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## News for the public good: What civic journalism proponents can learn from Karl Marx

### Sažetak

Pravac u američkom novinarstvu pod nazivom “javno novinarstvo”, “civilno novinarstvo” ili “kolektivističko novinarstvo” nastao je devedesetih godina kako bi dao veću važnost građanima i usmjeravao ih na to da postanu obrazovani učesnici u društvu – ne samo puki promatrači. Medijske organizacije cijeloga svijeta koje nastoje promicati ovaj tip novinarstva nalaze povijesno uporište i inspiraciju u ranim novinarskim uradcima Karla Marxa, u kojima je on pisao o važnosti novinstva, ljudskoj otuđenosti i socijalnim potrebama.

**Ključne riječi:** mediji, javno novinarstvo, komuniciranje, Karl Marx

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A movement in American journalism called “public journalism,” “civic journalism,” or “communitarian journalism” was created to enlighten and guide citizens so that they become educated participants in society—not merely spectators.<sup>1</sup> “The communitarians have a worthy goal. They want better journalism—journalism that fosters greater public concern and a higher moral level,” said University of Missouri journalism professor emeritus John Merrill (1997, 58)<sup>2</sup>.

In 1993, the now-defunct Pew Center for Civic journalism was created by The Pew Charitable Trusts “to help stimulate citizen involvement in community issues.” The center worked with news organizations—print and broadcast—helping them develop civic journalism projects and train their employees in the methodology of this brand of journalism. Additional organizations have had interests in the movement. According to Pew, project partners have included the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation, National Public Radio, Knight Ridder Inc., PBS's Project Democracy, and The Poynter Institute for Media Studies.

This paper will address why these organizations and others who are dabbling in the civic journalism movement might consider exploring the work of philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883)—especially the work of his younger years when he worked as a journalist and wrote of the importance of the press and of man’s alienation and social needs. Historically, he might be considered the real father of civic journalism.<sup>3</sup>

Merrill explained Marx’s journalistic beliefs:

Marx saw social needs as taking precedence over the basic Enlightenment brand of libertarianism. So he was ready to support a journalistic system geared to being an instrument for social progress ... he believed the ultimate goal of a person was to achieve the good of society. (1994, 94)

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<sup>1</sup> According to *Mixed news: The public/civic/communitarian journalism debate* (1997), this movement has been described via various names (1997, p. vi).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Merrill is a “strident” critic of communitarian journalism. In Corrigan, D. (1999). *The Public Journalism Movement in America*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

<sup>3</sup> Civic journalism should not be confused with “Citizen Journalism,” which is news created by non-journalists.

Marx's ideas don't seem so distant from the goal of civic journalism's—a journalism for the public good.

### **Marx: From academia to journalism**

Marx was born in 1818 in Prussia; at age 23, he received his doctorate from Jena University and moved to Bonn, where his mentor, Hegelian philosopher Bruno Bauer, taught at the university. Marx hoped to secure a teaching job there, too, but that never materialized. In fact, Bauer lost his job at the university because “the clericalist Prussian Government” forbade him to teach (Padover, 1974, ix). Idealists were not welcome. Because a future in academia in Germany seemed doubtful for Marx, he chose another occupation: journalism. He thought that in this profession he could use both his writing and intellectual skills. Padover writes in his introduction to Marx's translated journalistic works:

As a rebel and nonconformist, Marx had no occupational choice open to him other than writing. . . . The journalist had the choice of either defending the status quo, in which case he was likely to be rewarded with money and other favors, or of attacking it, which was certain to expose him to harassment, legal prosecution and, in the end, to exile. All of this was Marx's fate. (Padover, 1974, p. x)

No documents similar to the U.S. Bill of Rights or the First Amendment existed in Germany. Thus, free expression and journalists were under restrictions that became increasingly oppressive. Marx's first major article was “Remarks on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction,” a critique of an 1841 decree intended to stop anything critical of fundamental religious principles or offensive to the accepted morality of the time (Padover, 1843/1974). Marx's article addressed the problems of making German citizens aware of the new rules put forth in the decree.

It was published in *Anekdoten zur neuesten Deutschen Philosophie und Publicistik* in February 1843 in Switzerland. “The enhancement of patriotism and the awakening of participation in the interests of the fatherland . . . easily become transformed into an order for a new restriction of the freedom of our poor consumptive daily papers,” Marx

wrote (Padover, 1843/1974). The main point of Marx's article was that censorship was counterproductive; deficiencies in the press should be left for freedom to correct (Altschull, 1984, 91).

Although this noteworthy article was published in 1843, Marx's career as a newspaperman began in 1842 with the *Rheinische Zeitung* for which he wrote several articles about the importance of freedom of the press. At age 24, Marx became the editor of the newspaper and moved from Bonn to Köln, where he met Frederick Engels, who would become a longtime colleague and friend.

Marx continued to write critical articles about the government and censorship. He had a special interest in reproaching the government for the poor living conditions of the Moselle vine-growing peasantry and for the government's tendency for fining the poor who stole old wood from the forests to fuel wood stoves. His paper was accused of "flirting with communism," and he became intrigued by the concepts of both socialism and communism (Altschull, 1984, 91).

Silenced by censorship, he resigned his post as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* and moved to Paris. However, his experiences with the newspaper had helped him learn "well the skills of political journalism" (Altschull, 1984, 89). In Paris, he and Arnold Ruge began a publication, which folded after less than a year; however, he continued to free-lance articles and met up with Engels again, and the two created an "anti-capitalist" working relationship. In 1845, Marx moved from Paris to Brussels and again became involved in writing pursuits. By 1848, he and Engels had completed the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

Because of the revolutions of 1848 in Germany—and elsewhere on the continent—Marx returned to Köln to start the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. Again, in news columns, he attacked censorship. After a year of fighting the government and being hauled regularly into court, he received an expulsion order, and his newspaper stopped publication. He returned to Paris but was ordered out. Thus, London became his permanent home, where he continued his journalism.

Marx, who died in 1883 at his home in London, continued working as a full-time journalist through 1862, free-lancing for and editing a variety of publications. He also worked for an American newspaper, *The New York Daily Tribune*. He often collaborated on the articles with his friend Engels, who had also settled in London.

Marx's editorials and analyses (that he often co-wrote with Engels) were among "the best examples of interpretive journalism of the age" (Altschull, 1984, 93). His articles for the *Tribune* were oftentimes about European political events—and his reporting (and Engels') was notable. Christman (1966) writes:

If a preoccupation with the social and economic background of politics, and a determination to uncover the real motives that lie behind the words of politicians and governments are the hallmarks of modern political journalism, Karl Marx may properly be said to be its father. (p. xxviii)

Marx's journalism career lasted 20 years—but this profession did not support him. His family often lived in poverty. After 1862, he wrote sporadically for newspapers. He had several chronic illnesses that interrupted his work. Thus, with the energy he had left, he worked with the First International (the International Working Men's Association founded in London in 1864) and worked on *Das Kapital* (Padover, 1974, xi).

### **Marx's journalism and beyond**

In the 1843 "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State," Marx explained alienation. Alienation meant the following:

The projections of human experience in thought or social institutions are misleadingly separated from man in abstract speculation and acquire a harmful power over him in his social life, dividing him from himself and his fellow men so that he is never truly whole and never truly "at home." (Easton, L.D., & Guddat, K.H., 1967, p. 11)

Marx used his definition of alienation to criticize Hegel for his displacement of the power of the people. Hegel said that "the idea of the state requires unity of form and content, universality and particularity" (Easton, L.D., & Guddat, K.H., 1967, p. 12). Marx thought that these conditions could only be met through democracy: Democracy equals non-alienated citizens. Democracy can transform alienation of political life

through self-government. Marx believed that in a democracy the law exists for the people.

During his years as a journalist, “Marx’s activist and reformist inclinations constantly led him back to the present, to a time when one can act and can influence the course of history rather than simply observe it” (Christman, 1966, xi). The point for Marx was to change the world, not just interpret the world. This goes beyond today’s traditional journalist’s motto of “seek truth and report it.” His goals were similar to today’s civic journalist’s whose goals are to go beyond merely reporting what he or she hears or sees.

As editor of *Rheinische Zeitung*, the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, and the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, all radical publications, he did try to “change the world.” For example, he tried to educate the people for the upcoming revolutions. Throughout his life, he tried to understand capitalist society and how it developed; he shared his revelations through his writings—both journalistic and otherwise. While editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx identified the limitations on the freedom of the press. In the case of the Moselle peasants, Marx, through the newspaper, was not only seeking the truth about their plight, but he also was trying to shake the public out of its apathy so it would begin demanding social change. Marx believed the press should be more than just mere reporters of the news (Altschull, 1984, 92).

He saw the press as an important instrument in the hands of the rising working classes, aiding in education and as an agitator and propagandist for change and revolution. He saw the press, at least when he was writing in English for such newspapers as the *New York (Daily) Journal*, as needed to aid free inquiry (Merrill, 1994, 97).

### **Getting to the truth in the 1990s**

Traditional journalism stresses balance, fairness, and objectivity. Journalists must remain detached from the public so that there is no appearance of a conflict of interest. Thus, journalists, in their private and

professional lives, must stay clear of politics and other civic activities in their communities. Civic journalism rejects these traditions.

Arant (1999) wrote: Public journalism pulls back from detachment. It casts the press in a more active role of presenting information to the reader, of creating the forum for citizens to become politically active, and of motivating them to solve problems (155).

Bob Steele, senior scholar at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, continues to ask these questions of today's journalists (1997):

1. Should reporters be investigators of system failure or initiators of solutions?
2. Should journalists be detached observers or activist participants?
3. Should newspapers be independent watchdogs or conveners of public forums?<sup>4</sup>

Poynter Institute senior scholar Roy Peter Clark (1994) said civic journalism asks journalists to step across the traditional line of journalistic independence—the line that separates observers from conveners. Therefore, getting to the truth is done not merely by observers but by conveners. Journalists who have not accepted civic journalism wrestle with this, however.

Convincing some old-timers, or seasoned journalists, that civic journalism is a good—and a prosperous—idea can be difficult. In a 1997 *Quill* article, civic journalism advocate Gil Thelen, then editor of *The State* in Columbia, South Carolina, explained the dilemma as such:

I continue to think that the greatest force of resistance is the hypersensitivity that journalists have. The creative process in journalism is a very fragile thing. And the fact that we select, edit, compress, synthesize and all of that, in the largest sense, distorts reality. Journalists know that in a piece of their being, so there has grown a culture that is extraordinarily resistant to the outside. Now, with civic journalism, we're telling them to let other people into the house, let others into the definition of what is news and that there is going to be a more interactive role with journalists and feedback on how we fare. (Schaffer, 1997)

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<sup>4</sup> See also "The Ethics of Civic Journalism" by Steele at [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org), updated 2007

Robert McChesney, journalism professor at the University Wisconsin-Madison, argued that it is impossible to conceive of a democratic society without journalism playing a role in the political process. “If we are serious about participatory democracy ... we must be serious about journalism and its relation to democracy,” he said (1994). He suggested communication scholars examine why journalism does not currently serve democratic ends and what needs to be done so “we may have a more democratic journalism in the future” (1994).

Jay Rosen, New York University journalism professor and one of the forefathers of today’s public journalism, said that to understand so-called objectivity and its usefulness, we should look at “the epistemology of American journalists ... some would even say an ideology” (1993). Rosen explained that in this epistemology “if you separate facts from values, or information from opinion, or news from views, this will permit you to know the truth”; he asked what would be a stronger public philosophy. He said the answer to this question is democracy (1993). But if journalists “can find a way of seeing democracy as something we do, or better yet, as something we must create, re-invent, re-imagine, then they’ll be on their way to a new approach,” Rosen said (1993).

Thus, you will have a democratic journalism—a civic journalism.

Journalist Buzz Merritt wrote *Public journalism and public life: Why telling the news is not enough* in 1995. It is one of the many publications that became available in the 1990s to journalists that tell them how public journalism works. Following are the strategies of public journalism, according to Merritt:

1. It moves beyond the limited mission of telling the news to a broader mission of helping public life go well.
2. It moves from detachment to being a fair-minded participant in public life.
3. It moves beyond only describing what is “going wrong” to also imagining what “going right” would be like.
4. It moves from seeing people as consumers ... to seeing them as a public, as potential actors in arriving at democratic solutions to public problems. (1995)



Example: San Francisco media created the "Voice of the Voter" in the 1990s. This civic journalism project—a collaboration between print and broadcast journalists—helped thousands of readers, listeners, and viewers to participate in the election. The media used the power of the press to force political candidates to listen and reply to what the people had to say, the Pew Center reported (1997). Similar projects have been tried throughout the country, too. The point is not to just get out and vote, but make candidates accountable for what they say.

It should be noted that Marx insisted on "unlimiting voting" in his 1844 "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State." It was essential to democracy. The news organizations' goal is to give readers the information they need to make a decision on who to elect before they vote. Civic journalism strives to make citizens also feel accountable, but it also strives to show them how their participation in society—by voting, for instance—can make a difference. Journalists and government officials can work together to advance public life.

Communitic press theory, which has its roots in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is attributed to Marx . According to this press theory, the functions of the press are to aid the expansion of the socialist system (Merrill, 1983, 24). Eventually this kind of press system would end when "the communist utopia" took over. This paper, however, focuses on Marx's earlier writings and thoughts—a time when he saw the press as an important instrument "in the hands of the rising working classes, aiding education and as an agitator for change" (p. 97).

## **Learning from Marx**

Marx hoped to educate his readers, very much like today's civic journalists hope to do. Like today, Marx's readers were often more concerned with comings and goings of kings and queens, presidents and party leaders. Marx tried to show them the influence of "basic social and economic forces on social events" (Christman, 1966, xxviii). Christman wrote:

If a preoccupation with the social and economic background of politics, and a determination to uncover the real motives that lie behind the words of politicians and governments are the hallmarks of modern political journalism, Karl Marx may properly be said to be its father.

Initial surveys showed that the public's response to civic journalism was good. For example, the Pew Center evaluated four public journalism projects conducted in 1996. The organization found that all four projects had readers saying that they wanted more such reporting (Pew, 1997). It should be stressed, however, that before journalists can help educate the public, they must first educate themselves.

Marx's journalism for the *Tribune* was thorough. He used commercial statistics, official reports, treaties and parliamentary debates that gave his articles depth and a solidity not found in other writings of his time that relied upon court gossip and political chitchat (Christman, 1966, p. xxv). Marx brought to his work an extraordinary range of knowledge; he seems to have been incapable of superficiality or of writing about any topic or subject until he had gathered and mastered all the available information (p. xxv).

Additionally, whether journalists master the information or not, they must *believe* in this new civic, or democratic, journalism. One drawback for journalists who are interested in trying public journalism at their news media organizations is their worry about a profit motive. Those leery of public journalism have said it is merely a marketing ploy by news management. They wonder if newspaper management really cares and they wonder if the media are really trying to educate readers or viewers or just trying to *keep* readers? Foes of public journalism see it as a capitalistic gimmick to attract readers, Thus, marketing ploy or not, many of today's journalists who practice civic journalism see it working. And as more and more projects succeed, perhaps those journalists who are leery of the movement will cross the line and become conveners, doing good journalism in a different way.

## A better society

Merritt (1995) said civic journalism “moves beyond only describing what is “going wrong” (in society) to also imagining what “going right” would be like. What would “going right” be for Marx? It would be awakening society to what is possible.

A goal worth striving for, according to Marx, is a society in which everyone has the freedom to become a whole, or complete, person—a person who works at something in which he or she feels ownership, a person who lives comfortably, a person who uses both his or her mental and physical capabilities; therefore, there would be no more alienation due to what Marx considers capitalistic corruption. Merrill said that modern Marxist journalists want social harmony, cooperation, and group solidarity (1994, p. 100). Although Merrill does not connect this definition to civic journalists, it seems to fit.

Merrill wrote:

A communitarian perspective in journalism, growing in popularity at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, owes much to Marx, especially the young Marx of his more humanistic years. ...journalists would do well to share Marx’s desire to see a world free from exploitation, poverty, misery, fear, and oppression. ... although his solution to many of the world’s problems were over-idealistic and perhaps faulty, Marx set an example for the modern journalist who would desire to make at least a small part of the world a better place. (p. 100)

For those journalists at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century who have the goal of waking U.S. citizens from their alienation, so to speak, Marx’s journalistic writings and beliefs might help them in their quest. Merrill wrote in 2002 that “the ultimate objective is for public journalism to lose its name and become simply journalism. . . . Public life and journalism did not reach their current states in a short time and they will not recover in a short time.”

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