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What Are Journalists For?

Robert Jensen

What are journalists for? It's a question that has no definitive answer—certainly not one we can apply uniformly in all places at all times. But we should be asking the question and can, perhaps, provide some tentative answers for contemporary U.S. society.

Journalists should have the same goal as all people: to balance their own needs for fulfillment with the collective project of making the world a more just, humane, sustainable place to live for everyone and everything. But how should journalists pursue that goal? The question has been on my mind a lot lately since I teach journalism classes and over knowing what to tell students about a journalism career. I left mainstream newspaper journalism because I found it unsatisfying both politically and personally. The longer I'm out of the trade and the more I critically evaluate it, the more dissatisfied I become.

I've been looking for help, for alternatives, for a fresh way of thinking about what journalists can and should do to help create a better world. The writings of Wendell Berry have given me some new ideas. The title of this essay comes from a book by Berry, who is a poet, essayist, and Kentucky farmer. He asks: what are people for? Most of his observations apply to people and the land, to agriculture and rural communities, to the conflicts between science and stewardship. But his writing also contains some important insights that we can apply to almost any field, including journalism and communication.

So, what are journalists for? In response, I want to inquire about the role journalists should be playing in helping to develop and maintain communities. Tentatively, I've concluded that the professional values and ethics we teach in journalism schools undermine community.

It may seem odd to evaluate journalism based on essays written about farming and rural communities, but I take insight where I can find it. Berry is a wise person. His writing resonates for me and brings me hope. I disagree with some of his observations (most notably his occasional remarks on gender) but nevertheless trust his approach to life. Berry might not agree with all my applications, but I offer them in the spirit of his work.

In his writings, Wendell Berry posits several key principles. First, we in modern Western societies have a smaller scale of competence than we think. Second, without love and affection for specific people and places, we will fail. Third, answers to our problems must come from inside our communities, not from outside experts or new technology.

If these assertions are true, then the world is in trouble. We (by which I mostly mean Americans, but also others in the industrial world) routinely overreach the

scale of our competence, we often act without love and affection in systems that force us to squelch such love, and we have let experts and technology take over large chunks of our lives. Things aren't going so well, either in our society in general or in the news media. But in these measures are also the seeds of hope.

I have worked as a reporter and editor at a small town weekly, a suburban daily, and a larger metropolitan daily. Each place differed from the others, yet as a journalist I operated essentially the same way, using the same values and definitions. I had internalized ideas about what journalists are for. They are ideas that can be expressed as aphorisms and clichés: objectivity, neutrality, and the watchdog role of the press.

Yet the ideology of objectivity and neutrality has at least two problems. First, neutrality constitutes the functional equivalent of supporting the status quo. In the words of Myles Horton, the late educator and social activist, neutrality—the refusal to take sides—is simply “being what the system asks us to be.” If journalists are to be social critics, they can't be neutral. And if journalists aren't social critics, they are little more than stenographers who translate the technical language of elites for mass audiences.

But the commitment to neutrality also demands that journalists remain detached from the communities in which they work. As a journalist, I collected and disseminated information. I endeavored to cut myself off from the community in which I lived. And like most young journalists, I saw a successful future as being somewhere besides where I was, somewhere bigger and more prestigious—the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time* magazine, whatever. To have remained where I was would have been a failure, an admission that I didn't have what it took to make it big.

The journalism education I received is not uncommon, and not unlike how I taught my own students until the past few years. I taught a set of skills and values that stressed efficiency and neutrality, that equated success with working for a large publication with many readers. But I was promoting the wrong values and goals. If journalists are going to be useful in confronting the tasks ahead, if—to use a cliché—they are going to be part of the solution and not part of the problem, then we need new values and ideas about success.

It might sound apocalyptic, but we nevertheless face important decisions about the future of the human race and the health of the planet. I don't know how long we can limp along as we are: maybe years, maybe centuries—life is contingency. But it feels to me, and to many others, that we're in a critical era, perhaps approaching an important point after which there may be no return.

Communication industries are both in trouble and part of the trouble. They suffer from the same kinds of troubles confronting all our institutions: cultural, political, ecological, economic. This state of affairs has been the logical result of the systems that run our world: a particular kind of capitalism, a particular faith in technology, a particular scientific empiricism, and a particular conception of the individual in politics.

Like everyone, I have my own ideas about the source of our troubles: Most succinctly, our suffering stems mostly from the dynamic of domination and subordination that fuels so much of our lives. Success—the good life—has been linked to acquisition and conquest. We fight each other for control, locked in a

quest to dominate for fear of being subordinated. Much of that comes from the Western view of individual autonomy.

My bridge to journalism is the common linguistic root of community and communication, those things we have in common and the ways we share them. Various people in various disciplines, and in the wider world, are becoming increasingly interested in restructuring our world not around the individual but rather around the community. There's both danger and potential in that quest: communitarian movements can as easily be oppressive as progressive. In contrast, I'd like to combine a more radical politics with a focus on what Wes Jackson has called the "extended tribe."

Contemporary mainstream journalism, and mass media more generally, do little to help support community and much to undermine it. In James Carey's terms, modern journalism embraces a transmission model rather than a ritual model of communication. Journalism views its role as passing along information from one individual to another, not as creating connections between people. Yet our problem is connections, or the lack of them.

It's not a matter of broken connections, that we once had but have now lost. I'm not positing a golden age to which we must return, although there are societies, now and in the past, that have been far better at establishing connections among people and with the earth (various Native American societies come to mind, for example). We have to learn from the past and the present, and create something new. I want to talk about creation, not re-creation.

I use the concept of community to convey a sense of connection, of people bound together by commonality, with a sense of the folly of evaluating the world only according to the individual's limited self-interest. Community can be based on various commonalities: the most obvious is geographical, the community that forms between people living close to each other. Communities can also form around the oppression their members feel, such as in some African American or lesbian communities.

Journalists must be actively involved in constructing and maintaining community. We can use the phrase "journalism-in-community" in contrast to the more traditional idea of "community journalism." In most journalism schools, the latter is a size marker; it's the phrase one uses when talking about small papers or broadcast stations.

Where I come from, in the upper U.S. Midwest, there are many weekly newspapers. That's community journalism. The same rules and values of big-time journalism apply, with only minor modifications to acknowledge economic realities. (The role of journalism schools, by the way, seems in part to be training students to take jobs at near slave wages at these newspapers, and to avoid complaining or even noticing that their publishers often make a tidy profit from these and related publishing businesses.)

With these things in mind, let's return to Berry's principles and explore the possibilities. We can begin with the scale of our competence. The answer to the question of what journalists are for depends very much on where they are. Place is everything, and no two places are the same. In journalism education, we teach a set of skills and rules that students are told to apply fairly uniformly. But

Berry reminds us that local knowledge, local memory, and local details of place are crucial. When we impose “scientific” and “efficient” agriculture uniformly on the land, short-term benefits sometimes result, such as increased yields. But the long-term harm comes from ignoring the specific requirements of that place. For example, an agricultural system that ignores place will suffer from the loss of local soil and local memory. The conservation of soil and knowledge loses out to the quest for higher yields.

Berry says local cultures need a way to pass along memories, skills, and ways of life. Mass media, especially television, don’t do this. Many observers have noted the loss of a sense of place that comes with mass media: the movement is toward homogenization rather than celebrating differences between places and people. Just as soil can blow away, so can culture.

That’s part of what Berry means when he suggests that people should not overestimate the scale of their competence. If that is true, then maybe journalists can be the most creative and progressive when they nurture local knowledge, and help people in a particular place understand more about how to use that place and to resist larger oppressive structures.

Moreover, we need love and affection to ethically practice our profession, indeed to ethically exist in any community. Yet few journalists talk about their love and affection for a place or people. In fact, it goes against that basic canon of detachment and objectivity. Journalists can only profess love for higher ideals, such as truth and democracy (and the right of major media corporations to maintain profit margins of at least 20 percent). Yet while talking about love and affection in journalistic settings may be awkward, journalism educators and practitioners should not be squelching—by teaching them to be, above all, dispassionate—the passion young people may have for specific causes and specific places.

Western ethics focus on rules for ethical behavior: One is ethical when one follows the rules. (Journalists have an odd relationship to ethical rules. They talk about them, but they rarely write them down and almost never hold each other accountable. They tend to use rules only to discipline employees or to protect themselves from legal liability.) But there’s something more important than rules. Ethics requires us to situate ourselves in a moral community, to consider ourselves as part of that community, and to build trust between ourselves and other members of the community. That is, we must learn to love: to bring ourselves closer to the people we write about, rather than creating distance. This isn’t always easy; love and affection don’t guarantee a conflict-free world. But without those commitments, progressive change is unlikely.

The work of creating a more sustainable world must begin at the lowest level, in the smallest community. That’s where the real action is, the work that matters the most, not in Washington or New York. If knowledge of the problems and their potential solutions resides in local memory and culture, solutions imposed from the outside and from above are not likely to save us.

Berry’s experience has been largely negative, for example, with agricultural expertise, carried from large research universities to the small farmer and backed by government programs. Imposing scientific and technical solutions on local places has often been devastating. It deprives communities of the energy and

talents of young people, granting them instead a professional status that Berry claims is “too often understood as a license to become the predators of such places as this one that they came from.”

Journalism education does the same thing when it indoctrinates students with professional values, and sends them back to their communities to impose those values on their people. We should not merely be encouraging students to consider careers in small towns, but also to abandon the professional values we’ve been teaching them for so long. Journalists should not be professional communicators who come into a community as neutral pipelines of information (and thus almost always as unthinking supporters of the status quo), but rather as active participants in maintaining community. They should not be objective but rather openly subjective, not dispassionate but rather joyously passionate. This need not rob journalism of its critical edge; indeed, journalism so practiced would be more critical, would engage ideas and debates much more often.

This view also has implications for communication technology. If we refocus on local memory, on connections at that level, then the mad rush to develop machines that relay more messages more quickly becomes less important, even detrimental to the project. As communication technology advances, we assume it will be put to good use. But technology doesn’t drive economics and politics; technology makes certain things possible, but people still make decisions. No matter how much we run from that—no matter how much of the collective decision making we turn over to experts—we can’t escape responsibility for these choices. To judge its value, we have to look not only at how much information can be passed along how quickly at what kind of cost. We also have to ask who gets it, what kind of information does it contain, and who profits from it. And we have to ask what kind of world does it help build. We have to look at what it does or doesn’t do to the connections among people—arguably its most important function.

This doesn’t mean all technology is bad. Desktop publishing, for example, has made it possible for many individuals and small groups to produce publications that used to be too costly. Nevertheless, technology does not lie at the heart of the solutions to our problems. Instead, our problems stem from the poverty of our relationships to each other and to the world. They are problems of values and worldviews, exacerbated by certain kinds of economic and political systems. We can’t solve these problems with more of the same values, worldviews, and systems.

Obviously I have little affection for corporate journalism, performed in the service of large media corporations. Corporations organize themselves to make profits, not to enrich the lives of individuals or communities. Since the effects, both intended and inadvertent, of many corporate actions have actively hurt people and destroyed communities, the corporate media cannot be relied on to aid and maintain communities. Corporations have been particularly detrimental to community life.

As information technology becomes more complex and expensive, we have been aiming journalism increasingly at corporate consumers rather than the public market. Much money can be made from the business of collecting and presenting information to people who are willing and able to pay premium prices

for it. Journalism educators could begin training students to perform those tasks: that's where the jobs seem to be going. Alternatively, we could conclude that those trends will only exacerbate the already huge gaps between the rich and poor, the powerful and powerless, and the information elites and the less informed. Perhaps we should consider the political and ethical implications, and present other choices to students. As Berry writes:

...as the quality of use increases, the scale of use (that is, the size of operations) will decline, the tools will become simpler, and the methods and skills will become more complex.

Perhaps, if the quality of journalism improves, the scale of its use will shrink, the technology we use will become simpler, and the sophistication of our skills will increase. We will become better at understanding the world, not just faster in how we communicate our understanding. That's very different than the approach our existing media institutions and universities now take. But it's one we should seriously consider.

In a speech he once gave on sustainable agriculture, Wes Jackson—a plant geneticist—said that it isn't difficult to figure out how we can sustain ourselves and the planet. We just have to rethink what constitutes a successful life. Our goal in life, he said, should be to live cheaply, mill around, and die.

Perhaps we should consider that advice for journalism. Journalists would be considered to be successful if they find a way to live cheaply, mill around and write about it, then die. Success is not necessarily the *New York Times* or ABC News or reporting live from Paris. It's not sending your stories around the world in a millisecond. It's finding home, creating home, sustaining home, staying home.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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