



DOING CIVIC JOURNALISM

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

"At the first meeting somebody asked if it was a requirement that there be a TV partner, and the answer was no. There was a collective sigh in the room like 'Oh, thank heaven'," Fancher recalled.

"Operatively, it was difficult enough to keep three [partners] more or less on the same track without adding another one," Brown said. "We'll explore some kind of TV connection [next time] because they reach a lot of people we don't, but we don't expect any TV station to get as deeply into it as public radio."

Setting Goals

The partners had other important decisions to make: What were their goals? How could those goals be met? When would the project launch?

Representatives from each newsroom began a flurry of meetings. By early March, they had agreed on several mutual goals. Cyndi Nash, associate managing editor, listed them in a memo based on a March 4 meeting:

- "To involve readers and listeners in active civic life, and particularly the '94 campaign, more directly than ever before. This includes getting out of the way frequently, and letting citizens ask their own questions and express their own views without our comment, editing, or professionalism."
- "To produce insightful, enlightening, and engaging radio and print journalism."
- "To create good PR for our respective organizations."
- "To go where no media have gone before, and live to

tell about it."

"Unfocus" Groups

Unlike other NPR-Poynter projects that used a poll to identify issues, the Seattle partners invited several dozen citizens such as Foxley to participate in focus groups, or "unfocus" groups, as one editor put it. The input from the four professionally moderated groups helped design a far more relevant poll.

Bill Radke, then interim news director for KUOW, was not a fan of the pre-poll focus groups. He saw little value in using the focus groups to construct poll questions that could have been written by the partners. "I would take the money we spent on focus groups before the poll and spend that on another poll closer to the election," he said.

But to KPLU's Marcotte the tactic made sense: "We wanted to abandon our preconceived notions. We wanted to start with as much of a blank slate as possible." Traditional polls began with a list of issues from which participants choose; the Seattle partners wanted the focus-group participants and poll respondents to construct their own list.

In another departure from convention, the focus groups were not billed or conducted as political discussions; the subsequent poll also avoided partisan questions such as, "Which party does a better job?"

The Forum Begins

The "Front Porch Forum" opened for business Sunday, May 22, with a look at the focus groups, an explanation of civic journalism, and an invitation from Fancher to "pull up a chair and join us on the front porch." Underscoring the potential in the partnership, Fancher issued that invitation in his weekly Sunday 2-A column and during an interview on KPLU.

"The questions that those of us in the press ask may or may not relate to your problems. They may or may not be the questions that you would ask. [We] want to change that, but we need your help. We've created something we call the 'Front Porch Forum.' It's a new way to connect readers and listeners with the political process," Fancher told KPLU's listeners.



That same day, reporter Matassa introduced readers to some of their neighbors -- a woman from Bellevue and a man from Tacoma frustrated by the frenetic pace of their lives, a job counselor from Seattle who jettisoned some frustration by reducing his commute to a walk, a minister from Renton who believes in a "spiritual community," and David Foxley, the state trooper who christened the project.

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