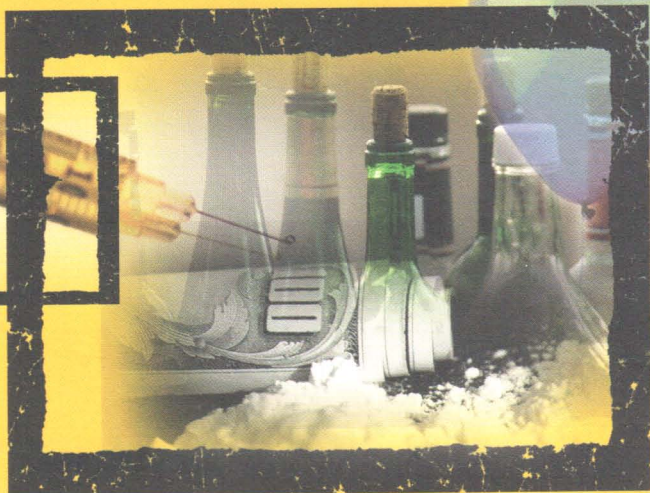


**TUNE
IN YOUR
COMMUNITY**

**TURN
ON YOUR
VIEWERS**



How to report news stories
that people care about.

Somewhere along the line we determined we have to show we are smarter than the general public. We know what they need; they're not smart enough to know it. Well, sure they are. Not only smart enough, they've had enough of us dictating what they know, what they see, what they hear. They're saying, 'Wait. You better pay attention.' And when you do, it's amazing how many stories you hear.

Mike Smith, WCTV, Tallahassee

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Introduction

For five years now, I have watched television news departments around the country advancing some new forms of journalism to help them connect better to their communities.

This journalism starts where citizens start on stories, empowers citizens to play a role, gives journalists better listening posts—and has generated excellent viewer feedback.

Now, it is time to showcase the kind of journalism that is emerging in hopes that it can foster even more ideas and experimentation.

This video shows how five TV news operations—in five very different markets—are meeting the challenge of leading serious public conversations on important issues and making it good television. They have done so without gutting their newscasts and without jeopardizing their ratings.

All these stations have been experimenting with civic journalism for several years. Many began with issues-based election coverage. Most have worked in multi-media partnerships. None of these stations has compromised quality or journalistic integrity. Rather, they have strengthened their product and their bond with the community.

How did they do it?

We have asked the leaders of these newsrooms to share lists of practical tips for any TV newsroom interested in establishing civic values. This booklet is the result. Though civic journalism can be a complex enterprise, here are some simple do's and don'ts that can guide your efforts.

Jan Schaffer

Executive Director

Pew Center for Civic Journalism

Choosing What Stories to Do

I want (my reporters) to tell me what's going on. 'Here's what so-and-so told me. Here's what they're talking about down at the coffee shop. Here's what I heard down at the courthouse.' That's the kind of stuff people want to know.

Mike Smith, WCTV, Tallahassee

- Let your reporters drive news decisions. They are the ones who are out in the community, hearing what people say. If you copy the front page of the paper and get the daybook out of the AP and that becomes your day, what you're basically saying is someone else is smarter than you are.
- Seek stories that reflect the concerns, issues and voices of the viewer.
- Scrutinize your choices. Ask yourself: why is this a story? Is it because, like Mt. Everest, it's there? Who is affected by it? Is it of interest to your viewers?
- Forget the formulas. Instead of thinking you have three hard-news stories and you need something soft, discuss a story on its merits and relevance to the community.
- Start in a different place. Instead of asking, "What is happening today?" ask, "How can we help today? How can we get people involved? What do people really want to know?"
- Cover breaking news, too. That is still our primary job. But choose related stories to show that breaking news does not happen in a vacuum.

Approaching the Stories You Choose

It's real easy to say something and that something goes on the air. And then somebody calls and says, 'You hurt me. Because of that you put me out of business' . . . [or] 'You showed a picture of my child.' And you know, it is just a story to us. But it is a life-changing experience to someone else.

John Miller, WFAA-TV, Dallas

- Focus on the people who are impacted by the story. Why is it important to them? How are they impacted? How can other viewers get involved?
- Stay pragmatic; take small steps, not giant leaps. Viewers may feel overwhelmed by the problem of homelessness but they can respond to the story of one homeless person. Civic-mindedness doesn't always mean saving thousands of people; it can mean helping one.
- Rather than tell a story through prominent officials, find an individual who cares deeply about the issue and talk to that person.
- Give citizens more direct access to policy makers. Let them ask the questions sometimes.
- Present citizen conversations in all their complexity. Dig deep to find out not just what people are saying publicly but what they say privately. They will tell you — if they know you won't sensationalize or try to polarize their views.
- Get the facts right, but also have a respectful understanding of the power that you wield. Report stories responsibly and sensitively.

Building a Civic Newsroom Culture

Step One: Hiring the Right People

I hire reporters to do one simple thing: To generate stories. It is important that they're able to walk and talk at the same time. It is important that they don't repel people with their looks or their voice, but their main job is to generate stories. If they can do that, then they're going to be successful here.

—Mike Smith, WCTV, Tallahassee

THINGS TO LOOK FOR:

- A reporter who is open-minded, not frozen into a cookie-cutter formula for doing television news stories.
- Someone who is happy being a reporter, not trying to become an anchor; someone who can be part of a team and is not trying to be a star.
- A solid journalist first, not necessarily a personality.
- A good listener.
- Someone who is truly curious about people and events and sincerely interested in learning about the community.

RED FLAGS:

- The resume tape is full of “me” stories, where the reporter is in the stories more than the people the story is about.
- The stories are devoid of real people, full of suits and ties and not the citizens impacted by the story.
- The stories are oversimplified; presented as “on the one hand; then on the other.”
- The stories are full of pat phrases and pat formulations.

Step Two: Instilling Civic Values

Just as we need to create a conversation with our audiences, I think we need to create a conversation [about values] in the newsroom. The news director can't do it (himself) . . . So I guess my strategy would be to go back and try to start a conversation and it doesn't necessarily have to be a newsroom-wide conversation to begin with . . . but you need a core group of people who are having a discussion.

—Dan Rosenheim, KRON-TV, San Francisco

- Talk a lot. Talk informally. Answer questions that pop up. Compliment work that connects with the community. Float ideas before they're fully formed. Suggest ways to approach a story from a new angle.
- Talk formally. Meet regularly — some stations do it monthly — to remind yourselves of your values and goals. Ask what you could be doing differently or doing better; what new things you can try to stay community oriented.
- Structure regular meetings to create a more civic news operation. WFAA holds its morning story meeting right in the middle of the newsroom so that anyone can pull up a chair and join in. That allows the most junior staff members to offer suggestions. (The station has found discussion can get so lively, editors must hold a separate meeting earlier to work out logistics of the noon newscast).
- Involve the staff early in the decision to take a civic approach to stories. You can't dictate this approach from on high and expect to have immediate staff buy-in.

Explain to them what it is and what you're trying to do. Chances are the staff will welcome the opportunity to do more substantive stories.

- Show by example. Find a partner inside the station who shares your values and produce a piece based on those values. When the staff sees the results, and a positive community response, more will buy in.
- Critique yourself. Constantly measure what you do against what you are trying to do. Let reporters know, verbally and in writing, how they can improve, what voices they're missing and how they can get those voices into a story.
- Take another crack at it. When a reporter misses an opportunity to get citizen voices in a story and there is still time before broadcast, have him do the extra reporting to add that dimension.
- Share feedback. Make sure the whole staff knows how viewers feel about their stories.
- Persist, persist, persist. Don't get discouraged if change is slow. You can't change 20 years of television news habits overnight. Some days it may seem that not a single story reflects the values you're striving for.

I don't label stories as 'civic journalism.' I don't want (reporters) doing stories that way because it's a civic journalism story; I want them doing it that way because that's what we do. I want them to look at every story that way.

—Mike Smith, WCTV, Tallahassee

Connecting with Individual Citizens

We have to be able to say to our viewers and our readers and our listeners, 'We realize solutions exist.' It may not be our role as reporters to suggest them ourselves, but . . . I think that, as civic journalists, our role is to acknowledge that they're there and to make it part of our coverage.

— Neil Heinen, WISC-TV, Madison

- Listen to the phone calls you get; read e-mail and letters from listeners. KRON has a full-time staff member who transcribes and distributes viewer feedback. A portion of each 6 p.m. newscast is dedicated to airing the most thoughtful or provocative viewer comments.
- Use live viewer call-ins:
 - In regular newscasts.
 - In separate information programs.
 - To connect viewers with experts and public officials.
 - To connect viewers with station officials and staff.
- Solicit questions for candidate debates from ordinary voters.
 - Moderators can ask the voters' questions.
 - The voters, themselves, can ask the questions live or via tape. Tape allows an extra measure of control over time and content.
- Use polls or focus groups to enrich your framing of an issue and to invite public input. They can also provide a ready-made database of citizens to turn to for follow-up interviews.
- Keep doing good ol' man-in-the-street interviews. These work especially well to help illustrate poll findings. A man on the street responding a certain way on an issue can represent all those who respond that way in your poll.

Connecting with Citizens in Groups

We worried a lot about whether (our town meetings) would become an event and, yes, they do, but that's a good thing because it gets people to come because they want to be on TV and they sense the excitement. The lights and the cameras make them feel important . . . We've done it without that and the electricity, the edge, and the attendance is so much greater when you have the lights and the cameras.

—**John Miller, WFAA-TV, Dallas**

- Use focus groups to help elicit viewer feedback and story ideas. WGME-TV held a focus group to discuss the issue of youth violence and then covered the meeting as a way to do stories about the issue.
- Convene “town hall” meetings or citizen forums — large gatherings in a studio or at a remote location — to help engage viewers in a broader community dialogue about an important issue. Citizen questions and comments should drive the agenda.
- Stage mock juries to put “on trial” important issues. Evidence and arguments are presented by experts and officials and the citizen audience is asked to reach a verdict.

As soon as we did our series and our show, we were flooded with phone calls, e-mail and mail just with people saying, 'Yeah, you guys are right, you are on to something.' And, 'This is what I think and this is how I think we can solve the problem.' And, 'This is where I think the problem started.' And that was very rewarding.

—**Jim O'Rourke, WGME-TV, Portland**

Broadcasting a Town Meeting, Citizens Forum or Mock Trial

It's very affirming when you go to a town meeting . . . You have people come up to you . . . and they say, 'I'm just so proud of you all. I am just so happy that you are doing this.'

—John Miller, WFAA-TV, Dallas

- Have a topic and a structure in place well in advance.
- Select a space that can accommodate the size crowd you want to host and can be adequately lit. The symbolism of the setting can add interest, too. For example, WISC-TV broadcast a town meeting on jobs from a shut-down factory building and a mock trial from a court house.
- Plan, in remote locations, to have a full remote production truck with a switcher, cameras, lighting and audio equipment. For live broadcasts from a remote location, you must also have a satellite truck.
- Use a minimum of four cameras — three stationary and one roving camera.
- Use two moderators, roaming the audience. One can hold the mike while the other seeks out the next speaker.
- Have on hand other technical staff: a floor director and two assistants to handle time cues for moderators and participants, a producer, a director, a lighting specialist, an audio technician, a truck operator and an engineer.
- Use pre-taped segments to break up the discussion and move from subject to subject within a topic. Set up monitors so that audience members can watch the segments.
- Broadcast meetings live or shot to tape to be aired later, either in their entirety or with editing.

Recruiting Citizens for a Large Meeting

Some came because they thought it was a good exercise in democracy. Some came because they thought it was cool.

— *Neil Heinen, WISC-TV, Madison*

- Promote your meeting on the air well in advance so people with an interest in the topic can plan to attend. One way to do that is to announce that the meeting is coming up during a news story on a related topic.
- Cross-promote the meeting with other media partners. All the partners can announce the meeting as part of their coverage of the topic. Partners in community groups can help recruit an audience through flyers or word of mouth.
- Beware of special interest participants. Advance promotion can attract people with an agenda and some speakers may attempt to take over the meeting.
- Strong moderators are important in keeping the discussion open and focused. They may simply have to walk away with the microphone.
- Ask citizens to pre-register. This can help you ensure sufficient space and resource materials, if you're handing them out. WISC-TV has used a clip-and-mail coupon in the newspaper and an 800 number to pre-register people, then put those who pre-registered on a mailing list.

Taking on Projects

We have always liked projects and we always try to have something going because it is an upper for the staff. It gives them something to coalesce around. It gets some people who may normally get stuck in an edit booth ... a chance to do something else. It is fun and we just like to do it.

—John Miller, WFAA-TV, Dallas

- Pick a topic that everyone is talking about — something very important to viewers and something that has already generated a lot of interest.
- Include a lot of elements — a long-term series of stories, specials, a town meeting, issues shows with experts whom viewers can question directly, complimentary resource guides. This sets it apart and gives viewers more opportunities and more ways to get involved.
- Make connections between the project and other parts of your regular coverage. A breaking story about juvenile crime can relate to an ongoing project about education. Viewers make those kinds of connections in their own lives. We gain credibility if we can do it too.
- Work with your promotions department to give the project high visibility. Promotions departments love long-term projects because they know the spots will work for more than one day.
- Work with other media partners and partners in the community. Set aside competitive concerns and reap the benefits of shared information and cross promotion.

Working with Partners

We have a choice. You can sit up here and sort of look down on the community . . . or you can get down there with the viewers and the readers and the citizens and say, 'Look, we live in this community, we have a stake in this community, whether we are a business or individuals.'

—Tom Bier, WISC-TV, Madison

- Look for issues of common concern. Elections, schools, diversity, transportation, all offer opportunities to work with other media to engage the community and create interest across the board.
- Share polling costs and data with partners. It can help cut your costs and expand your resources. Some stations split production costs for joint specials.
- Pick one person to coordinate the project and keep everybody up to speed. WGME's newspaper partner has a full-time community coordinator to oversee joint projects and keep track of dates, venues and other details.
- Meet frequently. Talk often. Constant contact prevents misunderstandings and opens up new possibilities. Take advantage of the synergy of minds as well as media.
- Change partners if it's not working. If a participant isn't doing its share, find a station or newspaper that will. They're out there.
- Build in flexibility to partner with different folks for different purposes. WISC-TV has four partners for state-wide projects and one for local schools coverage.

Measuring Impact

If people don't watch, if your ratings drop, all this is academic.

—*John Miller, WFAA-TV, Dallas*

We'd like to close with glowing reports of ratings skyrocketing after stations began using the values and tools of civic journalism in their newscasts.

The truth is, that happens only episodically.

For instance, WISC-TV produced a one-hour special on land use as part of its ongoing "We the People" project. Though the topic was weighty, the show won its 7 p.m. weeknight time slot in the July 1997 ratings period. And it came in second in its time slot in June 1998.

Mainly, though, the news directors interviewed for this toolbox have seen no sustained ratings gain for any particular story or project.

And yet, every one of them is convinced that civic journalism is good business.

The reason seems to be a matter of qualitative response, rather than quantitative.

WFAA's John Miller speaks about it in terms of building brand loyalty.

"To get people to watch me," he says, "I need viewers to like us better. One way I can make viewers like my station better is to present my station as more connected, more involved, more interested in them. I interact with them more. They see I care. That's a gold mine for getting viewers to like me more."

That sort of sustained, loyal viewer base is also what Tom Bier of WISC-TV points to as the edge the station gets from its civic journalism projects.

“It raises our image,” says Bier, “to where people will turn to you because they know you’ll be doing this kind of journalism. Our image is that we’re a serious news organization that’s not afraid to talk about serious issues. Regular citizens know that’s unusual and they appreciate that we’ve done it and it will drive people to view us.”

Dan Rosenheim tried an experiment at KRON-TV in San Francisco during sweeps week in February 1998. He ran a week-long series of 10-minute pieces on the subject of race relations in his 6 p.m. newscast.

His ratings did fine. The newscast averaged a seven through the week — about what he would normally expect. But he made his larger point. “If this is worthwhile, if this is a topic that is of current concern to viewers, if this is something that we ought to be doing in television news, we ought to be able to do it successfully.”

And it was successful, says Rosenheim, not just because he held on to viewers. “The qualitative response was excellent. There was an outpouring of letters and e-mails expressing happiness that this conversation was taking place.

“We were able to take that and encourage people to engage in a conversation with us and with themselves . . . Our website set up a conference for a conversation about race and that conference has now had thousands of people write in to express their views and continue the conversation.”

Isn't that what we're here for?

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From Maine to California, local television stations are applying the tools of civic journalism to reconnect with their viewers via powerful programming.

These examples show how five stations use combinations of polling, partnerships, community listening and civic reporting to create more people-oriented reporting.

- WFAA-TV, Dallas, spotlights community problems with special projects and family issues with its "Family First" reports.
- WISC-TV, Madison, uses "We the People," a statewide newspaper and television partnership, to explore education, land use and other issues.
- In Maine, Portland's WGME-TV reacted to school shootings across the nation by opening a community dialogue on how children learn respect and avoid violence.
- KRON-TV, San Francisco, tackled race relations in its sweeps news series "About Race."
- In Tallahassee, WCTV works at building civic values in its daily coverage.

Why these news people chose civic journalism — and what happened when they did — is the heart of "Tuning in."

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Producer: Ted O'Brien

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