

Q & A With Davis Merritt

The following are edited excerpts from an Oct. 6 interview conducted by Jack Breslin.

Silha Bulletin (SB): When did you first hear of this term, “Civic journalism,” can you remember?

Davis Merritt (DM): Well, I call it public journalism. . . And I heard it when Jay Rosen and I made it up and that was about ‘92, I guess. We’d been talking about this idea for some time and realized that we needed to give it a name though we didn’t want to give it a name, but needed to have something to call it because it’s about as much about public life as it is about journalism, we decided to call it public journalism.

SB: How would you define public journalism?

DM: I’m struggling here because I couldn’t give you a two-sentence paragraph definition of journalism itself. Public journalism is journalism that seeks to help public life go better by engaging people in it at a deeper level. You go far beyond that, but that’s the nut of it.

SB: Now, do you see public journalism lines between news and business or. . .

DM: Oh, no!

SB: How so?

DM: Well, how do you see it as blurring? I mean, it doesn’t even arise. I’m a journalist. That question doesn’t even arise.

SB: And so, you would not see any conflicts between trying to increase circulation through this or anything? It’s purely from a civic, public point of view?

DM: Well, all journalism aims at increasing circulation. Investigative journalism has one of its aims increasing circulation, right? Newspapers have to sell in order to be read. But that’s not what drives this. What drives this is the dilemma in public life and the fact that journalism is in trouble and public journalism is our response to those dilemmas.

SB: How would you say journalism is in trouble?

DM: Take a look at any survey you want. Penetration is going down, circulation on almost every newspaper in the country is going down. Any surveys you see of credibility of journalists, any surveys you see about believability, every measure I’ve ever seen in the last 10 years (shows) journalism has been in sharp decline.

I believe that one of the reasons journalism is in trouble in things like credibility and authority is that the way we have told the news in the last 10 or 15 years has relentlessly sent the message to people, “This isn’t about you and your

concerns, this is something that is going on that you are helpless to affect, the political system, the things going on in public life are far beyond you, you're not involved, you're spectators, if not victims." And you know, that's not the only way to do good journalism. There are ways to do good journalism that don't create that gap, and that's what we're trying to figure out how to do.

SB: How is public journalism different from good old-fashioned reporting by journalists who have routinely questioned people about issues and their priorities?

DM: Oh, in that sense, it may not be any different, but I don't know many journalists who have done much listening to people. If they do, it is not reflected in what I see in newspapers. . . . Conflict is the heart of democracy, and we do need to address it, but we write about conflict, for instance, in very narrow ways that exclude most people from the discussion. We write about it using experts and absolutists on quote, the two sides, unquote, instead of also including that vast middle ground where most people's views are held. I mean, have you read E.J. Dionne, Jr.'s book, *Why Americans Hate Politics*? Well, he makes the point very well about politicians framing issues at the extremes for their own purposes, and that this is the major reason, he says, that Americans are disenchanted and cynical about politics is because they're not part of the discussion. They don't hear their views in the discussions, and you know, the question that I have is, where do most of these Americans who hate politics learn most of what they know about politics? From journalists. Because we frame stories in exactly the same way. And it's that kind of habit of mind that we're seeking to change. We're not saying that a lot of the journalism that is going on and has been going on is bad. There's a lot of quite good journalism that is going on. But it's insufficient, a lot of it, in that it, rather than engaging people, in the journalism and in the process of public life, it repels them. Well, it doesn't have to be that way. By changing some of the habits and some of the conventions that we have fallen into such as the way we deal with conflict, I believe that we can do good journalism, continue to do good journalism, but also draw people back into both journalism and public life. I can't prove this, but again, this is our response to the twin dilemmas of public life and journalism. If somebody's got a better response, let's hear it. But this is our response.

SB: Now you say one of the weaknesses of journalism today is that journalists don't listen. What are some of the other weaknesses?

DM: This kind of adversarial attitude toward all institutions, including the institution of the public. Journalism is in a defensive crouch all the time and there

are some reasons for that, and I understand it. I've been a working newspaperman for 42 years and I know about all there is to know about it, from that point of view. But, you know, we need a healthy skepticism. My observation is that what used to be healthy skepticism has just turned into just this snarly adversarialism about everything. And I think that's reflected in our newspapers, and I think that's one of the habits we have to recognize. Another one is we have to recognize that we frame stories — that's what journalists do. And that the way we frame stories needs to be a more reflective and thoughtful process, when it can be, than the way we do it now. That's another habit we need to develop. We need to understand the distinction between objectivity and detachment and understand that journalistic objectivity is a good thing if it exists, and I contend it does, that there is such a thing as journalistic objectivity, having it meaning fairness and balance and accuracy and a clear, cool-headed look at the facts. Journalistic objectivity is an important thing and we must maintain it, but detachment, this sort of "we're not part of anything notion, uh, doesn't work well for us." It separates us from our sources, it separates us from our audiences, it separates us from the whole rest of the world. It's mandatory that journalists care about the implications of their work, and so often when we're doing stories, the way the frames we choose to do stories are frames that say "you're not involved here." Well, whether we like it or not, or whether we're comfortable with it or not, the way we do journalism affects the way public life goes. That is inescapable. What we choose to put in the story, what we choose to leave out, how we choose to emphasize things within a story, all of those things affect what happens. And so, we are kidding ourselves if we say, "Oh, no, we're just good observers, sitting off here on a mountain and neither responsible nor accountable for the outcome of what we do." That's an unethical and immoral position. There's a difference between journalistic objectivity and detachment. Definitely.

SB: If you met a reader who knew nothing about this concept and was complaining to you about the lack of civic pride, or apathy, how would you tell him that this might benefit his community and perhaps get some of that civic pride back?

DM: Well, because, and I don't know whether civic pride is the right word, I assume that if people are more engaged in civic life, they would have some pride about it. Here's the thing. Journalism is totally dependent upon democracy working well. And democracy is totally dependent upon journalism. There's a total interdependence there. And we as journalists have a stake, whether we like it or not, and whether democracy works well and whether people are engaged. If

people are not engaged in public life, they have no need for journalists. Because what we do is about public life for the most part. And if people continue to withdraw from concerns about public life and engagement in public life, our downward trends are going to continue and accelerate. We have a vested interest as journalists as well as democratic citizens and people being engaged in public life. And I make no apology for the notion that democracy works best when people are fully engaged in it. That's sort of the essence of the idea.