

DOING CIVIC JOURNALISM

- Civic Catalyst Newsletter
- Publications
- Videos
- Speeches & Articles
- Research
- Conferences & Workshops
- Spotlights

PEW PROJECTS

BATTEN AWARDS

ABOUT THE PEW CENTER

SEARCH ENGINE | SITE MAP

HOME

Publications

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

Tom Brown and the reporters at the *Times* were thinking along the same lines. "A lot of what you do still has to be that kind of journalism, reporting on campaigns and issues, problems. That's where the newspaper can add value to the equation. There are also a lot of instances where you need to do a lot of good, explanatory stuff. I think it's really futile to try to become a sort of empty vessel into which you pour readers' comments and politicians' answers. There is a lot of genuine confusion about a lot of politically related questions. The paper's job is to straighten that out so they can ask better questions and have a better understanding of what's going on."

Matassa agreed. "This stuff is a lot better if you can add value as reporters. Take campaign finances - when somebody asked all the candidates to respond to the [campaign finance] reform bill, we added some reporting. We gave more than a response, we gave context for it."

They all reached the same conclusion: Good *civic* journalism does not abandon the values and standards of good journalism.

The Paths Diverge

The flexibility that attracted Fancher at the outset meant the partners could collaborate or go their own way. In fact, their paths diverged after the poll results were published. The "Front Porch Forum" team didn't meet between early July and late August. The partners continued to cross-promote, but would plan only one more joint event - a general election debate between Sen. Slade Gorton and Democratic primary winner Ron Sims. The *Times* liked the independence.

"The partnership worked out well, better than I thought it would," Matassa said. "We started off together, did five big

things together, then went our separate ways."

But Marcotte expected more. "It's almost like we went our separate ways after the poll results came out. They were proceeding with their issue pieces. We were doing a piece per week - every Wednesday. In August, when we did the four issue forums, the newspaper just didn't really want to get into it. We saw the opportunity for voices. In retrospect, I felt like we were too much out of touch with each other."

"Front Porch Forum" virtually disappeared from the *Times* for the rest of July and most of August. The sole exception was a sharp letter to the editor criticizing the rosy picture painted by the poll stories.

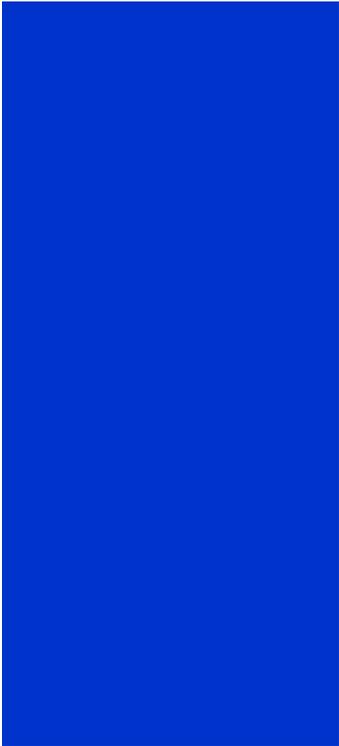
The radio partners continued in-depth coverage through the summer. With the poll as a touchstone, KUOW and KPLU continued independent weekly issues coverage and collaborated on four small-group issues forums. Unlike focus groups that are used to measure intensity and help an organization form a policy, small-group forums featured a contained discussion or conversation about a single topic with broadcast, not research, as the goal.

Held in August, the small-group issues forums focused on crime, education, growth, and cost of living; each included five residents drawn from the focus group participants and poll respondents. The small forums illustrated the differences between radio and print. The four sessions generated in-depth reports for KPLU that ran as a series in September and edited versions that aired as forums on KUOW. The *Times* declined to participate.

"One of the organizational things people need to understand is that things that work for newspapers may or may not work for radio," Tom Brown said.

Instead, the *Times* produced its own Page-One series about issues highlighted in the poll and focus groups, publishing five in-depth articles between August 21 and the September 20 primary. The first tackled growth, the problem the largest number of respondents said must be addressed in the next five years. Subsequent articles examined health care, crime, affordable housing, and education.

As the series progressed, the paper got better at asking readers to participate. The first article featured a small shaded column asking the same questions as the very first story in May, and offering ways to reach the forum. The second article was accompanied by a sidebar with a full headline inviting readers to "Step onto the Porch." This time, readers were invited to send specific questions for candidates; the radio stations' e-mail addresses were included.



By August 31, when the third article appeared, the paper finally achieved the blend of copy and graphics that would carry this small, but significant feature through November. A standing head made the purpose clear: "Front Porch Forum. Putting the people back in politics." The day's topic was identified, the "Forum" was explained and a new bullet list made the contact information much easier to read.

< [Back](#) | [Table of Contents](#) |

[[Civic Catalyst Newsletter](#)] [[Publications](#)] [[Videos](#)]
[[Speeches & Articles](#)] [[Research](#)]
[[Conferences & Workshops](#)] [[Spotlights](#)]

[[Doing Civic Journalism](#)] [[Pew Projects](#)] [[Batten Awards](#)]
[[About the Pew Center](#)] [[Search Engine](#)] [[Site Map](#)] [[Home](#)]