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## Publications

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

Matassa explained civic journalism, using the *Charlotte Observer's* 1992 election project as an illustration. Like Fancher, he didn't pretend to have all the answers or even all the questions.

Matassa's tone signaled a change. Instead of the impersonal third-person, he wrote as though he were in the midst of an informal, polite conversation, liberally sprinkling stories with "you," "we," and "us."

Readers and listeners were encouraged, almost exhorted, to offer comments or ask questions by phone, mail, e-mail, or fax. The first words on Page One asked: "What do you like about living here? What worries you? What are your hopes?"

An inside sidebar offered phone numbers at the *Times*, KPLU, and KUOW, a "Forum" fax number at the *Times*, Matassa's e-mail address, and a post office box. Readers were asked to include their name, city of residence, and phone number for verification.

The *Times* heard from such people as Arianna Vander Houwen, a resident of Seattle angered by her inability to get a response to her letters and calls to local politicians, and Tom Swett of Bellevue, an unemployed childless young husband volunteering on a school district committee. Dick and Lauralee Smith of Seattle applauded the *Times* for its initiative. "Your opening article exactly articulates our concerns that 'We the People' have almost completely lost our voice in determining the future of the Puget Sound region (and the nation in general)."

Their replies appeared with nine others on a special "Front Porch Forum" page published May 31. Instead of pulling out "sound bites," the often lengthy letters were printed in full, letting the writers tell their stories. Calls to the radio stations aired during "listener response" segments.

The radio stations relied on the strengths of their different

formats:

- KUOW devoted half-hour talk show segments on Monday, May 23, and Wednesday, May 25. The former set the stage with interviews with Poynter's Ed Miller and a focus group participant; the latter invited calls from listeners with suggestions for improving election coverage.
- KPLU's Marcotte produced a five-part series, beginning with Fancher's comments. The other four parts covered the underlying gap between citizens and the political system; community values; new and interesting ways citizens are overcoming the isolation of modern life to forge new political dialogues; and listeners' comments about "Front Porch Forum."

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### Next Step: Polling

While the partners were launching "Front Porch Forum," pollster Elway Research of Seattle was preparing a statewide poll. With the focus groups as a guide, the 76-question poll was indirect, issues oriented, and open-ended.

For instance, one series of questions asked: "In your opinion, what would you most like to see happen in your community in the next five years?" "Who should be responsible for making this happen?" and "What can you do to help make this happen?" The open-ended questions invited the participants to help shape the poll instead of demanding that all answers fit a prescribed set of responses.

Elway Research conducted random telephone interviews with 500 Washington residents from June 16 to June 19. Fifty of the 500 completed surveys were turned over to the partners for use in their reporting; each of the 50 had agreed to be contacted by a reporter. In retrospect, the partners say they would have preferred a larger pool instead of sharing the same 50 potential sources.

Some of the results were anticipated -- crime, social issues, and the economy were among the top concerns -- but the poll picked up unexpected anxieties about the future of the family and affordable housing. More than half of the respondents distrusted government's ability to resolve problems.

The partners expected citizens' attitudes to be negative; instead, the most striking findings were positive. People were overwhelmingly satisfied with their personal lives and

optimistic about the future. Crime was a general worry, but nine out of ten felt personally safe. One trend was clear: The happiest, most satisfied people were those who had some sort of community connection, whether it was talking to neighbors, volunteer work, or belonging to a church.

Again, the partners personalized their coverage by talking to some of the respondents and reporting their stories.

At KPLU, Marcotte prepared another five-part series that began on Sunday and aired during Morning Edition. Segments included poll highlights, an interview with the pollster, interviews with citizens, and listener feedback.

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