

Publications

Civic Journalism: Six Case Studies SEATTLE, WASH. "Front Porch Forum"

In a fall meeting with NPR editorial director John Dinges, Marcotte and Stillman promised to devote the equivalent of two full-time news people to the project, as well as part of their limited budgets. Acceptance in the NPR-Poynter Election Project meant both stations would be eligible for additional NPR funding, from the Pew Center for Civic Journalism.

By late 1993, KPLU and KUOW knew they were a team. The next connection was with the *Times*, where executive editor Michael Fancher was intrigued by the possibilities of a partnership with public radio and the opportunity to expand his commitment to citizen-oriented reporting.

Fancher appreciated the election project's proposed flexibility. In the five project cities (Boston, Dallas, San Francisco, Seattle, and Wichita), each partnership would design its own project and each partner could produce independent editorial content. "Poynter and NPR weren't coming through the door with a game plan. We were free to find our own path," Fancher said.

But Fancher didn't accept the invitation immediately. Unlike some newsrooms, where mid-level editors and reporters are assigned to produce a project after senior management signs on, everyone who would be responsible for what eventually became the "Front Porch Forum"-- including lead political reporter Mark Matassa -- was invited to discuss the proposed partnership at a January 20, 1994, meeting with NPR's Dinges and Poynter's Ed Miller.

"On important decisions we try to involve reporters from the ground up," said political editor Tom Brown. "We have made a major effort, a major effort, to involve reporters. As a result we don't tend to get hugely divisive internal fights over things. It's not as fractured a place as other newsrooms."

To some staffers, especially regional editor David Boardman, the project didn't represent much that was new at a paper that had long since abandoned horse-race coverage. Boardman, a frequent Poynter faculty member with a background in political reporting and editing, warmed to the goals of the project, but was cool to the notion that citizen-focused coverage was anything new at the *Times*.

The NPR-Poynter Election Project was based on the notion that the media had to stop covering elections as horse races; Boardman and others, including reporter Matassa, believed the *Times* had left horse-race coverage behind in the '80s. In fact, the *Times* stopped horse-race polling in 1983.

As Boardman explained, "This idea of covering a campaign as a whole rather than little sections of who's ahead wasn't new."

"I probably was more skeptical than most of the people," Matassa said. "I thought that we had done a lot of the things that were the goals of this project."

The skeptics became more receptive when they looked at the other aspects of the project. "I could see some value in a partnership with NPR," Boardman said. "We also saw the natural next step for us. We'd already been doing focus groups. In 1988, we used a panel of citizens called the "Puget Sound Panel," a group of citizens who gathered monthly during the campaign to discuss their reactions for publication.

Boardman, Brown, and others thought the *Times* could use the project as a testing ground for ideas that could be extended to other kinds of coverage.

Assistant managing editor Carole Carmichael understood the mixed reactions. "We had a history of moving away from the horse race that the others [partners] did not." Still, she added, "there was almost unanimous opinion that 'Yes, here was something we should do.' It was a matter of trying to figure out how we were going to build a better mousetrap."

No one was skeptical enough to warrant turning down the invitation to join KPLU and KUOW. Once the decision was made, *Times* management stayed involved. Fancher used his Sunday column to talk to readers about the project, while Carmichael took an active role in the planning and execution. Managing editor Alex MacLeod took part in some of the planning meetings. Their participation sent a clear signal that everyone was part of the effort and that the commitment came from the top.

With the newspaper on board, the natural next step would have been to add a television station to the mix. But television was a bridge the new partners refused to cross. For one thing, there was no obvious choice; furthermore, the partners believed television would skew the project.

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