

JAY ROSEN

The Public Defender

A JOURNALISM PROFESSOR'S CRUSADE TO BRING THE COMMUNITY INTO THE NEWSROOM

BY SCOTT SHERMAN

DURING THE 1996 ELECTIONS, FIFTEEN North Carolina newspapers and TV stations collaborated on an unusual experiment known as "Your Voice, Your Vote." The local media asked two thousand residents to list the issues they were most concerned about: taxes and spending, crime and drugs, education and financial security. With this information in hand, the coalition then interviewed each candidate—except Senator Jesse Helms, who refused to participate—and produced a series of articles comparing their responses.

Almost immediately, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, the *Financial Times*, and other leading newspapers excoriated the endeavor, arguing that its reliance on polls to direct the coverage amounted to pandering and led to the exclusion of key issues—such as race—that didn't show up in the surveys. The campaign manager for Helms's rival, Harvey Gantt, complained that the appar-

ently high-minded project ended up being unfair to his candidate by short-circuiting an open discussion of racial issues. (Gantt lost.) Jonathan Yardley of *The Washington Post* blasted the experiment as an attempt by the press to "control the political agenda," and Michael Kelly of *The New Yorker* slammed the project as "anti-democratic" and "dishonest." In response, *Charlotte Observer* editor Jennie Buckner retorted, in a *Washington Post* Op-Ed, that some big-city critics had not even bothered to read the actual coverage, and she claimed to be "particularly astonished by the number of journalists who seem offended by the suggestion that they might learn something valuable by listening to citizens."

The North Carolina project is the most conspicuous example so far of "public" or "civic" journalism—a communitarian-flavored movement whose intellectual architect, leading theoretician, and chief

provocateur is a tireless (some would say relentless) New York University journalism professor named Jay Rosen. Rooted in small- and medium-sized newspapers, public journalism calls on the press, in Rosen's words, to jettison the role of "detached observer" and "help revive civic life and improve public dialogue."

Jeremiads about the decline of public life are routinely issued in academic and political circles, but Rosen has been unusually energetic in his response to them, having spent the last eight years promoting what media scholar Michael Schudson calls "the best-organized journalistic social movement in the history of the American press." The movement has inspired hundreds of news organizations—among them print, radio, and TV outlets—to experiment with the idea, and it has taken Rosen from Greenwich Village, where he lives and works, into scores of newsrooms from coast to coast.

Reporters and editors, typically wary of academic language and ideas, were not always eager to listen to someone with a doctorate in media studies, but Rosen's persistence has paid off. Since 1990 he has addressed more than three thousand journalists, been interviewed by news organizations from Japan to South Africa, and garnered \$1.3 million worth of foundation grants to pursue and develop the idea. Rosen also played a significant role in shaping James Fallows's influential book, *Breaking the News* (Pantheon, 1996).

The actual experiments carried out under the rubric of public journalism vary widely in style and breadth. But they all start from the premise that American public life is in lousy shape and the press has a responsibility to do something to help. Public journalists have used a wide range of techniques: town meetings, focus groups, polling, even pizza parties. In Huntington, West Virginia, *The Herald Dispatch* helped to organize task forces whose efforts eventually raised \$3 million in federal funds for a ramshackle, deindustrialized region; in Norfolk, Virginia, *The Virginian-Pilot* asked political candidates to supply a "public application form," along with a résumé and letters of recommendation; in San Francisco, *The Chronicle* inserted postage-paid voter registration forms, which led to large numbers of new voters; in Spokane, Washington, *The Spokesman-Review* abolished the position of editorial-page editor and installed two "interactive" editors to help readers craft Op-Ed pieces on topics ranging from the recollections of an impassioned twenty-year-old woman on public assistance to an eighty-five-year-old man's account of life inside a nursing home.

FEW OF these folksier projects have proven as controversial as the Charlotte experiment. Yet the mere mention of public journalism draws a fierce response from some members of the media elite, who argue that the movement amounts to little more than errant boosterism and that it threatens the press's reputation as an independent watchdog. "Reporters, editors, and publishers have their hands full learning to tell it right," Max Frankel wrote in *The New York Times Magazine*. "They should leave reforms to reformers." *Washington Post* columnist Richard Harwood cautioned that "The press already has credibility problems based on

the public perception that it is an arrogant, self-serving institution that more often aggravates than cures the social ills that afflict us. To anoint ourselves now as leaders of a new American Reformation may be a little more than the market will bear." And in *The New Yorker*, David Remnick inquired, "Why abandon the entire enterprise of informed, aggressive skepticism—even in its current state—in the hope of pleasing an imagined public? When journalists begin acting like waiters and taking orders from the public and pollsters, the results are not pretty."

Although public journalism has made only modest headway in journalism schools, some critics blame academia for

ONE 1995 SURVEY FOUND THAT 45 PERCENT OF AMERICANS HAD READ A DAILY NEWSPAPER THE PREVIOUS DAY—DOWN FROM 71 PERCENT IN 1965.

the renegade ideas swirling through small-town newspapers. For Remnick, public journalism is "especially popular among ink-free journalism professors." More pointedly, *Washington Post* editor Leonard Downie—whom Rosen publicly debated in 1995—says it is a movement fueled by "academics who are risking the terrible prostitution of our profession."

ROSEN, forty-one, was born and raised in Buffalo's middle-class suburbs. His mother was a teacher who kept *Time* and *Saturday Review* on the coffee table; his father was absent from the start. At SUNY Buffalo he began his undergraduate career as a management major. "My aspirations were quite low at that time," Rosen says from his spotless office just off Washington Square Park. Tall, lanky, and filled with nervous energy, he recalls that he was "drifting into suburban life as a member of the middle-managerial class. Then one day I got angry."

His sociology instructor had distributed a Socialist Workers Party propaganda leaflet to the class. Outraged that the professor had overstepped his boundaries and violated the canons of objectivity, the young Rosen burst into the office of the school newspaper and demanded that the editors write a story about it. In the time-honored tradition

of college journalism, they replied: "Why don't you do it?" That article led to a staff job and eventually to the editorship; a summer position as a reporter at *The Buffalo Courier-Express* followed.

Rosen, who would come to spend much of his career questioning the virtues of objectivity, soon decided that journalistic detachment wasn't for him. At the *Courier-Express*, he found that he was not especially interested in covering school boards, fires, and the minutiae of Buffalo politics. So he eventually decided to enroll in graduate school, joining NYU's Department of Media Ecology. After writing a dissertation on John Dewey, Walter Lippmann, and the relationship

between the press and the public, he was hired by NYU's Department of Journalism in 1986. Around this time, he began turning out press criticism for *Tikkun*, *The Listener*, and other small publications. According to Rosen, he was soon striving to connect with the world outside Greenwich Village: "Before I started doing public journalism, I was an imitation of a hip, downtown intellectual. In other words, I thought I was cool. Why? Because I had learned how to sneer at popular culture. It's just a pose you learn as a graduate student studying the media. You learn how to be witty and ironic...in your various put-downs of Vanna White and *USA Today*."

But Rosen would soon shuck this persona for something considerably more earnest. In 1990 he met the man who would set him on his future course: Davis "Buzz" Merritt of *The Wichita Eagle*, "the original public journalist."

MERRITT was appointed editor of the *Eagle* in 1975. He had worked on newspapers in Charlotte and in Boca Raton, Florida, but his new assignment was a mixed blessing: In 1959 *Time* magazine had dubbed Wichita's papers the "bottom of the barrel." Merritt resuscitated the *Eagle*, garnering awards for writing, layout, and photography. But

despite the laurels, readership and circulation were declining, and, worse, community problems seemed intractable. Moreover, the 1988 presidential campaign—with its charges and countercharges, contrived imagery, and endless mudslinging—convinced Merritt that he was witnessing nothing less than “a death spiral of democracy.” In response, he conceived of an ambitious, perhaps even messianic, agenda for journalists: “It was...clear to me that the public couldn’t change on its own, being merely a victim of the incestuous partnership of politics and the political press. Which left only us, the press, to change, to try to halt the devastating spiral.”

Two years later, with the Kansas gubernatorial race approaching, Merritt had a chance to reclaim the election from consultants and spin doctors. Supported by polling data, the paper focused its coverage on ten concerns, such as education, economic development, agriculture, and social services, giving each a long background piece in the paper. The *Eagle* also introduced a weekly feature that summarized the candidates’ positions on core issues and then noted what they had said about each one that week. If a candidate was silent, the box simply said: “This Week: Did not talk about it.” In 1992 the *Eagle* formally launched the “People’s Project” in the belief that journalism could “empower people to take back control of their lives.” The paper interviewed Wichita residents about their problems and concerns, which led to a series of public forums, community events, and feature articles that included phone numbers of groups working on social problems. The result? Merritt claims that volunteerism in the Wichita school system soared 37 percent.

When Rosen was introduced to Merritt in 1991, he knew at once that he had located an ally and an accomplice: Merritt, entirely on his own, had put into practice some of the very ideas about the press and the creation of the public sphere contained in Rosen’s dissertation. “Merritt understood that his challenge as an editor was to help form as well as inform the public,” Rosen has said. So the two men joined forces. From the beginning, there was

a clear division of labor: Rosen supplied the vocabulary, intellectual framework, and rhetorical zest, while Merritt’s forty-one years in the newspaper business, in addition to his Midwestern populist demeanor, furnished legitimacy.

IN 1993 the duo invented the term “public journalism,” and the concept began to attract the support of influential figures in the newspaper industry, especially James K. Batten, the late chairman of the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, who in 1993 helped Rosen obtain the first of two \$528,000 grants from the Miami-based Knight Foundation. Other foundations—primarily The Pew Charitable Trusts and Kettering—entered the fray, as did the American Press Institute and the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. Together they provided high-profile institutional backing for public journalism.


One reason that press barons and foundations were attracted to public journalism was the feeling of discontent that swept the newspaper industry in the 1980s and 1990s. Remnick has captured the prevailing mood: “Every good journalist is at least vaguely aware that his trade may one day go the way of phrenology—and, what’s more, the

population will hardly protest the extinction.” In laying the groundwork for a novel approach to journalism, Rosen uses a barrage of statistics to illustrate the precarious state of the newspaper and the diminishing public confidence in the press. One 1995 survey showed that 45 percent of Americans had read a daily newspaper the previous day—a number down from 71 percent in 1965. A Yankelovich poll indicated that in 1988, 50 percent of respondents had high confidence in news from newspapers, but by 1993 only 20 percent felt that way. Some polls suggest outright hostility: 71 percent of Americans, according to 1994 *Times-Mirror* data, believe that the press “gets in the way of society solving its problems.”

Add to that the stunning proliferation of “infotainment,” cynicism at all levels

INSIDE

- Profiles of Charlotte-area delegates. **Page 8A**
- Some of the key people to watch at the Democratic National Convention.





DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION

Viewer's guide


MONDAY

- The convention opens at 3 p.m. EDT.
- Remarks by S.C. native Don Fowler, chairman of the Democratic National Committee.
- Actor Christopher Reeve and gun control activist Sarah Brady close the evening.

TUESDAY

- Evan Bayh, the young moderate governor of Indiana, gives keynote address.
- Harvey Gantt, rival of Sen. Jesse Helms and former Charlotte mayor, is highlighted with other congressional candidates.
- Hillary Clinton speaks.



So you want to tune in as Democrats gather in Chicago this week to nominate Bill Clinton for president? ABC, NBC and CBS will cover prime-time highlights of big-deal speakers.


Those wanting gavel-to-gavel detail should check out C-SPAN, CNN or PBS.

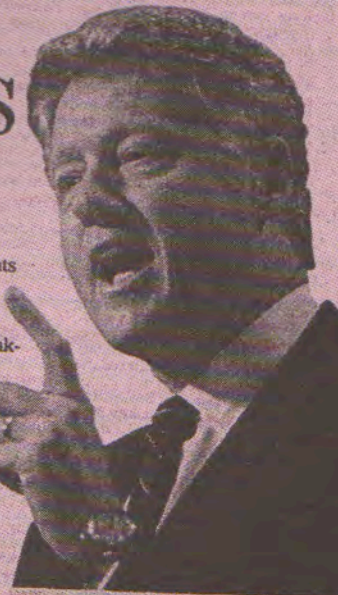
Complete TV listing/page 8A

— Carol D. Leonnig

WEDNESDAY

- Women in the Senate get the spotlight: Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, Carol Moseley-Braun of Illinois, Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer of California, and Patty Murray of Washington.
- Vice President Al Gore...





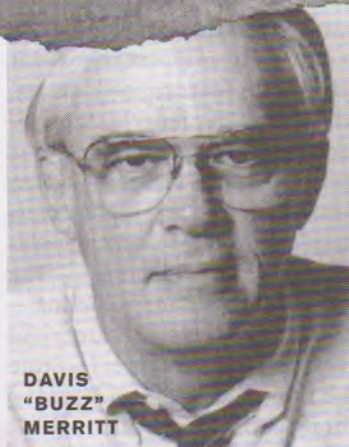
The Charlotte Observer

The Wichita Eagle

of the news business, and the apparent erosion of journalistic credibility and you have some sense of the gloom that dominates industry gatherings. Though newspapers are generally a profitable business, publishers are understandably anxious about their future. Underneath it all is a pervasive fear that the newspaper itself may soon be a casualty of the computer age, as Neil Hickey argued in the November/December 1997 issue of *Columbia Journalism Review*. In "Will [Bill] Gates Crush Newspapers?" Hickey predicted that by 2001 newspapers will have lost nearly \$5 billion in advertising to on-line services, a development that would cripple the industry.

FOR Rosen, public journalism offers a last chance to guarantee the profession's future. In order for such a rescue operation to succeed, however, he believes that journalists must forsake two of their most cherished principles: objectivity and adversarialism.

According to Rosen, adversarialism (or "the reporter-as-crap-detector," in his parlance) has been adopted as the identity of choice for many journalists—especially the young, the upwardly mobile, and those weaned on *The Washington Post's* Watergate coverage. In his 1996 book, *Getting the Connections Right* (Twentieth-Century Fund), Rosen argues that adversarial reporting has engendered a peculiar form of journalistic nihilism, "a snarling and relentless cynicism—a categorical mistrust of all public figures." Beneath the "hardened realism" of the cynical reporter lies the illusion that a public "eager to see the veil stripped from politics will magically reappear each day to provide the journalist with an attentive audience." But the more likely result, Rosen insists, "is that people will ignore the news as they come to conclude that no honest leaders exist, no genuine debate



DAVIS
"BUZZ"
MERRITT

can be had, no one cares much whether problems are solved, and therefore politics and journalism are a waste of time." Rosen doesn't deny that superb journalism has resulted from what he calls the "cult of toughness," nor does he believe that political coverage should be sycophantic, but he does object to reporters' masquerading as "zealous prosecutors." (As an example, he cites Tim Russert's efforts to blindside his guests on *Meet the Press*.) Quite simply, journalists must see themselves as "political actors" who have "some stake in the health of the political system."

The notion of objectivity, what he calls the "epistemology of American journalists," is another favorite target. Rosen takes pains to argue that objectivity contains much that is useful for the press—the disinterested pursuit of truth, the attempt to restrain biases, and so on. But he also laments the feelings of insularity and superiority that he believes typically accompany its invocation. "Everybody who comes at the press with a dissatisfaction, with a complaint, or even with an idea is seen by journalists as subjective," he told *The New York Times*. "One of the most insidious effects of objectivity is that it creates a world in which journalists can live without criticism, because they're the only judges of what's objective."

Starting in the 1970s, objectivity was scrutinized by communication scholars but to little effect: After all, *Journalism*

THE WICHITA EAGLE
EDITOR BELIEVES
THAT "ONLY WE,
THE PRESS" CAN
HOPE TO HALT A
"DEATH SPIRAL OF
DEMOCRACY."

Quarterly doesn't exactly circulate in newsrooms. But by arguing his case in hundreds of face-to-face conversations with working journalists, Rosen forced the media establishment to take notice. In appraising the objectivity debate, he floats what he calls a disruptive question: "Since the press is already a player in public life, what should it be playing for?"

In fact, when Rosen asks that question, he is careful to avoid endorsing the openly partisan journalism one might find in European newspapers (which are often directly affiliated with political parties) or in American opinion magazines, such as *The Nation* and the *National Review*. As Merritt puts it, the public journalist has "left the press box and gotten down on the field, not as a contestant but as a fair-minded participant with an open and expressed interest in the process going well." Rosen too prefers to talk about process, not politics. Like many other left-leaning advocates of "deliberative democracy," he insists his goal is not to advance any particular political agenda but rather to promote greater public deliberation.

ROSEN'S brand of deliberative democracy stems largely from the communications theorist and Columbia Journalism School professor James Carey. During his long career as dean of the College of Communication at the University of Illinois, Carey played a major role in introducing the "interpretative"

theories of thinkers like John Dewey, Max Weber, Lewis Mumford, Clifford Geertz, and Raymond Williams to communication, a field traditionally dominated by quantitative effects-based research. Yet Carey's work is little known outside the discipline, in part because he is an essayist (he hasn't produced a single monograph) and in part because his articles are buried in obscure academic journals. (Minnesota's recent publication of *James Carey: A Critical Reader* should add to his reputation; it is a stimulating compendium of essays by and about him.)

At its core, Carey's writing offers an overview of what he sees as the rise and fall of American journalism—a history that he closely links to the rise and fall of public life. For instance, in "The Press, Public Opinion and Public Discourse" (1995), he describes his vision of a robust American public sphere as it existed in the taverns of Colonial New England, where newspapers and pamphlets triggered heated debate among denizens and travelers. Of course, it was a world restricted by race and gender and class, but in Carey's view it was something special nevertheless:

The public, in this phase, was not a fiction or an abstraction: a group of people sitting at home watching television or privately and invisibly reading a newspaper or numbers collected in a public opinion poll. The public was a specified social formation: a group of people, often strangers, gathered in public houses to talk, to read the news together, to dispute the meaning of events, to join political impulses to political actions.

Carey then documents the erosion of that milieu, beginning with the growth of Progressive-era journalistic professionalization, followed by the rise of expert knowledge, and finally, the consolidation of the survey research and polling industries. Modern journalism was the result, and Carey concedes that it has been "a bulwark of liberty in our time" and that "no one has come up with a better arrangement." Still, it is plagued by a near-fatal defect: It is a journalism that "justifies itself in the

public's name but in which the public plays no role, except as an audience." He adds: "Journalism only makes sense in relation to the public and public life. Therefore, the fundamental problem in journalism is to reconstitute the public, to bring it back into existence."

In his search for a way out of this impasse, Carey looks to the work of John Dewey, in particular his celebrated debate with Walter Lippmann during the 1920s. Lippmann had insisted that the idea of an informed citizenry was a delusion: "They arrive in the middle of the third act and leave before the last curtain, staying just long enough to decide who is the hero and who is the villain." In response, Dewey agreed that democratic theory had erred in positing the omniscient citizen, but he defended the popular capacity for decision making. The problem, for Dewey, was how to create the kind of direct public interaction that could fulfill the promise of participatory democracy. But what happens when a town or a city grows to a size where face-to-face dialogue is impossible? Carey argues that it then falls to the press to foster that dialogue. In his interpretation of Dewey, "public opinion...is formed only in discussion," and, hence, "the purpose of news is not to represent and inform but to signal, tell a story and activate inquiry." He warns: "The press, by seeing its role as that of informing the public, abandons its role as an agency for carrying on the conversation in our culture."

Like Rosen, the historian and social

critic Christopher Lasch was convinced by Carey's argument. In a 1990 essay "Journalism, Publicity, and the Lost Art of Argument," he put forth his own summary of Dewey's riposte to Lippmann: "Instead of dismissing direct democracy as irrelevant to modern conditions, we need to re-create it on a large scale. And from this point of view, the press serves as the equivalent of a town meeting."

A LEADING scholar who dissenters from the Dewey-Carey-Lasch-Rosen line is UC-San Diego's Michael Schudson, author of *Discovering The News* (Basic, 1978), the definitive account of the triumph of journalistic objectivity.

Schudson is uneasy about some of the more grandiose statements he has heard from Rosen and Carey. "I don't think the press has ever constituted the public," he says, adding that today's public life may not be as utterly passive and disengaged as critics say. Moreover, he is skeptical of

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TREND: Based on a state survey of last spring's graduating class, most area students understand the need to continue their education beyond high school. More than 80 percent of area graduates said they were going to college or another post-secondary school. About 9 percent said they were going directly to work.

Seniors' plans

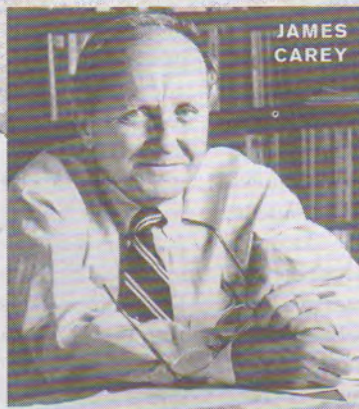
Includes seniors in Sedgwick, Harvey and Butler counties.



*Includes unemployment and parenthood. Does not total 100% because of rounding

College Other post-secondary Employment Military Other Unknown

IN CAREY'S VIEW, THE RISE OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM COINCIDED WITH THE DECLINE OF VIBRANT POLITICAL DISCUSSION IN TAVERNS AND ON THE STREETS.



Dewey's emphasis on face-to-face conversation. In an essay entitled "Why Conversation Is Not the Soul of Democracy," which appears in the December 1997 issue of *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Schudson insists that the current "romance" with conversation, which is visible all over the academic landscape, is deeply problematic. Drawing from Jane Mansbridge's research on Vermont town meetings, Schudson points out that they can not only lead to stress, social discomfort, and the reinforcement of local hierarchies, but that conversation itself is hardly egalitarian or effortless. (Other critics of the conversation model have added that public dialogue may create

discord just as easily as consensus and promote hypocrisy rather than sincerity.)

In a lucid essay forthcoming in *The Politics of News* (Congressional Quarterly Press), Schudson wonders if the goals of public journalism are really compatible with one another: "What is it that public journalism is supposed to be advancing? Is it 'community'? Or is it a healthy public discourse? Or is it a well-endowed public domain? What makes public journalists believe that these things are consistent rather than at war?" And he concludes

that public journalism is, in fact, a conservative reform movement with a narrow political agenda—one that is too compatible with market-oriented journalism:

It does not propose new media accountability systems. It does not offer a citizen media review board or a National News Council. It does not recommend publicly elected publishers or editors. It does not suggest that the press be formally or even informally answerable to a governmental or community body. It does not borrow from Sweden the proposition that government should subsidize news organizations that would enlarge the diversity of viewpoints available to the reading public. It does not propose nonprofit news institutions (like PBS) or news institutions without advertising (like the reformulated *Ms.* magazine).

Still, Schudson applauds public journalism's vigorous challenge to standard media assumptions and practices—"What democratic process," he tartly asks, "led newspapers to follow local football teams with greater constancy and a richer sense of history than they follow local politics?"—and insists that it is "the most serious and most intelligent development in journalism in decades."

IN newsrooms, meanwhile, the controversy continues. Current public journalism projects, funded by Pew, target economic reconstruction: In Aberdeen, Washington, a coalition of media outlets is examining the decline of the local fishing and logging industries and will attempt to come up with remedies; in Long Beach, California, the *Press-Telegram* is doing something similar in a community ravaged by defense cutbacks.

But the current wave of experiments also provides plenty of ammunition for critics: At *The Asbury Park Press* in New Jersey, for example, "grassroots community activists and leaders have been

the mirror of ideas

Marcel Bénabou

TRANSLATED BY STEVEN RENDALL
PREFACE BY WARREN MOTTE
MARCEL BÉNABOU'S MEMOIR DELVES
INTO HIS UNCOMMON FAMILY HISTORY
WHILE REFLECTING ON THE MYSTERIES OF
MEMORY, THE PAST, AND WRITING.

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PUBLISHERS WEEKLY BEST BOOKS 1996
WHY I HAVE NOT WRITTEN
ANY OF MY BOOKS
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**jacob,
menahem,
and mimoun**

A Family Epic

TRANSLATED BY
JONATHAN F. KRELL
TOURNIER'S MYRIAD
REFLECTIONS ON
PAIRS BOTH LOWLY
AND EXALTED—
MOVING FROM FORK
AND SPOON TO
BEING AND
NOTHINGNESS—
REVEAL WHY HIS
WORKS HAVE
GENERATED
INTERNATIONAL
ATTENTION AND
ACCLAIM.
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meeting at the *Press* monthly," according to a recently published account by the newspaper's staffers. This raises questions: If the local newspaper doesn't keep a critical eye on community leaders, who will? And what segment of a given community is most likely to benefit from public journalism in the first place?

An upbeat 1996 Pew study of four public journalism projects—in Charlotte, Madison, San Francisco, and Binghams—found that considerable numbers of citizens knew about and approved of the projects, but those who were likely to be moved to participate in them were already part of "the active civic core." "What remains unknown," the study concluded, "is whether civic journalism *causes* community action or being active leads people to pay attention to public journalism."

What's more, Rosen must sometimes feel that he has helped to create a monster. In a 1995 advertisement that appeared on the front page of *Editor and Publisher*, the trade magazine of the newspaper industry, the Gannett Company blared: "We believe in 'public journalism'—and have done it for years." The ad, which Rosen calls a "heated exercise in hype," hailed the efforts of various Gannett papers—one of which, *The Gazette* in Elmira, New York, had "spearheaded the drive that raised \$200,000 to bring a city-owned baseball stadium up to the standard to keep the [local minor league] baseball franchise in the city." "My heart sank when I saw it," Rosen recalls. "Stadium fixing was not the idea we had floated in any form I could recognize."

ROSEN himself admits to having made plenty of mistakes, and he recounts them in the conclusion to his forthcoming book, *What Are Journalists For?* (Yale): "Turning people off by coming on too strongly, alienating potential supporters with inflammatory rhetoric, getting defensive in the face of criticism—or sounding clueless to three-quarters of [an audience]." One can add the following: his desire to have it both ways on the objectivity question; his readiness to demonize journalists (he writes in the *Carey Reader*

that reporters indifferent to "democracy as a way of life" are "dangers to themselves and to the rest of us"); and his alarmist rhetoric about the "deepening ordeal" of American politics: In *Getting the Connections Right*, Rosen points to "militia members and black nationalists" who "read the papers with a savage mistrust." Nowhere in Rosen's writings does he address the issue of whether it's the duty of the press to sponsor public discussion, boost civic activity, and, as he often intones, "make public life go well"—or if that's a task better left to political parties, religious organizations, and trade unions. Meanwhile, critics point out that public journalism has thus far not been a profitable venture. Newspapers that pioneered the idea—*The Wichita Eagle*, among them—are still grappling with problems of dwindling circulation and public apathy.

But Rosen has many defenders. "Newspapers in Wichita, Charlotte, and many other cities are different now," says David Rubin, Dean of Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. "One reason they are different is because of Jay Rosen." "In the end, we're

going to find that Jay Rosen is one of the architects of the journalism we'll be seeing for decades to come," says Steve Smith of *The Colorado Springs Gazette*. "That's no mean feat for a nasally-voiced academic from NYU."

IN SPITE of his missteps, Rosen has fueled a vigorous discussion. Does the press have a responsibility that transcends objective journalism? What *are* journalists for? And now he is beginning to raise a related, and perhaps equally urgent, question: What are professors for?

Last year, Rosen participated in a conference on "public scholarship" sponsored by the Kettering Foundation. And in an interview published in Kettering's *Higher Education Exchange*, Rosen recently called for a new generation of "public scholars," who are to be differentiated from "public intellectuals." Public intellectuals, for Rosen, are basically mandarins, members of the avant-garde who step forward at urgent moments to enlighten the public. Public scholars, on the other hand, begin with the "realization that they don't know

RUSSELL BANKS

bestselling author of *The Sweet Hereafter*, brings to life an American icon, the legendary John Brown

"[Russell Banks] is the uncompromising moral voice of our time... I trust his portrait of American more than any other."

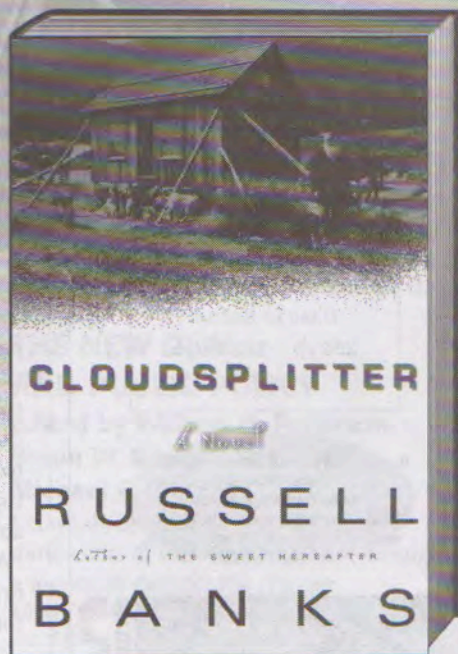
—MICHAEL ONDAATJE,
author of *The English Patient*

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CRITICS ARGUE THAT THE PUBLIC JOURNALISM MOVEMENT AMOUNTS TO LITTLE MORE THAN ERRANT BOOSTERISM AND THREATENS THE PRESS'S REPUTATION AS AN INDEPENDENT WATCHDOG.

something, and the something can only be known in one way: through a process of inquiry conducted with others in public." For Rosen, public scholarship encourages academics to treat the subjects of their research as active, autonomous beings—and not just as bundles of data to be dissected and analyzed. But Rosen hasn't placed any firm limits on the idea, and that might well make some academics tremble: Must a graduate student in medieval studies hold a town meeting before choosing her dissertation topic?

In a scathing response to Rosen in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Kettering conference participant Alan Wolfe argued that many aspects of public scholarship are admirable but ultimately it's a "flawed concept" that conceals a political agenda. Taking issue with Rosen's Deweyan aspiration to revive the public, Wolfe noted, "There is an American public already in place, quite comfortable about making its views known via talk radio, letters to the editor and electoral activity. Asking scholars to 'enlarge public understanding'—Rosen's words—is a way of saying that scholars do not like the understandings the public already has." Let's not be surprised, Wolfe adds, if the public, or at least the conservative wing of it, remains suspicious of professors who claim to seek cooperation "in deciding what we ought to value." Most significantly, Wolfe worried that the duty to engage in public scholarship might compromise a scholar's work: "As a scholar," Wolfe concludes, "I have only one principal obligation: to my quest for understanding."

In his response, Wolfe noted that "Dewey preferred a

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have sought community input to better understand local concerns. They have produced enterprise projects, written editorials, conducted public forums, and actively led community campaigns to unite readers in a common search for solutions. The result: Much progress in making our communities better places to live. On Pages 27 through 29, you'll find a partial list of community leadership projects conducted by

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public that did not yet exist to the one whose influence could be felt everywhere around him." The same might be said of Rosen and Carey when they speak of "forming" and "reconstituting" the public. As Wolfe suggests, such language conjures up social engineering, and is at odds with the spirit of the movement they helped establish—a movement that, at its best, points the way toward a less distant and more equitable relationship between the press and the public. It's a point Rosen must bear in mind, for the fate of public journalism will ultimately rest on how effectively its disciples can conquer the hearts and minds of an actually existing public, not an imagined one.

Scott Sherman's work has appeared in *The Nation*, *The Utne Reader*, and other publications. His article "Fighting Words: Adolf Reed's Crusade Against the New Black Intellectuals" appeared in the March 1997 issue of LF.

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