

# The Paradox of Tradition and Transformation

I believe progress requires reconciling a paradox of tradition and transformation. Journalism is being tested and challenged as never before. Journalists must preserve, even strengthen, the profession's tradition of public service through independent, truthful news and information while also radically transforming itself to be more inclusive, democratic, interdependent, and authentically accountable.

Clearly, there is tension between tradition and transformation, but there has always been tension within the core ethical values of professional journalism. For example, journalists have always wrestled with tensions between reporting stories fully and withholding details that would be unnecessarily harmful, such as not publishing a rape victim's identity or being independent of sources, but cooperating with law enforcement if the timing of a story would hamper an investigation.

While striving to be objective and neutral in their reporting, journalists cannot be robots. Indeed, a core tenet of journalism is that it is an act of conscience and character. A more engaged approach to journalism would help journalists better understand and respect how the public views and weighs these tensions while also helping the public understand why journalists weigh the relative values the ways they do.

Tradition and transformation may seem self-contradictory, but Engaged Journalism can uphold both at once. The concept comes from the book "Built to Last" by Jim Collins, who says to reject the tyranny of the OR and embrace the genius of the AND. Collins says that a truly visionary company embraces both ends of a continuum. It preserves a passionately held core ideology or purpose and stimulates progress or transformation in everything else:

“Continuity and change

conservatism and progressiveness,

stability and revolution,

predictability and chaos,

heritage and renewal,

fundamentals and craziness.

And, and, and.”

Journalism’s choice cannot be between defending traditional principles OR building public trust in journalism and democracy through public engagement. To “save” journalism, its practitioners need to create radically new ways to connect with, learn from and report about all of the people. They must open their hearts and minds to the transformational ideas. Create the AND.

One way to simultaneously uphold tradition and transformation is to explore established principles from a more engaged or interactive perspective. Examples that have emerged from various convenings of Journalism That Matters and the Agora Journalism Center include

### **Be Independent AND Be Interdependent**

Journalism must be independent of any vested interest other than the public interest to protect its integrity from coercive pressures or influences. Interdependence is an ethical value of Engaged Journalism to enable open, honest connection between journalists and the public they serve. It means recognizing that journalism’s ability to flourish is directly tied to the flourishing of communities and civil society. Also, it means acknowledging that quality journalism can no longer be thought of as something that journalists can/should produce independently of the public. Reconciling these values of independence and interdependence requires a leap of faith, with hope, courage and conviction. The potential benefit is collective learning with increased dialogue and deliberation.

### **Create Journalism for People AND Create Journalism with People**

Engaged Journalism is done for people; it is also done with people. It welcomes the public as active partners in mutual inquiry to support the democratic purposes of journalism. This kind of participatory journalism goes beyond mere transparency to give people meaningful opportunities to be involved in all aspects of the journalistic process. People who are motivated and have the opportunity to be part of creating journalism will likely be more trusting of it.

### **Speak Truth to Power AND Speak Truth to Empower**

Engaged Journalism holds power accountable. It also has the potential to help empower people, individually and collectively, to understand and achieve their own best interests and aspirations. It “gives voice to the voiceless,” while helping people find and use their own voices. Engaged Journalism values journalistic neutrality, transparency and accountability as parts of its truth discipline, but it also advocates for democratic principles and practices.

### **Reveal What is Wrong AND Illuminate What is Possible**

Engaged Journalism is more truthful when it reports possibilities, not just problems. The relentless negativity of news and its sharp focus on conflict and confrontation distorts reality and is not a truthful, comprehensive or helpful perspective. Engaged journalists should always ask of their work, “What good does it do?”

## **Finding the AND**

Finally, a note of caution about establishing the values, standards and ethics of Engaged Journalism. How you do it matters.

Stephen Ward warns that the public should participate in developing what he calls “open ethics” or “public-participatory ethics.” Ward cautions, “A closed approach (by and for journalists) only confirms the skepticism of the public that journalists are not willing to be transparent about their ethics and therefore are not to be trusted.” An open approach “builds ethics literacy while increasing public confidence in quality journalism. It encourages transparency and accountability of media.”

Ward also suggests that the ethics of democratically engaged journalism should guide all who communicate in the public sphere. “If you are communicating with the public, you—whomever you are—owe concrete and effective accountability methods to your audience,” he says.

A few of the questions Ward proposes are: How might an “open” approach to developing new standards for journalism be undertaken? What new practices and norms would the public support? If the public publishes, contributes to or shares media content, is it their ethical responsibility to be truthful and trustworthy?

Ward’s warning reminds me of a 2015 gathering that Agora Journalism Center and Journalism That Matters co-hosted in Portland, Oregon. It was called “Experience Engagement: How communities and journalism can thrive together.” The non-journalists at that gathering came up with their own admonition to the journalists: “Nothing about us without us.” It is a phrase that has a long history in the international disability community as an expression of fighting back against powerlessness.

In the context of journalism, the phrase speaks to the reality that people have unprecedented control over their use of media. Engagement is essential for journalism to have value in their lives, and will be better for being inclusive and tapping into the collective knowledge of the community. People now have a genuine opportunity to help shape the future of journalism and a responsibility to do it.

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Revision #6

Created Wed, Dec 4, 2019 10:56 PM by Jeff

Updated Fri, Jan 3, 2020 12:21 PM by Jeff