local constituencies. The Harwood Institute subsequently devised a manual in which the principles of civic mapping were laid out (see Harwood, 1996; revised in 2000), produced four practical training videos, and organised numerous seminars for interested news organisations. Since 1999, when the first civic mapping seminar was held, more than three dozen news organisations in the United States (see Campbell, 2004), as well as a couple in South Africa (see Davidson, 2004), have engaged in civic mapping projects. Moreover, civic mapping has been used as an educational tool in various journalism programs across the United States, both in the form of joint projects between given news organisations and journalism programs (see Spurlock, 2001) and as self-contained in-class projects (see Hetrick, 2001).

According to Harwood (2000), journalists' failure to capture the breadth and depth of concerns of their local constituencies can be attributed to the fact that they spend most of their time and energy on two particular "layers" of local civic life. These include the "official" layer of local governmental institutions, such as when journalists report on the deliberations and actions of City Council, and the "private" layer of local residents, such as when journalists report on the reactions of ordinary citizens to given news stories or otherwise produce human-interest stories on individual triumphs and tragedies. As Harwood (2000, p. 14) puts it, "When journalists venture into [local] civic life, often they gravitate to the official and private layers. Then when they want more sources, they expand the number of people within those layers".

Yet, Harwood (2000) discovered, every locality contains five distinct "civic layers", each offering fundamentally different insights about that locality. These include the "official" layer of local governmental institutions; the "quasi-official" layer of local municipal leagues, civic organisations, and advocacy groups; "third places" like community socials, places of worship, and diners; "incidental" encounters on sidewalks, at food markets, and in backyards; and the "private" spaces of people's homes. Cognitive civic map-

ping, then, should be understood as an effort to "identify those other [civic] layers and the people and news in them" (Harwood, 2000, p. 4). The goal, as Harwood (2000, pp. 5-6) puts it, should be "to move beyond the usual suspects into a deeper and broader understanding" of given localities.

Following Harwood's (2000) call to move beyond the "usual suspects", many prominent news organisations in the United States, including the *Denver* (Colorado) *Post*, the *Detroit* (Michigan) *Free Press*, the *San Diego* (California) *Union-Tribune*, the *Tampa* (Florida) *Tribune*, and the *Wichita* (Kansas) *Eagle*, have broadened their range of news sources by attending community socials, paying attention to the conversations taking place in various public spaces, and seeking out citizens in the privacy of their homes. The results of these investigations, in turn, have been made available to the entire newsroom in the form of written lists of news sources, electronic databases, and, as Harwood (2000) intended, actual geographic maps (see Clark, 2001; Farwell, 2001; Miller, 2001).

More broadly, Harwood's (2000) five-part typology of civic layers (and news sources) represents an analytical advance over both mainstream, journalistic understandings of local civic life and prevailing public journalism thinking. Instead of presuming, as most mainstream journalists appear to do, that the deliberations taking place within local governmental institutions offer a representative picture of the concerns of citizens of given localities more generally, Harwood's (2000) typology presumes that different, if not conflicting, concerns are held by people within various civic layers. And in contrast to prevailing public journalism thinking, which asserts that journalists should simply turn entrenched information-gathering procedures upside down by focusing attention on the concerns of "ordinary citizens" rather than "elite actors" (see, for example, Charity, 1995; Merritt, 1998; Rosen, 1999), Harwood's (2000) typology offers a more nuanced understanding of where and how journalists can tap into those citizen concerns by distinguishing between "third places", "incidental" encounters, and "private" spaces.

Indeed, Harwood (2000) argues that, in these latter three layers of local civic life, journalists are likely to encounter conversations that seldom take place in the more organised spheres represented by the "official" and "quasi-official" layers. The problem with the official and quasi-official layers, Harwood (2000) emphasises, is that they tend to be frequented primarily by "professional citizens" (p. 28), and that their formal and informal rules of par-

ticipation tend to restrict the range of participants, topics of discussion, and modes of deliberation. As Harwood (2000, p. 4) puts it, "A concern that bubbles up from [below] will sound quite different from one that is discussed at a [formal] public meeting". For example, during a civic mapping project on redevelopment of a neighborhood in Tampa Heights, Florida, journalists from the *Tampa Tribune* discovered that, once they went beyond the official and quasi-official layers of that neighborhood, local residents had very different concerns; differences that separated rather than united what the journalists had previously assumed to be a united neighborhood (see Campbell, 2002, 2004).

Harwood's (2000) argument that journalists should go beyond the organised spheres of local civic life, with its formal meetings and attendant rules of participation, is indeed important. While no empirical research has looked at the various types of deliberative fora that news organisations committed to public journalism commonly sponsor (see Friedland & Nichols, 2002), the more general scholarly literature shows that such fora offer a very limited understanding of citizens' concerns. Indeed, the literature shows not only that a small, select strata of citizens tend to participate in such fora, but also that their formal and informal rules of participation tend to exclude the vast majority of citizens and their concerns. While most citizens, contrary to popular belief, do engage in extensive conversations about political issues in the private sphere of their homes, at work, and in various informal settings, they do not attend more formal fora and, when they do, either tend to stay silent or, as Eliasoph (1998, p. 16; see also Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Mutz & Mondak, 2006) found, speak in "hushed tones".

To capture the nature of these latter, more informal conversations, Harwood (2000) argues, it is essential that journalists alter the ways in which they traditionally have interacted with citizens. Specifically, Harwood (2000, p. 4) emphasizes, instead of engaging citizens in "formal interviews" by "knocking on a family's front door to ask a few questions", journalists ought to engage citizens in "civic conversations" by sitting down "in their living rooms to understand their lives". That is, "The goal should not be to find the quote [but rather] to discover patterns in what people are saying, to probe to uncover meaning and figure out how people's thinking unfolds as they talk" (p. 23).

Like his five-part typology of civic layers more generally, Harwood's (2000) notion of "civic conversations" represents an advance of other, more

commonly applied public journalism tools, notably public opinion polls and focus group discussions. In contrast to public opinion polls, which require citizens to respond to concerns already defined by journalists rather than to independently (and publicly) define those concerns themselves, civic conversations would allow citizens to elaborate on their concerns at length, in their own words, and through interaction with others. And in contrast to focus group discussions, which take place among groups of strangers who are unlikely to meet again after the encounter, civic conversations would take place between citizens who are already familiar with one another and within the actual contexts of their everyday lives (see Glasser & Craft, 1998; Heikkila & Kunelius, 1996; Iggers, 1998). Simply put, civic conversations are much more likely than public opinion polls and focus group discussions to offer journalists a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of what is on citizens' minds.

Taken together, by broadening their understanding of local civic life to encompass various civic layers, seeking out conversations taking place outside the organised (official and quasi-official) layers, and doing so by engaging citizens in genuinely civic conversations, journalists might be able to reduce the gap between news organisations and their audiences. To the extent that citizens see the breadth and depth of their concerns represented in news reporting, and in ways that accurately reflect the nature of those concerns, citizens might be more likely to find news reporting relevant and meaningful to their lives.

Structural Civic Mapping

While the cognitive approach to civic mapping could help strengthen citizens' interest in journalistically-mediated political information, there is little reason to believe that this approach would also inspire citizens to participate more actively in democratic processes. To further that second goal, it would be necessary to supplement the cognitive approach with what Campbell (2002, 2004) calls a "structural" approach to civic mapping.

The problem with the cognitive approach to civic mapping, Campbell (2004, p. 252) notes, is that "it concentrates on the horisontal expansion of [news] sources and does not sufficiently theorize the vertical connections

among the source layers it identifies". More pointedly, I would argue, the problem with this approach is that it conceives of citizens exclusively as news sources on given issues and does not also conceive of citizens as active participants who are willing and capable of addressing those issues. Instead of aiming to involve citizens in efforts to solve issues of particular concern to them, it merely aims to enhance journalists' understanding of those concerns. Second, and relatedly, the cognitive approach too readily dismisses the importance of the official and quasi-official (or organised) layers of local civic life in favor of the more unorganized layers of third places, incidental encounters, and private spaces. While it is certainly important, as previously discussed, for journalists to broaden their range of news sources beyond official and quasi-official institutions, actual efforts to solve given issues are rarely carried out by individual citizens but rather by organised (quasi-official) citizen groups, either on their own or in collaboration with (official) governmental institutions.

Campbell (2002) reaches much the same conclusion, arguing that the cognitive approach to civic mapping ought to be complemented by a structural approach, which would be aimed at enabling "citizens to participate more fully and effectively in civic life and the public decisions that effect them" (p. 228) or, more precisely, at enhancing citizens' "problem-solving capacity" (p. 11). This could be accomplished in practice, Campbell (2002) notes, by mapping the various problem solving-oriented "social networks" (p. 147) within given localities. An important component of such a structural approach to civic mapping, Campbell (2002, p. 232) emphasizes, following Burt (1992), would be to identify the "structural holes" in given social networks; that is, the "places where [social] ties are weak or non-existent". Ideally, Campbell (2004, p. 155) notes, journalists ought to solicit citizens' help in constructing such structural maps which, in turn, should "be made available to [citizens] as a resource to further encourage and inform" their problem-solving efforts.

A structural approach to civic mapping, then, would require journalists, in collaboration with citizens, to map the various problem solving-oriented social networks within given localities and to evaluate whether and how those social networks could be strengthened, so as to enhance their problem-solving capacity. The goal of such a structural approach would be to assess whether existing efforts to address given issues are adequate and, if that is not the case,

to determine how those efforts could be enhanced through new, reconfigured social networks.

One of few examples of a structural approach to civic mapping is that of the *Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Washington. As part of its "Key Moments" public journalism initiative, journalists from the *Spokesman-Review* examined why some teenagers end up leading successful lives while others end up in prison by mapping the distribution of social networks (and their support services) across the city and comparing that map to maps of particular neighborhoods where teenagers were more or less likely to lead successful lives. Indeed, the journalists involved with this initiative tried to locate the structural holes in existing social networks so as to be able to specify how support services in neighborhoods with the highest percentage of troubled teenagers could be improved (see Campbell, 2002, 2004).

Like the cognitive approach to civic mapping, such a structural approach poses certain challenges to the practice of public journalism. First, if journalists are to construct maps of existing social networks and, more importantly, assess whether and how those social networks could be strengthened (e.g., by identifying "structural holes" in the form of "weak" or "non-existing" social ties), they would need to abandon their stance of political neutrality in favour of political advocacy - or what Rosen (1999, p. 76) refers to as the distinction between "doing journalism" and "doing politics". Indeed, without explicitly stated evaluative standards, journalists would be unable to articulate (and justify) why certain configurations of social networks are more appropriate than other possible ones.

Second, and equally important, journalists would need to broaden their understanding of what constitutes appropriate problem-solving by considering other forms of intervention than local, citizen-based problem-solving. Instead of presuming a priori, as most public journalists appear to do, that all issues can and should be addressed by local citizen groups (see Glasser, 1999; Parisi, 1997; Schudson, 1999), journalists ought to consider whether given issues could be adequately addressed by citizen groups themselves, or whether those issues require more deep-seated, political intervention by governmental institutions. Moreover, journalists ought to consider whether given issues could be adequately addressed through local intervention, whether by citizen groups or governmental institutions, or whether those issues require intervention of a broader, non-local scope. While it is certainly imaginable that many issues

could be adequately addressed by given (local or non-local) citizen groups themselves, many other issues would require intervention by (local or non-local) governmental institutions to be adequately addressed (see Haas, 2007b for a more in-depth discussion of public journalism-inspired problem-solving options).

Regardless of which problem-solving options journalists try to further in given contexts, such a structural approach to civic mapping is likely to inspire citizens to participate more actively in democratic processes. By involving citizens in efforts to evaluate given problem solving-oriented social networks, and including them in discussions of how those social networks could be strengthened, journalists would be likely to inspire citizens to become more politically involved themselves. Indeed, by encouraging citizens to participate more actively in problem-solving efforts, either through involvement in organised citizen groups or in collaboration with governmental institutions, journalists are not only likely to inspire more citizen participation in the public affairs of the localities in which they reside, but may also prompt citizens to participate more actively in political elections. Importantly, such a structural approach to civic mapping is also likely to enhance audience interest in journalistically-mediated political information. The vast scholarly literature on "community integration" shows that the more communicatively-integrated given localities are, the higher the interest in local news coverage (see, for example, Emig, 1995; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Park, Yoon, & Shah, 2005).

The Challenges of Civic Mapping

The prior discussion shows that the research and reporting tool known as civic mapping can fruitfully be used to address the two gaps that inspired the emergence of the public journalism movement in the first place: between news organisations and their audiences and between citizens and politics. Specifically, while the cognitive approach to civic mapping can be used by journalists to broaden their range of news sources, and thereby to produce news coverage that is more relevant and meaningful to people as audiences, the structural approach can be used by journalists to strengthen existing problem

solving-oriented social networks, and thereby to inspire people as citizens to participate more actively in democratic processes.

While these two approaches to civic mapping, if used together, could help journalists further public journalism's goals, their actual implementation poses certain challenges to the practice of journalism. Briefly put, the cognitive approach requires journalists to broaden their understanding of local civic life to encompass various civic layers, make efforts to seek out news sources that are not part of organised civic life in given localities, and engage those news sources in naturally-occurring interactions, in the form of civic conversations, rather than formal interviews. Moreover, the structural approach requires journalists to rethink their role in and responsibility for civic life by abandoning their stance of political neutrality in favour of political advocacy as well as conceive of problem-solving in broader terms than local, citizen-based intervention.

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