Conversation and Credibility:

Broadening Journalism Criticism through Public Engagement

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Abstract

As technology and public expectations have expanded journalism into a practice shared by many, criticism remains the province of a relative few. Bloggers have added their voices to professionals' self-criticism, and social media have vastly expanded opportunities for dialogic exchanges. Building on earlier research, this article seeks to expand journalism criticism by applying the dominant public relations model of two-way symmetrical communication. This includes collaboration, compromise, listening, and a desire to balance power. These attributes can enable journalists to be transparent, accountable, and autonomous if they publicly replicate the thoughtfulness of conversations they have long had among themselves.

Key words

accountability

credibility

journalism criticism

two-way symmetry

dialogue

Introduction

“In a traditional environment, journalists simply ask readers or viewers to trust them,” Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos (2007) wrote. Reporters want audiences to believe that they are accurate, thorough, and impartial, which “is a lot to ask” (p. 271). This highlights a paradox: In an era of ubiquitous information, public confidence in journalism has plunged to historic lows. The Pew Research Center for People and the Press’ most recent biennial survey revealed that only 29% of Americans think journalists are accurate, and just 21% believe they are willing to admit mistakes (Pew Research Center, 2009, p. 2). Still, journalists have historically critiqued their work and sought to improve their ethical performance. Such self-examinations have often been vigorous, but most have been in-house. Journalism’s critical conversations have been accurately characterized, from a slightly different perspective, as “Talking to/About Itself” (Craft, 2009). Criticism continues to flourish beyond public view—in newsrooms, workshops, conventions, trade magazines, and media reviews. The target audience of such scrutiny is journalists themselves (Bunton, 2000, p. 69), underscoring the gap between news media and the public. This is problematic because even sophisticated ethical analyses and moral justifications represent wasted opportunities when they are not communicated to news consumers. Marzolf (1995) argued that journalists “are missing a chance to frame the issues and explain their standards and practices to a public that finds them arrogant and distant” (p. 56). Many journalists defend this distance, arguing that it preserves their autonomy and ability to act as independent watchdogs (Bukro, 2010; Haas & Steiner, 2002, pp. 325-326). However, the disconnect is deepened by episodic attention to journalism ethics in response to crises involving plagiarism, inaccuracy, bias, or insensitivity (Haas, 2006, pp. 351-352; Bertrand, 2000, p. 149).

Meanwhile, social networking media are altering the landscape. Reporters can use these instantaneous, interactive forms of communication to transmit continual updates to self-selected followers. These technologies also allow virtually anyone be a real-time media critic, expanding earlier opportunities like blogs and websites (Cooper, 2006; Ettema, 2009; Harper, 2009). Some journalists and news organizations are using these new tools dialogically to build communities, better connect with audiences, and bring discussions about ethics into the public arena (Schulte, 2009; Gleason, 2009). Social media promise to help journalists explain themselves—to practice “credibility through conversation” (Nieman, 2009, p. 35) and stem the erosion of trust (Skoler, 2009). Journalists can show, not just tell, how their work is reliable and why their practices are ethical.

This article situates these recent developments within the established context of journalists’ self-critical conversations. The aim is to improve criticism of the news media by broadening it into a process of public engagement. This work addresses Marzolf’s challenge to bring journalism criticism out of the cloister and into the public arena. Specifically, this research seeks to expand criticism by applying an old idea to the contemporary media environment. In public relations, two-way symmetrical communication has long been the dominant paradigm (Gower, 2006). Public relations is often perceived in conflict with journalism, but scholars have explored similarities in terms of accountability (Ettema & Glasser, 1987; Nemeth & Sanders, 1999; Nemeth, 2007). Because technology has deprived news organizations of their information monopoly while successive crises have drained their credibility, journalists can no longer merely assert that the public should trust them to address ethics intramurally. Guided by the concept of two-way symmetrical communication, journalists could engage the public in transparent, balanced dialogue and show they are willing to consider changes in practice. If journalists are committed to the process, it would enable them to build trust and demonstrate accountability while retaining their autonomy.

This article begins by reviewing scholarship about media criticism, journalistic accountability, and ways to foster dialogue between journalists and audiences. To ground this article's conceptual goals in concrete reality, it then uses three crises to illustrate different forms of public engagement about journalism ethics: the scandal involving *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair, the discredited CBS News story on George W. Bush's National Guard service, and coverage of Hurricane Katrina. In each crisis, the process of journalism criticism took different forms. This article concludes by suggesting specific ways that journalists can replicate with the public the depth and thoughtfulness of conversations they have long had among themselves.

Literature Review

This section begins with scholarship about journalism criticism, accountability, and credibility. Much of this work has diagnosed shortcomings. It then examines research that recommends solutions such as using eloquence to engage with audiences or applying public relations theory to journalistic accountability. This section concludes by presenting scholarship about three recent journalistic crises, focusing on the process of criticism and how journalists communicated with the public—or failed to.

Haas (2006) distinguished between news media criticism and self-criticism, stipulating that the former is external and the latter reflexive. Self-criticism “would require journalists to reflect on how their own and others’ reporting is shaped, if not constrained, by the commercial interests of news media owners and advertisers, organizational pressures and work routines, and various news gathering and reporting conventions” (p. 351). This would include responsiveness to public needs and a willingness to address values like objectivity. This is rare, Haas argued, because many journalists fear alienating employers. He suggested public venues for self-criticism and advocated moving it beyond seeking to persuade the public that journalists “are capable of self-improvement” and do not need regulation (p. 352). Fengler (2003) took a functional approach, defining self-criticism as “monitoring, investigating, and analyzing developments in journalism and the media business” as well as an ability to “expose mistakes, point toward potentially harmful developments, and encourage attention to ethics among journalists” (p. 818). Like Haas, Fengler sought to broaden self-criticism, arguing that “critics might need to be reminded at times that their prime duty should be service to the public, and not their peers” (p. 827). Bunton (2000) contextualized journalism self-criticism in a broader frame of self-regulation, which included explanation, criticism, and reform—introducing “new developments and insights” (p. 73). Wyatt’s (2007) theoretical perspective is valuable for its discursive element and characterization of journalism as a social practice confronted with challenge and change. She offered a normative guide for criticism to reinforce the relationship between journalists and the public, and she argued that self-regulation remains integral to the process.

A related scholarly topic is how journalists are held accountable. Craft (2009) described how journalists' internal watchdogging sometimes takes the form of "covert" self-critique in which individual practitioners appear to comply with competitive pressures while quietly upholding vocational standards. D'Angelo and Esser (2009) recommended metacoverage—coverage about news coverage—as an accountability system, but Harper (2009) observed that the number of media critics writing for mainstream and alternative outlets is dwindling. Self-scrutiny is limited by its reach, and non-journalists demand to be included. As Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos (2007) noted, journalists have lost "controlled access to the means of distributing information to large numbers of people" and can no longer take public trust for granted (p. 273). Instead, "oversight of professional behavior has become a team sport, and journalists no longer control who gets to play"; there is "a virtually infinite number of participants" (p. 274).

Hayes (2008) was frustrated by what he perceived as resistance to external scrutiny, saying "the mainstream press in the United States has swatted away its critics ... as illegitimate interlopers in its relationship with its audience" (p. 1). Hayes offered specific criteria for accountability, such as whether a critique led to content changes, prompted a reform of standards or practices, or fostered a public debate (2008, p. 4). Pritchard (2000) was equally detailed. He defined accountability as "the process by which media organizations may be expected or obliged to render ... an explanation or justification of a media worker's conduct" to a constituent—"an individual, group, or organization whose good will is important to the media organization" (p. 2). Similarly, Nemeth and Sanders (1999) portrayed accountability as "an obligation to explain or justify behavior to such external constituencies as readers or sources" (p. 32).

Some scholars have found that accountability can clash with journalistic values. Haas and Steiner (2002) implied that autonomy might keep news organizations from transparently explaining their actions (pp. 325-326), and even traditional accountability measures have met with resistance. Starck and Eisele (1999) discovered that newspaper ombudsmen engendered internal resentment but boosted credibility, while Haiman (2000) argued that the more corrections a news organization runs, the more it is believed. However:

> There also is a difference between what the public thinks about corrections and what many journalists think about them. Many journalists apparently believe that since they are writing the ‘first rough draft of history’ and doing it under deadline pressure, it should be expected that some errors, misunderstandings and misinterpretations will occur. ... The public sees it quite another way. ... Seeing as many errors as they do, the public would like to see many more corrections and clarifications. (Haiman, 2000, p. 13)

For some scholars, trust is crucial. Vanacker and Belmas (2009) distinguished between trust and credibility. An individual or a report might be credible, they wrote, but trust is complex, relational, and cumulative. Vanacker and Belmas zeroed in on the attenuated communication between journalists and the public. “The major issue that divides business and journalism in generating trust from audiences/customers is feedback. Feedback must necessarily go both ways” (p. 117). Whereas businesses obtain timely feedback through consumer behavior, this is not always true in journalism, where “the feedback is rarely explicit, so when a news organization makes a mistake, the mistake can cost dearly because there may be no acknowledgement of or response to that mistake" (p. 117).

To bridge the gap, scholars have addressed ways that journalists can engage their audiences. Skoler (2009) discussed how technological innovations have created higher public expectations. These include fundamental realignments in communication patterns. "People expect to share information, not be fed it," he argued. "They expect to be listened to when they have knowledge and raise questions" (p. 39). Skoler urged journalists to acknowledge that they are no longer gatekeepers. Instead, "we need to listen, ask questions, and be genuinely open to what our readers, listeners, and watchers tell us is important" (Skoler, 2009, p. 39).

Glasser and Ettema (2008) recognized the challenges inherent in such dialogue. Understanding "ethics as a process rather than an outcome" (p. 512), they embraced eloquence as a means of improving public explanation. They declared that "the problem of ethics in journalism ... is not the inability of journalists to know right from wrong but their inability to talk articulately and reflectively about it" (p. 512). The authors' characterization might be clarified, as journalists have long spoken "articulately and reflectively"—but primarily among themselves. This stems partly from what Glasser and Ettema diagnosed as a "triumph of autonomy over accountability," which has fostered "a curious ethic of defiance" (p. 528). In turn, this has led to a failure to communicate outwardly, a reluctance to talk to the very audiences journalists aim to serve and upon whose support news organizations depend. Journalists must understand that the public might not share their norms and employ eloquence that "moves the discussion beyond individual self-interest and into the domain of generalizable interests" (Glasser & Ettema, 2008, p. 530).

Similarly, some researchers have sought common ground through public relations theory. They have perceived parallels between strategic communication and journalism criticism. Ettema and Glasser (1987) found that many newspaper ombudsmen felt conflicted. On one hand, they aimed to hold their organizations accountable, but on the other, they assumed a public relations role in attempting to persuade the public that journalists were trustworthy—or at least that they cared (pp. 5-7). Nemeth (2007) observed editors' accountability roles and determined that they were often subordinate to their public relations roles (p. 16). Nemeth and Sanders (1999) applied Grunig and Grunig's (1992) public relations models incorporating "balance (asymmetrical or symmetrical) and the direction of communication (one-way or two-way)" (Nemeth & Sanders, 1999, p. 31). Although they established that most ombudsmen practiced two-way communication, "the ombudsman's position and the nature of how most write their columns means the ombudsman decides who speaks, how they are allowed to speak and how much they are permitted to say" (p. 36).

Meanwhile, public relations has continued to evolve. Gower (2006) reviewed key developments in an effort to move the discipline forward theoretically, and she deemed two-way symmetrical communication the "dominant theoretical paradigm in the field" (2006, p. 177). Gower warned that "when one theory is put forward as the 'excellence' model for the practice," it can "close off other ideas and stultify thinking" (p. 178). She also observed that although practitioners use a mix of approaches at various times, the two-way symmetrical model is noteworthy for its emphasis on speaking and listening, a desire to balance power relationships, and "collaboration, negotiation, and compromise" (p. 178). Grunig offered ways to apply existing models to social media. He noted that "fads are common" (Grunig, 2009, p. 1) and "when new media are introduced communicators tend to use them in the same way that they used the old media" (p. 6). But Grunig argued that social media are well-suited to facilitating the goals of two-way symmetrical communication: listening, learning, sustaining dialogue, cultivating relationships, and being socially responsible (Grunig, 2009, pp. 2, 4).

Finally, numerous scholars have addressed the three crises examined below and considered how journalism criticism played out. McMasters (2004) analyzed the Jayson Blair scandal in immediate and longer terms. The immediate impact was reactive: news organizations began "firing the miscreants, flaying themselves, commissioning inquiries, and publishing pages and pages of findings" (p. 407). Over the longer term, journalists tried to stop "further descent into the credibility cellar" by reviewing and revising policies to verify sourcing and prevent plagiarism (p. 407). For Patterson and Urbanski (2006), the Blair incident illustrated the need for journalists to engage in dialogue. "Perhaps the only way to prevent violations of the public trust ... is for the press to go outside its own offices and invest more trust in the public. ... The public trust is out there. News organizations just need to open their doors" (p. 847).

Much scholarship about the CBS controversy has focused on the involvement of new media because criticism erupted after bloggers questioned the authenticity of documents about George W. Bush's National Guard service. Tomaszeski, Proffitt, and McClung (2009) addressed the incident in their model portraying the interaction of bloggers, the news media, and the public. They argued that "bloggers can serve as an accountability system for mainstream media" and influence the adoption of agendas (p. 76). Hindman (2008) applied ethics theories and codes to journalists' reactions to the CBS scandal. She discovered that the news media identified truth-telling, accountability, independence, and fulfilling obligations as vital principles. Hindman also argued that journalists could have done more to expand the incident into a broader conversation about ethics (p. 107).

Hurricane Katrina coverage has attracted considerable scholarly attention, including research about how journalists and the public interacted. Bowman and Willis (2005) determined that although technology allowed nonprofessionals to share information, news organizations remained committed to gatekeeping. That model would erode, they concluded, predicting that "authority will continue to shift from once-trusted institutions to communities or individuals who have earned credibility through hard-won public discourse" (p. 9). Robinson (2009a) detailed that evolution. She examined the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, whose online news stories expanded to include survivors' individual experiences. "In the process, audiences joined with journalists as authors and reshaped the news narrative" (p. 432), making journalism "a shared production" (p. 445). However, sharing created tension, Robinson also found (2009b). While established journalists portrayed themselves as "hero, witness, and watchdog in order to assert their authority" (p. 808), their amateur counterparts—mainly bloggers and contributors to forums—positioned themselves as "counselors, journal writers, history drafters, meaning-makers, and opinion leaders" (p. 806). They upset the "established hierarchical information structure" (p. 809) and altered expectations for journalism. To improve their vocation, Robinson concluded, professional journalists should pay more attention to amateurs.

Taken together, this scholarship indicates the importance of journalism criticism and the need to include the public. Not fully developed in the literature are ways to reconcile journalistic norms like autonomy and impartiality with modern audiences who might view autonomy as arrogance, impartiality as aloofness, or either one as “a formula for irrelevance” (Gleason, 2009, p. 6). The civic journalism movement has much in common with this work’s topic, especially in its cooperative, collaborative stance. But the movement’s aim was primarily to reflect public priorities in news coverage, not criticism. To illustrate the latter in tangible terms, this article applies Grunig and Grunig’s (1992) models to three recent crises to analyze the process of journalism criticism. There were problems with each process, but they offer insights into how broader journalism criticism can be pursued.

Three Crises, Three Different Forms of Criticism

This section analyzes discussions about journalism ethics arising from the Jayson Blair scandal, the CBS story about George W. Bush’s National Guard service, and coverage of Hurricane Katrina. These “crises of credibility” (Vanacker & Belmas, 2009, p. 118) represent fractures in public confidence in journalism. The goal of this section is not to evaluate news coverage but to analyze journalism criticism. One way to do this is to take advantage of the fact that journalists routinely talk among themselves about ethical decision-making. Journalists’ conversations about these crises were found in the news media; trade journals like *Editor & Publisher* and *Broadcasting & Cable*; journalism reviews like *Columbia Journalism Review* and *American Journalism Review*;

publications like the Society of Professional Journalists' *Quill*; panels and workshops at professional meetings; and forums such as the Poynter Institute. These discussions were analyzed in two ways. First, they were read inductively to allow meaning to emerge from the text itself (Gibbs, 2007). The goal was to identify issues that arose from discussions of each crisis, and this approach yielded the topics examined below. Voices of public critics were often missing from these conversations. However, the purpose of this article is to encourage journalists to open up their self-critical processes, so it is instructive to see how they reacted among themselves to external critics and the extent to which they acknowledged or included them. Second, as noted above, these conversations were analyzed in light of Grunig and Grunig's (1992) models to assess the balance and flow of communication. Each took a different form, yielding a variety of insights into journalism criticism.

The New York Times and Jayson Blair: Self-Directed Criticism

Jayson Blair, a 27-year-old reporter for *The New York Times*, was caught plagiarizing in 2003 when a media critic noted that a Blair story strongly resembled an article in a Texas newspaper. After Blair resigned, *Times* staffers launched an investigation that uncovered plagiarism and fabrication in dozens of stories. The paper published a 14,000-word exposé of Blair's misdeeds, including a story-by-story correction of the record. The lead paragraph called the incident "a profound betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper" (Barry, Barstow, Glater, Liptab, & Steinberg, 2003, p. 1). Public communication was invited via a note to the public stating, "The Times is asking readers to report any additional falsehoods in Mr. Blair's work; the e-mail address is retrace@nytimes.com" (p. 1). Ultimately, the *Times*'s top two editors also resigned, and the newspaper created an ombudsman position—which it called a public editor—to write occasional columns about the paper's performance.

The scandal quickly became a subject of discussion among journalists. For many, the incident raised questions of accuracy, transparency, and public confidence. At an American Press Institute gathering two months later, several editors reiterated the need for formal corrections. "Correcting mistakes is the only way the archive gets fixed" so others do not repeat the error, said Byron Calame of *The Wall Street Journal* ("For participants, nothing routine about revisiting ethics," para. 12). Some editors wondered whether news organizations needed internal affairs divisions like those that investigate wrongdoing in police departments, but others disagreed, saying that newsrooms already have internal systems to ensure quality. Separately, another editor concluded that the Blair incident had taught several lessons. "The upshot has been a renewal of healthy skepticism about our work and an attention to details and procedures," said Margaret Wolf Freivogel of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. "Many organizations have re-examined their policies on use of confidential sources and have instituted formal guidelines where a patchwork of customs and common practices used to prevail" (Wolf Freivogel, 2004, p. 571). Other journalists asked if naming an ombudsman was sufficient. If the *Times* "expects the public editor to absorb and deflect all criticism, the system will break down," warned *Orlando Sentinel* Public Editor Manning Pynn. "The public editor can serve as a liaison between readers and the journalists whose work has puzzled or offended them. But a public editor can't hope unilaterally to address all complaints" ("Ombudsmen weigh in on changes," para. 20).

Peter Bhatia, president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, acknowledged the damage to credibility. As a solution, he prescribed transparency:

> Please consider this an endorsement of ... opening up, via public editors, or editor columns, or bringing readers into the newsroom. Whatever it takes, it is time for all of us to embrace this idea. It does not ask us to cede our decision-making responsibilities or our news judgment to outsiders. Our readers look to us to make these kinds of judgments; we just need to help them understand how we make them. (Bhatia, 2003, para. 5)

CBS and 60 Minutes: External Critics Spark an Internal Investigation

In September 2004, CBS's *60 Minutes Wednesday* aired a story about then-Lieutenant George W. Bush's 1970s service in the Texas Air National Guard. The story relied on documents purporting to show that among other things, Bush had ignored orders to take a flight physical. Literally overnight, numerous bloggers attacked the documents, claiming that they appeared to have been composed on a computer, not a typewriter. Because *60 Minutes Wednesday* staffers did not have original documents, they could not prove their authenticity. The network hired a team of lawyers to investigate.[1] They produced a 224-page report concluding that the story was inadequately verified and the journalists involved were overly driven by competition (Thornburg & Boccardi, 2005, pp. 221-222). A producer was fired, three other staffers were asked to resign, and longtime CBS anchor Dan Rather left several months later. The panel recommended that the network appoint a senior executive to review investigative work. Subsequently, playing off its trademark logo, CBS News created a "Public Eye" blog as "an unprecedented effort to bring the viewing public into the news-making process. ... We will be communicating continually with our audience to explain what we are doing and to hear what they think of our efforts ... for improvement" (Meyer, 2005, para. 8). The blog's audience was explicitly public, not just "insiders and professional journalists" (para. 10).

In the midst of a contentious presidential campaign, the CBS story attracted enormous public attention. Most significant for analyzing journalism criticism was the role of bloggers. CBS seemed taken by surprise; as the investigative report noted, "the strong sense was that the attacks were driven by partisans and competitors, and thus were not valid" (Thornburg & Boccardi, 2005, p. 222). Many journalists expressed similar feelings. National Public Radio's *On The Media* program called the controversy "a focal point for rage against the liberal media machine" ("Re: The Longest Sixty Minutes"), while *Columbia Journalism Review* observed that "CBS's critics are guilty of many of the very same sins" and said "the reviled MSM often followed the bloggers' lead" by failing to verify assertions or contextualize the affair (Pein, 2005, p. 32). An Associated Press writer asked, "After a panel ... said it couldn't prove political bias and conservatives roundly rejected that, can peace ever break out between the network and its outside critics?" (Bauder, 2005, para. 5).

Others, however, believed that the incident taught valuable lessons, especially about balancing competition with verification. "Competition is the greatest virtue of capitalism, and, on occasion, its greatest vice," said Roy Peter Clark of the Poynter Institute. "I'm not sure if I were in Dan Rather's chair that I could have held this story. But he should have" (Poynter Institute, 2004, para. 21). *Washington Post* writer Howard Kurtz noted the professional context:

> Hard-charging reporters, by their nature, push to get stories on the air or into print, sometimes against the reservations of their superiors. They are trained to see patterns, connect the dots, nail down the case against the politician or businessman in their sights. No one wins fame, fortune, and journalism prizes by sitting on an explosive report. (Kurtz, 2005, p. C1)

A *Forbes* reporter pressed the point even further, arguing that "whether media insiders want to admit it or not, if all reporting was [sic] held to the courtroom-high standards laid out by the results of the investigation, they might have to scrap the news altogether" (Ackman, 2005, para. 3).

Fired producer Mary Mapes vividly illustrated tensions between accountability and autonomy when she described the network's reaction as "an unconditional surrender to public opinion" (Mapes, 2005, pp. 311-312). She also recounted an exchange with a CBS public relations executive, who asked for her help in addressing the memos' authenticity. Mapes wrote: "I had done my job. Now it seemed I was being given responsibility for failing to craft an effective PR defense on behalf of my story" (p. 205).

Hurricane Katrina: Many Voices, Unclear Outcome

In August 2005 Hurricane Katrina devastated the gulf coast, killing more than 1,000 people and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. Numerous cities and towns were devastated, and most of New Orleans was submerged. As news crews scrambled to cover the developing story, inaccuracies appeared in their reports, including rumors of widespread murders, bodies stacked in freezers, and roving gangs of rapists. To some observers, portrayals of an apocalyptic city sinking into lawlessness reflected journalistic insensitivity or overt racial stereotyping in which African-Americans were labeled as looters while whites were not (Dyson, 2006). Another contested label was “refugee,” which some felt disparaged already-marginalized storm victims by implicitly comparing them to non-Americans fleeing famine or warfare. Katrina differed from the Blair and CBS controversies because it involved scores of news organizations, not just one, and broad journalistic practices, not just a single plagiarist or questionable story. Like the earlier incidents, storm coverage drew enormous public interest.

Katrina prompted discussions about several aspects of ethics, including accuracy, stance, and labeling. Journalists and public critics voiced disappointment about the rampant reporting of rumors. “It’s unfortunate we saw these kinds of stories saying crime had taken place on a massive scale when that wasn’t the case,” Orleans Parish District Attorney Eddie Jordan was quoted as saying. “It’s not consistent with the highest standards of journalism” (Thevenot & Russell, 2005, para. 12). Many in the news media replied that they had done the best they could under the circumstances. David Cohen of WWL-AM in New Orleans spoke of “journalists without homes, their kids without schools, their spouses without jobs, who ‘took seriously their obligation to stay on the air’” (Eggerton, 2006, para. 7). The *Times-Picayune* addressed such criticism by debunking myths it had reported and explaining in detail how casualty counts had grown out of proportion (Thevenot & Russell, 2005).

Katrina also called into question a canon of journalism: neutral stance. “The storm seemed to free TV reporters from their customary role as detached observers, letting them show their feelings and act like human beings without fear of compromising their journalistic integrity,” wrote Deborah Potter of the broadcast training center NewsLab (Potter, 2005, p. 88). *American Journalism Review* critic Rachel Smolkin wondered, “Is one of our profession's most basic tenets—that journalists shouldn't intervene—needlessly strident, making reporters seem inhuman?" (2005/2006, p. 40). She quoted Paul McMasters of the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center, who said, "Journalists step back from the fray to serve humanity on a different level. ... Yet journalists have been largely incapable of making that point to the American people" (Smolkin, 2005/2006, p. 43). In her blog, former editor Geneva Overholser noted that when reporters expressed outrage at public officials in the wake of the storm, "Readers and viewers loved it. ... Coverage driven by grief and hope is exactly *not* what objectivity has been. The commitment to being dispassionate often felt to consumers like a lack of concern" (Overholser, 2006, paras. 2-3).

When the public challenged labels like "looter" and "refugee," many journalists called on one another to be more careful. The National Association of Black Journalists asked "that editors continue to exercise scrutiny when describing the behavior of people in the disaster area as 'looting,' relying on first-hand, direct observation and factual confidence that the actions in news reports and in photographs are indeed the criminal act before affixing the label" (NABJ, 2005, para. 7). Meanwhile, a debate raged at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, where public editor Angela Tuck observed to her colleagues, "On today's Metro cover, we referred to a black hurricane victim as a refugee in a caption while referring to two white hurricane victims as evacuees in another caption" ("Re: Refugees," 2005, p. 18). A staffer answered: "Why are we allowing ourselves to be swayed by the oversensitivity of our readers? Don't we know words better than anyone?" (p. 18).

In one noteworthy case, public and press did have a dialogue. When the American Society of Newspaper Editors invited filmmaker Spike Lee to its 2007 convention, he brought three Katrina survivors with him. Inside the professionals' sanctum, they offered their views about the coverage. "It made for a compelling picture," wrote *Miami Herald* columnist Leonard Pitts, Jr.: "the gatekeepers of American print journalism, listening in rapt attention" to complaints offered by their "blunt, peppery" critics (Pitts, 2007, para. 8).

Conclusion: Engaging the Public on Equal Terms

Each of these crises provided a lesson for expanding journalism criticism. The Blair scandal showed the limits of one-way communication. *The New York Times* practiced transparency by revealing the results of its investigation, but it directed the process. Two-way communication was invited when the paper called on readers to e-mail corrections, but it was asymmetrical; journalists would control how such submissions would be used. The scope of the *Times* investigation and the appointment of an ombudsman reflected the idea that journalists have the expertise to police themselves and determine the standards by which they will be judged. One journalist highlighted the shortcomings of an ombudsman, implying that it was no substitute for direct contact between rank-and-file staffers and the public. But the *Times*'s attitude was echoed by American Society of Newspaper Editors president Bhatia. He directed his comments to fellow journalists, and it is noteworthy that he framed transparency in terms of autonomy: Journalists would retain control over news judgment, and public deference was assumed. There would be two-way communication with "outsiders," but they were to be persuaded that journalists' decision-making processes were sound. Bhatia's viewpoint reflected part of Ettema & Glasser's (1987) analysis, in which two-way asymmetrical communication incorporated public feedback to achieve organizations' persuasive goals. The *Times*, then, did not achieve a dialogue, let alone a symmetry of power.

The CBS controversy involved two-way communication in which external blog attacks elicited a formal response. However, it was a battle, not a conversation. Hindman (2008) observed that journalists missed an opportunity to expand this communication into "discussion of the broader ethical principles of truth-telling, accountability, autonomy, and obligation" (p. 107), for which the weighty report by lawyers was no substitute. It can be argued that CBS's reaction hindered public participation, as the investigation signified an end to discussion: problem solved, erring journalists removed, case closed. In terms of communication flow, Tomaszeski, Proffitt, and McClung's (2009) analysis of the CBS case was linear. It showed a chain of cause and effect in one direction. Consistent with that model, the bloggers' attacks sparked change at CBS, but many journalists viewed it as ultimately driven by political and business considerations. Still, it hints at how a dialogue might have been started. Confronted with online critics, CBS could have engaged them on their own terms. It had the tools at its disposal, as it later proved when it launched its Public Eye blog. It might have been perceived as an attempt to engage in conversation with these critics, but the blog was launched a year after the initial story and its editors denied that it was a response to the crisis (Meyer, 2005). Furthermore, it was not an open forum, as moderators maintained control. Even more instructive was the response of fired producer Mapes. Her perception of rigid separation between public relations and journalism is consistent with autonomy, but despite her protests, her story did not speak for itself.

Criticism of Hurricane Katrina coverage was more diffuse. Critical communication flowed two ways between journalists and the public, and it might be considered symmetrical because dozens of news media were involved, not a monolithic entity. However, it also could be characterized as groups talking past each other. Katrina stirred debates about journalistic standards and who sets them. A district attorney did not hesitate to offer an opinion about "the highest standards of journalism" (Thevenot & Russell, 2005, para. 12), while the "refugee" exchange reflected strong resistance to opening news processes to the public. Still, the labeling controversy was a teachable moment. The Poynter Institute's Keith Woods concluded that the notorious "looter vs. finder" debate presented more of a caricature than a case study (Woods, 2005), but it illustrated a powerful public interest in journalism ethics. It was an opportunity for journalists to add their voices to a debate that was already occurring. Although some journalists responded defensively to the "refugee" flap, many organizations changed their policies and adopted the less stigmatizing "evacuee"—visible proof that journalists were listening. Another teachable moment pertains to stance. Neutrality aims to ensure a complete, balanced account untainted by partiality or involvement (Smolkin, 2005/2006). But detachment has perpetuated a separation between journalists and non-journalists, attenuating public trust and making journalists appear "inhuman" (p. 40). Still, it presented an opportunity to explain the practice. If impartiality was hotly debated in the National Guard story, when CBS was accused of overt political bias, Katrina challenged the very idea of an "objective" stance. Overholser speculated that covering the storm had made journalists more human, which she thought was good for the profession and public.

"More and more, Americans are trusting the information they get from sources with a 'voice,'" she wrote (Overholser, 2006, para. 3).

In each of these crises, it is significant that when journalists spoke among themselves about ethics, their discussions were characterized by spontaneity, diversity, dialogic flow, and open engagement: in other words, two-way symmetrical communication. Why was this not the pattern for discussing ethics with the public? Glasser and Ettema (2008) discerned a "triumph of autonomy over accountability" (p. 528), which explains much about how journalists reacted in these crises. Self-criticism can be viewed as an expression of vocational independence and a defense of autonomy. Genuine symmetry involves risk, but it is not unprecedented. Public inclusion and balancing power relationships have already been applied to reporting and writing news. Applying it to journalism criticism will prove complex and controversial, but as Glasser and Ettema (2008) indicated, openness is needed to give the public a stake in criticism and in journalism.

Technology has been a leveler. By sharing information, checking facts, and criticizing the news media, the public is already engaged, whether journalists like it or not. Grunig (2009) argued, "Conversations are taking place within and among publics ... and organizations must now use public relations to join these conversations" (p. 6). Consistent with two-way symmetry, social media are popular because people use them to communicate in ways that are personal, unfiltered, and authentic (Gleason, 2009). As Vanacker and Belmas (2009) pointed out, "trust is based on expectations" (p. 117), and it is relational. Audiences increasingly expect individual and institutional transparency (Skoler, 2009), and with social media journalists have a technological means to foster trust relationships on a personal level. This is consistent with Grunig's (2009) analysis of social media as supporting dialogic, symmetrical, and socially responsible communication. If journalists pursued critical conversations with outsiders, what might be different, and how would public relations theory inform it? Applying two-way symmetrical communication to journalism criticism could incorporate four attributes:

• Journalists should be prepared to publicly justify their choices. In the examples above, this could have included explaining why a reporter or document was credible, why "refugee" was an acceptable term, or why reporters should remain neutral.

• To contextualize their choices, news organizations should post their own ethics codes and/or those of the Society of Professional Journalists or the Radio-Television News Directors Association. Among other things, news organizations could invite public comment on the codes and the values that motivate them.

• News organizations should seek public input about standards and practices. This is perhaps where two-way communication can be most symmetrical. Grunig (2009) urged public relations practitioners to abandon "the illusion of control" (p. 3) over what is said about their organizations. If journalism criticism is to be broadened, journalists need to stop trying to control the conversation. If the public perceives that journalists are willing to listen and consider change, that could contribute significantly to trust.

• Journalists should continue conversations on an ongoing basis, not just during times of crisis. Under fire, CBS staffers showed how autonomy can lapse into defensiveness, and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* debate elicited a lament about "the oversensitivity of our readers" ("Re: Refugees," 2005, p. 18). This is where social media could make the greatest contribution, as they facilitate constant communication. A continuing commitment to discussing journalism ethics could ensure that improvements become part of professional practice, not just reactions to tense situations.

Future research might use interviews or surveys to ask journalists about their accountability practices and their willingness to expand media criticism to include the public. Potentially useful questions could include whether journalists would more likely embrace two-way symmetrical communication if it were not presented as a PR theory. Even more instructive would be to examine news organizations that have broadened their self-criticism to include the public. For now, this research offers suggestions to expand the conversation. It is possible that a continuing, public process of journalism criticism might establish new journalistic priorities or contribute new ideas to practical ethics. The former could include scrupulous insistence on accuracy (bolstered, perhaps, by welcoming public fact-checkers), and the latter might more firmly tie sensitivity to broader principles such as care or harm. Ultimately, openness could benefit both the profession and the public.

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[1] The investigation was co-chaired by former U.S. Attorney General Dick Thornburgh and retired Associated Press executive Lou Boccardi, but much of the work was performed by a Washington law firm. See Mapes (2005).