

By working with Garza, the TV station is broadening how it defines the news, and who gets to cover it.

"It's good for viewers to hear from regular people like us on issues important to them," Garza told the *San Antonio Express-News*. "It is also an encouragement to others to become more involved in their communities."

People backing this approach argue that bringing citizens like Garza into the journalistic process lets new ideas for news get discovered, taps more trustworthy sources for news, and creates room for more interesting and relevant stories. If the media are to help democracy function, they need to bring their audience more directly into the process of deciding what news is.

Garza's work with KVDA shows how the news media improve when they listen to the public. Actions such as this could lead to restoring citizens' trust in the news media.

Some people put the Columbus, Georgia, and Andrea Garza experiments under the banner of something called "civic journalism." Others call it "public journalism." These efforts — by newspapers, TV and radio stations, and others — seek to bring citizens more into the news process and problem solving in their communities. Such efforts make use of town hall meetings, public opinion surveys, community conversations, the Internet, and other tools. Journalists and citizens alike see these efforts as a way to strengthen their relationship. In fact, networks of journalists and new organizations have formed to support and promote these efforts.

There are many goals for this kind of journalism, but one of them is straightforward enough: by creating stronger bonds between journalists and citizens, doing better reporting, and engaging people more in their community life, greater trust can come about between the news media and citizens.

## An Open Conversation

The Minnesota News Council is another example where citizens and the news media have worked together to shape the news media's ongoing practices.

For the past 30 years, the council has served as an arbitrator between the press and public. The council's mission is to "promote fair, vigorous and trusted journalism by creating a forum

## The Public Journalism Movement

In 1995, the Pew Center for Civic Journalism began administering an annual Batten Award, (named after newspaper executive Jim Batten) a \$25,000 cash award "to print or electronic journalists whose work supports people's involvement in the life of their community." Two recent Batten Award winners are:

### **In 2001 for "West Virginia After Coal," *The Herald-Dispatch*, Huntington, W.V., and West Virginia Public Broadcasting.**

These media drew citizens across West Virginia into a discussion of their future given the economic decline of the coal industry. First, journalists met with experts: economists, business executives, environmentalists, and representatives of both coal industry management and organized labor. After getting a feel for the major problem — a need for more good jobs — the media held town hall meetings.

They tried to give a voice to everyone. "In prior years, environmentalists would pack the audience, or the coal operators and coal miners [would]," says Suzanne Higgins, senior producer at West Virginia Public Broadcasting. "We came up with a list of stakeholders — big business, small business, and organized labor. Also on our list were job seekers, students, clergy, health care officials, parents, and teachers — everyone who had a stake. So, not only were we trying to hear others' solutions, but we also gave a voice to some folks who may have been intimidated by special interests."

The result: The legislature began talking seriously about economic growth in West Virginia and how to use revenues still coming in from the coal industry to diversify the state's economy.

### **In 1999 for "The Deadliest Drug: Maine's Addiction to Alcohol," *The Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram*.**

The newspapers published an in-depth investigative series outlining statistics about alcohol abuse in the state and then putting human faces on the numbers. But then, at the request of readers, the newspapers launched study circles, engaging thousands of Maine citizens in discussion of the alcohol problem in the state and what to do about it.

"There were 70 to 80 communities that ended up doing something around the topic of alcohol use all over Maine," recalls Jeannine Guttman, editor and vice president of the newspapers. "Some of them started youth centers on their own and some of them started after-school programs aimed at kids, and there was a whole spectrum of different solutions that communities came up with. But they did it on their own and then we wrote about them."

where citizens and the news media can engage each other in examining standards of fairness."

The council provides forums, educational programs, and a newsletter/magazine on media ethics. The council has also helped sort out more than 100 complaints about news coverage. In 50 percent of the cases, the council has asked journalists to change their behavior.

The Minnesota News Council shifts the responsibility for setting journalistic standards discussed in Approach One. In this case, citizens play a central role in the setting and monitoring of such standards.

Here's how it works. When someone in the community files a complaint about a news story, the council directs them to the appropriate manager in the affected news organization to see if the two parties can work out some kind of solution. In this way, right from the start, a discussion takes place between journalists and people in the community, creating room for give-and-take.

But if the citizen and the news medium can't come to some kind of solution themselves, the council — twelve news media representatives and twelve citizens, plus a chairperson — convenes to hear the case. Once the case is decided, a press release is distributed and the news outlet involved is encouraged to report on the finding, no matter what the outcome.

Donald Q. Smith, editor of the weekly *Monticello Times*, said when he first joined the council they ruled against the news media in the first four cases. "I felt uncomfortable," he recalls, "but the fact that those papers did the things that generated those complaints proved to me the [need for] the News Council."

John French, an attorney specializing in libel who represents the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, said the council "fills a gap between ... pure, honest journalism and libel. The press needs to be sensitized to people in the community who feel that, although the paper did nothing illegal to them, something about an article just wasn't fair."

### Severing Ties

But if such relationships cannot be forged, many people say, beware! For some, the only way to bring down the great wall between the news media and the public is to take it down themselves. The "off" button is one way to think about this approach. Quit reading the paper or watching the news, and then, better yet, start your own news source.

A boycott, particularly a well-publicized one, can be a powerful tool as well as a symbolic gesture in forcing the news media to examine their behavior and change their wayward ways.

When the NAACP and other minority groups threatened the networks with a boycott

## Minnesota News Council



Courtesy of Minnesota News Council

