



DOING CIVIC JOURNALISM

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

That Monday, KUOW began weekly four-minute reports based on the poll results. The reports aired twice every Monday through the primary, once during *Morning Edition* and again during the station's mid-morning call-in show, Weekday. The second report was followed by an hour call-in show on the subject of the day.

Standing in for Marcie Stillman, who was on leave, interim news director Bill Radke hired freelance print reporter Danny Westneat to produce the "Front Porch Forum" series. The \$2,500 investment kept him from overloading a two-person full-time news staff.

Radke and Westneat agreed that merely reporting what poll respondents said wouldn't be enough; instead, Westneat's job was to sift through the poll results, take what people said, and look deeper to see if their comments matched reality.

His first feature was a good example. With affordable housing high on the "top concerns" list, Westneat began his examination by following a young Seattle couple on a house-hunting trip and recording their comments. He sprinkled in statistics and expert comments about the changing housing market.

Subsequent features covered a Generation X that was more hopeful than most believe it to be, Ross Perot supporters from 1992 who were more unhappy than before, ways to create a sense of community, and the alienation within the community that cropped up when children didn't attend neighborhood schools.

"I thought these were interesting pieces, more than just about the election they were stories about connections, cynicism," Radke said. KUOW would have covered the election without the project, but Radke firmly believes these stories would not have been part of the coverage.

The *Times* splashed the overall poll results across two-thirds

of Page One on Sunday, July 10. The news story written by Matassa was accompanied by a colorful graphic showing two people on the front porch of a one-story house; the accompanying article jumped inside to a full page with a series of pie charts offering more detailed results. The next day, in another Page-One story based on poll results, Matassa examined ways individuals and groups could step in where government was failing.

Before the poll results were published, the five major candidates for U.S. Senate were asked the same 76 questions. Their responses were published a week after the initial results were released. The headline told the story: "How Senate candidates differ from the rest of us."

Many of the pie charts from the first poll story were used again, this time with the names of the candidates superimposed on the segment of the chart containing their answer. For instance, three of the five -- including a county councilman -- said they felt like outsiders in local politics; their names appeared on the piece of the pie representing the 57 percent of poll respondents who said they felt like outsiders.

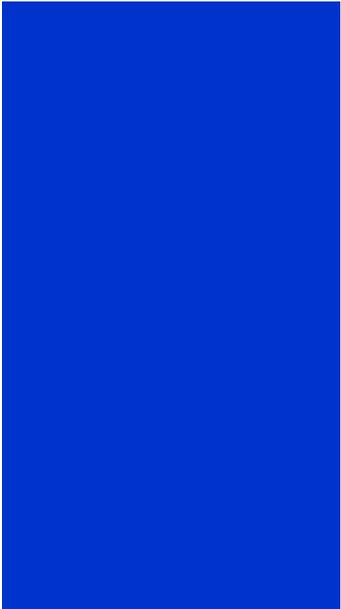
Readers could see that all five had a household income over \$60,000 compared with only 15 percent of the respondents at that level. They could see who agreed with the minority who thought efforts to control population growth were losing ground, that none of the candidates agreed with the majority who thought progress was being made in tackling transportation problems, and that only one agreed progress was being made in education.

Perhaps most important, they could see evidence that partisan lines blur, as Matassa wrote, "when candidates are forced to briefly respond to questions rather than deliver speeches." Slade Gorton, the Republican incumbent, more often than not shared a piece of the pie with at least one of the Democrats seeking to oppose him in the general election.

The Reporter's Role

One of the first to encourage KPLU's involvement, Paula Wissel was uncertain about the reporter's role in civic journalism and whether she was supposed to abdicate some of the reporter's traditional responsibilities along with shifting reporting styles.

"For me, it was kind of hard to figure out how you take this theory and make it into actual reporting. I have a big concern



about the whole process. What if all the people are saying things that are completely inaccurate? I think it's dangerous for some of this stuff to go unchallenged."

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