

# **JOURNALISM THAT MATTERS: A Beginning**

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**PRE-SET:** September 21, 10 days after the tragedy of September 11, we are on the phone with the president of the Associated Press Managing Editors (APME), a North American association of newspaper editors. After talking with many people he has made the decision to proceed with the APME annual conference in 3 weeks. What tipped the balance in this difficult decision? A new concept: whoever comes is the right people. The entire agenda is recast in these three weeks, including the theme of the Newsroom Summit and Open Space scheduled to end the conference. 9/11 sharpened our focus, had us asking what was really important? Our theme changed from "Saving Journalism" to "Journalism that Matters."

**THE CONFERENCE SCENE:** In addition to the horrors of September 11, the anthrax scare is now in the air. Newspaper editors from all over North America are here. As outsiders, we watched, fascinated by the roller coaster ride these folks are experiencing. They are covering a deeply horrific story, one in which many are directly affected. At the same time, they are celebrating. Circulation, which has been dropping for the last twenty years, is skyrocketing. Stories of teenagers reading newspapers - unheard of - are rampant. There is a feeling that what they do is an important public service and that they are rising to the occasion: newsrooms and business offices, traditionally at odds, come together making decisions based on what's best for informing the public. Unselfish acts abound. For example, the AP makes its photo service, normally cost prohibitive for smaller papers, available for whoever wishes access. The participants are caught in an emotional tidal wave, buffeted by grief, loss, and disbelief, exhilarated by increased circulation and readership. The question on every mind: how do we keep this new audience?

**THE SUMMIT:** It is the last event of the conference. We open Friday evening with the format that was the norm for every session. There is a panel of experts discussing journalism that matters. In 45 minutes, we invite everyone next door, into a room with low lighting, soft music, and small round tables set for groups of four. We invite them into a World Café conversation. This is the first time that people are invited to do something other than listen to experts. The good news: they have a great time (no surprises here). The bad news (from our colleague on the inside): they're having the same conversation they've been having for the last twenty years. Good insight for the open space!

Saturday morning, the room is set, chairs in a circle. Early arrivers stare at the room, deeply distrustful of this strange set up. (We learned during a previous session that research found newsroom cultures to be almost uniformly defensive. In fact, their

defensiveness surpassed even the military and health care.) We open the space, raising the bar by challenging editors to take their conversations to new places. We encourage them to move beyond the same old gripes and explore new possibilities. As always, topics are posted. And something we've never seen before - two topics are posted AFTER people leave for their sessions. Turns out the conveners are uncomfortable announcing them in public. The conversations are INTENSE. There is little use of two feet as people huddle in tight-knit circles of chairs. The voices of participating high school and college journalists help take the conversations to new places. Closing remarks are filled with the usual accolades. One person summed it up: "I got more ideas out of this morning than out of the rest of the conference."

WHAT'S NEXT: Sunday morning, we meet with the board. It is unanimous. They want more. Two people volunteer their states for the next "Journalism that Matters" summit. We've accomplished our purpose, the conversations will continue. You see, this open space was conceived as a step in an ambitious project. We wish to invite journalists into revisiting the essential purpose and practice of their profession by convening conversations in every state and province, using a network of OS practitioners from around North America. For us, the desire to do this comes through learnings from Appreciative Inquiry: the stories we tell ourselves shape the way we see and behave in the world; the questions we ask are fateful, directing attention to what we notice and what remains unseen. In addition, our work in organizations has led us to conclude that the communication system is a powerful "strange attractor" in social systems, accelerating and sustaining change. Journalists are our collective storytellers, asking questions on our behalf. At the heart of our communications system, journalists are uniquely positioned to contribute to the greater good through the stories they tell.

We believe Open Space is the ideal ground for journalists to re-invent their craft. If you have something to contribute (funding, ideas, good wishes), let us know!

P.S. Journalists take great notes! They did the best job of capturing the conversations that we've ever seen. Take a peek at any session at [www.journalismthatmatters.org](http://www.journalismthatmatters.org).

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