

User-centric Public Media, WBEZ's Call to Action

Posted by [Patricia Aufderheide](#) [1] on November 09, 2012



User-centric journalism creates new challenges for journalists, about accountability, fairness and accuracy. But it also offers public media, as we noted in our white paper [Public Media 2.0](#) [2], great opportunities. Now, Chicago public radio station WBEZ's CEO Torey Malatia issues [a challenge](#) [3] to all creators of public media, and disentangles engagement from advocacy. (It was triggered by his decision to yank a show he found tilting toward advocacy.)



[4]

[WBEZ](#) [4], one of public radio's sites of innovation, has engaging civic discourse baked into mission. [Malatia explains in his piece](#) [3] in pubcasting's journal of record, [Current](#) [5], that public media "is a central resource for promoting inclusiveness in public engagement;" success, for him, is best measured in how well public media facilitate civic discourse.

End of objectivity?

But wouldn't that mean giving up on objectivity? Like most smart journalists, Malatia doesn't believe that objectivity is possible, but he also doesn't think abandoning an unattainable goal means sinking into advocacy. What he means by "advocacy" is framing discussion to persuade, whether or not the argument has real value.

Malatia, like many of us, is disgusted with the pundit posturing. "We have unknowingly licensed these few use of our rightful function in democracy," he says.

He challenges public media to "counteract the partisanship of new media and reverse public passivity by refocusing journalism on civic discourse." How? Deal with issues that people are concerned about. And how would you know that? You would connect with people. You would, in short, leave the building.



Servants, not leaders.

For Malatia, journalism has become truly participatory, the professional journalists are servants, not leaders, of a discussion. “Journalists...should devote themselves to supporting an environment of inclusiveness that provides an open stage for differences—making way for the participation of even the most taciturn citizens,” he argues. He’s speaking in a language that American philosopher John Dewey would have found congenial, as our [Public Media FAQ](#) [6] notes.

Here’s Malatia's call to action:

Public media journalists should be among democracy’s insatiable seekers of inclusiveness, bringing into the civic conversation differences that richly complicate the argument. Our job is to find as many voices as we can of those who might disagree, who differ in their life experiences, circumstances, race, ethnicity, beliefs, economic circumstances and social values.

I want to tune in to that public media. Even on WBEZ, it’s still more a promise than a reality. [Tweet](#) [7]

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