

Can the Media Affect Regional Issues?

Liam O'Connor

Is there truly a place in popular media coverage for issues affecting our regions? What role can public officials play in working with the press to present issues of regional importance? Are the media among the players at the regional level?

Average citizens must have access to information regarding regional issues if they are to make informed decisions based on the best interests of the region. The public space provided by the popular press is one place where this information is displayed. If we are to see better media coverage of regional issues, regional leaders and the media must find ways to seek common ground.

Few individuals are in a better position to comment upon that common ground than Charles Royer, now national program director of Urban Health Initiative. He spent much of his career as a newspaper and television journalist, and then shifted into politics as the mayor of Seattle, Washington. He relates the following story regarding the interplay of journalists and politicians:

As a reporter, the one thing I hated most was the press secretary. I didn't want to have this stuff filtered. I hated it when people had news conferences and tried to feed us stuff. I wanted to get stuff on my own.

What impressed me when I was elected mayor was the absolute river of information that I had available to me compared to the little trickle I had when I was a reporter. So I did backgrounds, briefing for the press. I said: "You guys wouldn't believe what's going on in this place. I've got to sit down on a regular basis and fill you in on this stuff, but it's got to be off the record." So, at the first meeting, the newspaper reporters were writing stuff down with their pencils and pens.

Then one of the radio guys came and said, "Look, we would like to bring our recorder. They are our pen-

cils." I said, no that would defeat the purpose. Then the TV reporters wanted to bring their cameras. I told them no, but they showed up anyway, at the mayor's inner office, with their cameras and tape recorders.

The picture that went over the Associated Press wire was the former TV guy (Royer) trying to hold the door closed against the TV cameras coming into his office.

Royer made his comments at a two-day roundtable discussion in November 1997, "Steps Towards Regional Solutions: The Rochester Forum," hosted by Mayor William Johnson of Rochester, New York, and facilitated by Partners for Livable Communities, a nonprofit group based in Washington, D.C. (Fulton, 1997, p. 14.)

Participants in this forum discussed the challenges in covering regional issues from the perspective of both public officials and the media. Participants hailed from across the country, from San Diego to New Haven, and included four mayors, a county chairperson, a mix of 10 publishers, editors, journalists, and a number of experts on urban and regional issues.

These participants all engaged in a discussion about the media as a force in helping to unify or fragment their regions. The questions that this forum addressed included the following: Why should the region be a major focus of media coverage? What are some of the specific challenges in covering regional issues? How have some regions taken steps towards addressing these challenges?

Why Regional?

The media may view the region as a collection of segmented jurisdictions, impeding their ability to see a more comprehensive regionwide view. Few

media have "regional beat" reporters.

Bruce Katz, director of the Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy at the Brookings Institution, told the group about several factors that make regions logical media coverage units, as opposed to segmented jurisdictional units. He noted that research has shown regions to be basic economic units in today's global economy, in terms of their input, output, workforce development, wages, technology, infrastructure, and the like.

They are further connected by a growing interdependency of cities and surrounding suburbs—their fortunes are intertwined. Welfare reform has illuminated the spatial mismatch of job availability in the suburbs and worker pools in the cities—and shown that it takes more than effective transportation and transit systems to address this mismatch. Regions, working together with a well-informed citizenry, can begin to manage the sprawl that bites into the rural landscape.

Fiscal pressures on local governments have forced these local jurisdictions to pursue more joint ventures, alliances, and cost-sharing initiatives with new regional partners. Many of these partners are nongovernmental players operating on a regional, rather than local scale. The nongovernmental players include universities, civic organizations, foundations, cultural institutions, economic coalitions, faith-based groups, and many others.

These partnerships form along a continuum model of regional partnerships, first elaborated in 1992 by Beverly Cigler, from networks to cooperation to coordination to collaboration. (Cigler, 1992.) The very loose linkage called networking involves information exchange—the exchange of ideas, news and reports—and is where the media as regional player enters in. The most complex of regional partnerships is regional collaboration which involves strong and stable, perhaps legal, linkages among organizations within a region.

Serious Obstacles

Regions may be important in today's world, but they pose unique challenges of coverage to the media. They are large, complex, diverse, and dynamic.

Participants in the forum identified some specific challenges in achieving effective regional media coverage:

1. **Newspapers are moving simultaneously toward regionalism and "zoning."** While newspapers work to cover the region and to claim the whole metropolitan area as their "market," they increasingly decide to produce localized zoned editions due to market forces and competition with other media, such as television. The zoned editions of a metropolitan newspaper track along some combination of political boundaries. They enable small advertisers to reach a very local audience for a very economical price, and allow reporters to follow localized stories. They unavoidably fragment the news and the news audience.
2. **Media stories tend to follow traditional jurisdictional lines.** Much of what is written is tied to local elections, debates, and concerns, and thus follows these local jurisdictional lines closely. While encouraging readers to think about their own neighborhoods, these local stories at times ignore the effects that particular events across town clearly have upon them.
3. **Regional stories tend to unfold in a slow and cumbersome fashion.** Media representatives and public officials acknowledged that many newspaper stories with regional scope can take years to evolve, because they are often long-range consensus-building processes.
4. **New regional leadership entities aren't deemed newsworthy.** Often, the new players on the regional level have come to include more than local public officials and large corporate entities. Universities, community foundations, cultural institutions, economic coalitions and the like, which are having great impact on shaping our regions, are not widely covered in the popular news media which tends to highlight the political and corporate arenas. They are not high profile groups, but the partnerships they craft have begun to change the regional landscape.
5. **Sprawl is on the public agenda but is not well understood.** There is a greater understanding of "sprawl" as a problem, but not always of

the underlying issues and/or reasons. Sprawl is often covered on a piecemeal basis on suburban local government beats. Increasingly it is part of a debate over regional transportation or environmental issues that is of interest to the press, but coverage is hindered by the slow-moving and abstract nature of such stories.

Where There's a Will...

Some regions accomplish regional media coverage in the face of all of these challenges. Charles Royer cited two examples of how he tried to encourage better regional coverage during his tenure as mayor of Seattle.

In 1978 he instituted the "Leadership Conference," in which about 25 members of his staff, the business community, and mainstream media went on a trip to San Francisco to learn about downtown zoning. In addition to learning valuable examples from another region, group members were able to get to know each other and further realize that they were all working toward the same goals. They later institutionalized the annual trip and began to hold it in nearby cities, as a means of learning more about their own region.

He cited another Seattle example from 1994. The major newspaper, a public radio station, and two public television stations decided to cooperate in sponsoring the "Front Porch Forum." They bought pizza for about 270 families and invited 1,500 people to have a conversation about quality of life in the region.

The four media outlets created a survey to gauge sentiment in the region, and later boiled that down to a mock trial where the region was actually "put on trial." It demonstrated that the media can get involved without having to facilitate the debate themselves and cross the lines of objective journalism.

Other ideas emerged from the Rochester Forum as to how both the press and public officials could take steps to facilitate regional understanding. One editor suggested a "nut graph" on every local story—a small sidebar putting each story into a regional context. Another cited the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* weekly editorial page dedicated exclusively to regional stories as a good model.



Charles Royer, national program director, of Urban Health Initiative, and former mayor of Seattle, former newspaper and television journalist.

Alan Ehrenhalt of *Governing* magazine and David Broder of *The Washington Post* both suggested that journalists put more of a "pocketbook" angle on regional stories to give them a better hook. For example, a story on the long-term detrimental effects of developing farmland areas might not make the front page; however, a story detailing the economic costs in terms of new infrastructure and higher taxes would.

Another example is the work of Neal Peirce, national syndicated columnist and urban affairs expert, who has written numerous regional assessments, describing in layman's terms the interdependence of various regional influences such as politics, market pressure, and civic initiatives. An October 4, 1998 column by Mr. Peirce depicts movements to combat sprawl in regions around the country.

In Kansas City, Missouri, a weeklong series on the harmful effects of sprawl by the metropolitan daily newspaper stands out as a prime example of the powerful benefits of regional media coverage.

Kansas City: "Divided We Stand"

Sometimes the media steps in to play a regional role. In December 1995, the *Kansas City Star* did a

In-Depth On-Line Media Coverage of Regional Issues

Baltimore Sun	www.sunspot.net/news/special/regionalism
Charlotte Observer	www.ccchoices.org/pr_index.htm
Citistates	
Northeast Nebraska (Columbus Telegram, Fremont Tribune, Norfolk Daily News)	www.citistates.com/reports.htm
Cleveland—City Club and WCLV Radio	www.cleveland.com/community/cityclub/archive/orfield
Erie Times	www.goerie.com/peirce/html/body_recommendations.html
Indianapolis Star/News	search.starnews.com
Kansas City Star	www.kcstar.com (Select Library. Do author search on Jeffrey Spivak, and a collection search on Library '95. Leave main search blank.)
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	www.jsonline.com (In the query box for Search JS Online, type Forum for Progress.)
Philadelphia Inquirer	www.libertynet.org/community/peirce
Reading Eagle	www2.mabc.org/mabc/default2.htm (Within the Go Search, select Peirce Report.)
Saint Louis Post-Dispatch	www.stlnet.com (Scroll down, then select Special Reports where there are several extensive regional analysis articles.)
Seattle Times	www.frontporch.org/old-index.html
York Daily Record	www.ydr.com/rusk.htm

week-long series entitled "Divided We Stand," detailing the impacts of sprawl on the two-state Kansas City region. (Lester and Spivak, 1995.) The series received a great deal of attention and sparked controversy. Published in the slow news week following Christmas, the series dealt with a variety of issues related to sprawl and questions of growth, such as:

1. the impact of federal mortgage policies on heightening racial separation between cities and suburbs;
2. the role that interstate highways play in creating sprawl (the region has more miles of per-capita urban interstate than any other city in the U.S.);

3. the spread of crime and congestion into the older suburbs;
4. the desire of affluent residents to flee to newly developing suburban areas like Johnson County, Kansas; and
5. the role that organizations such as the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) play in regional decision making.

MARC itself had previously published a report attacking the harmful effects and cost of sprawl. However, it was not until the "Divided We Stand" series that the debate took on a truly regional flavor. Perhaps the reason was the style of the series—it made its

points not through statistics alone, but also through personal stories of individuals and families around the region, and how sprawl had affected them. In effect, it "connected the dots." The media's ability to humanize obtuse policy to a mass audience gives it great influence in regional public policy. The *Kansas City Star* series stands as a model for the role of the metropolitan newspaper in fostering regional dialogue.

The series proved beneficial in many ways. Not only did it contribute to regional dialogue, it actually helped strengthen a sense of regional identity. It directly impacted discussions on several regional issues, including a city-county consolidation and a proposed regional beltway. It showed the interest of the "average reader" in the seemingly abstract topic of regionalism, when presented on a human scale. Finally, it changed the way the *Star* covered regional issues—after the report, one reporter was dedicated solely to the coverage of MARC, the regional Chamber of Commerce, and other groups dealing with regional issues.

Conclusions

"Steps Towards Regional Solutions—The Rochester Forum" arrived at the following general conclusions:

1. Metropolitan dailies should be prepared for the possibility that regionalism will emerge as a major public-policy issue in their circulation area.
2. The press should understand that the power structure in the typical metropolis has changed significantly and includes many nongovernmental players operating on a regional, rather than local scale, and operating in partnership with one another.
3. Regional advocates should better understand the "news culture" and how to present regional issues in a way that will make them more attractive as topics of news coverage.
4. Regional advocates should work together and take advantage of their own existing networks to assist journalists in "connecting the dots" across jurisdictional boundaries and subject areas.

5. Central city mayors should recognize that in most cases they will be unable to advance regionalism completely on their own initiative.

Simply by choosing what news to report, what copy to kill, which stories to ignore, the media become regional players. By these decisions, they enter, perhaps unwittingly, into the regional arena. They may, as with the *Kansas City Star*, make a conscious decision to contribute to regional dialogue. By all accounts, their place within their region's multicomunity partnerships remains within the loose linkages of networking which aims to accomplish information exchange. It is no small role. ■

Liam O'Connor is a program officer with Partners for Livable Communities. This article was based on a report written by William Fulton, publisher and editor of California Planning and Development Report, entitled "Steps Towards Regional Solutions: The Rochester Forum." Copies of this 25-page report are available through Partners for Livable Communities.

Partners for Livable Communities plans to continue this discussion as a subtopic of a major national conference on regionalism which they are facilitating for Shelby County/Memphis, Tennessee. The conference will be held in Memphis, October 17-19, 1999, and will focus on the role of the private sector in fostering regional collaboration. For more information on this conference, please contact Partners for Livable Communities (www.livable.com or phone 202-887-5990).

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