

# What Am I For?

*A report on the International Dialogues for Thought Leaders in Media: Journalism  
Images & Voices of Hope*

*Fetzer Institute*

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**By Jon Funabiki**

These are tumultuous times for the nation, the world and for that particular human enterprise that we call journalism. In the U.S., even the nation's premier newspapers are struggling for economic survival, and journalists are losing their jobs in droves. The upheavals stir many thoughts. The obvious question spilling from the lips of many: Will journalism survive? But for those who practice journalism—not only as a career, but as a life's calling—a second, deeply personal question boils up from within: What am I for?

This is the core of a series of questions that bubbled up when an extraordinary group of accomplished journalists and filmmakers—path breakers, pacesetters, Pulitzer Prize-winners—took a time-out to ponder and talk about what their work means to them. Every topic, qualm and question led to still more questions:

- Why did I become a journalist?
- What do I do as a journalist?
- How may I wield my power as a journalist?
- Have I had impact as a journalist?
- What do I hope to accomplish in life?
- Can I do this as a journalist?

The 16 journalists and filmmakers, hand-picked from the U.S. and abroad, were brought together for the International Dialogue for Thought Leaders in Media: Journalism. They were honored for creating work that has had a positive impact on society. Additionally, they were asked to share—through facilitated dialogue and intimate conversation—their personal stories and perspectives in hopes of yielding insights about what makes them tick. How do they think about their work as journalists, their personal sense of mission and their desire to have an impact on society?

The program was sponsored by Images & Voices of Hope and the Fetzer Institute. It took place over four days in June of 2008 at the Fetzer Institute's contemplative meeting facility, Seasons: A Center for Renewal, on a lush, tree-studded site in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Thunderstorms occasionally rattled through the area, turning the building's open-beam wood ceiling into a kettle drum that interrupted soul-searching dialogues. (Please see attachment for a complete list of participants, facilitators and other organizers.)

The participants excavated their thoughts as they were guided through four complex journalism topics: courage, voice, impact and personal mission. Skillful facilitation was provided by Bob Steele, the Eugene S. Pulliam Distinguished Visiting Professor of Journalism at DePauw University; Keith Woods, dean of faculty at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies; and Roberta Baskin, director of the Investigative Team at Washington, D.C.'s ABC7/WJLA-TV. Linda Gerber, a Chicago television producer oversaw the taping of the weekend. Judy Rodgers, founder of Images & Voices of Hope, chaired the program.

There were no hard-and-fast decisions; no conclusions drawn; no votes cast. Most often, each discussion opened the door to more questions. Far from being boastful, these professionals were modest and frank. They were not overly romantic about the state of journalism. Most were quick to criticize the news media (especially in the U.S.) for their coziness to powerful elites, their fixations on scandalous celebrities, their failure to adequately serve ethnic and minority communities and their resistance to change. The participants did reveal the keels that steady their personal convictions and steer their ambitious goals for the future. But during this time of shared reflection, many revealed that their mooring ropes are frayed with angst about the future.

Unanimously, they exuded a passion for journalism. Individually, they demonstrated the many creative and diverse ways in which journalism can manifest itself. Just to demonstrate, take this random sampling of five plucked from the Magnificent16:

- Dejan Anastasijevic, a senior investigative reporter for Belgrade-based *VREME* weekly and a freelance correspondent for *Time Magazine*, has published exposés about organized crime in Serbia and chronicled the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo. Anastasijevic survived a 2007 assassination attempt when two hand grenades were placed on his bedroom windowsill. He describes himself as an “old school” journalist. “Just tell people what is wrong. Nobody likes preaching.”
- Renee Ferguson, an investigative reporter for NBC5 News in Chicago, has won many awards for breaking controversial stories. An African American, she is drawn to cases of discrimination or exploitation, such as the story she broke about how U.S. Customs Agents targeted minority women for strip searches at O’Hare International Airport. “I will tell you unabashedly that I am an advocate for people who can’t speak, who are poor or who can’t get through any other way.”
- Patrice Barrat, managing director of Article Z, a Paris-based multimedia production company whose projects include *madmundo.tv*, which engages journalists, “citizen-investigators” and international agencies on complex global issues, such as hunger, women’s rights and government corruption. Unlike other conference participants who receive paychecks from their companies, Barrat faces the added burden of needing to raise money from foundations to finance his projects. “I’ve never worked for my career—I’ve worked for ideas.”
- Vu Thanh Thuy, who with her husband Duong Phuc created Radio Saigon Houston, a pioneering and influential station serving her local Vietnamese community. Besides her journalism, Vu has been honored internationally for her humanitarian and charitable

work, such as raising \$500,000 for the Red Cross after the 9-11 terrorist attacks. Former journalists in South Vietnam, the couple and their children fled that country on a raft after the fall of Saigon in 1965, but were held captive by sea pirates until rescued by the crew of a passing ship. “I made a vow that if I can survive (captivity) then I have to make a worthwhile life—I have to do something.”

- Chris Palmer—the clear winner of the prize for bearing the most professional titles—is an environmentalist, filmmaker, author, professor and standup comic. One of the world’s premier producers of IMAX-sized wildlife films, he moved the group to belly laughs with an impromptu performance in which he toggled between stand-up jokes and a professorial-like lecture on the elements of comedy. He said that his life is guided by a five-page “personal mission statement,” which he updates annually. It says, in part: “I want to live a principle-centered life, committed to personal improvement and devoted to my family and to my role as a husband and father.”

Given their dissimilarities, what could be the glue that would bind these and the other participants? It seemed that the charge to reflect on personal mission and social impact struck a chord, perhaps because of the formation of a kind of “perfect storm” bearing directly on the participants’ lives. At the time of this event—June of 2008—three phenomena converged.

**First, volatility in history:** This is a time of momentous change, challenge and opportunity at all levels—a time that calls more than ever for good journalism.

The four days of conversation were peppered with references to historic news stories of all kinds, from religious wars to global warming to the continuing fallout from the “9-11” terrorist attacks, the Asian Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. (Yet to be felt at the time of this event were the full effects of the global recession and the historic election of Sen. Barack Obama as U.S. President.)

To be sure, the gravity of these events only served to reinforce the journalists’ drive to want to cover them as stories. But it also forced them to attempt to parse the fuzzy gray lines separating news reporting, the desire to promote change and the label of advocacy. Are you a journalist if you express a point of view or leverage the wisdom that you have gathered? Is the impact of journalism blunted by the rules and constraints of journalism? Is the purpose of journalism achieved if no change occurs?

“On the biggest story that I covered for four years—Rwanda—I had tons of people writing me and tons of appreciation for my work, but zero impact on actually getting this country and this government to do anything about it,” said Michael Skoler, executive director of the Center for Innovation in Journalism and a former NPR foreign correspondent.

Vu Thanh Thuy, for one, does not hesitate to step out of the traditional role of reporter. When Houston became a magnet for Vietnamese Americans fleeing Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast, she quickly used her station to organize emergency help, broadcasting pleas for food, shelter and volunteers. “I realized that even though I am a journalist, I had to put the microphone down and pull up our sleeves to help,” she explained.

Margaret “Peggy” Engel, director of the Alicia Patterson Journalism Foundation and a former reporter, was not alone in criticizing the profession’s inattention to the question of impact. She recalled a series of horror story exposés she once produced for the *Des Moines Register* about the treatment of poor people, orphans and the mentally ill in state facilities that are called “poor farms.”

“Nothing changed as a result of these series, and I was really depressed about it for a long time,” Engel said. “You know, it was really a 50-50 dice roll whether things would have any impact or not.”

**Second, volatility in journalism:** This is a time in which the profession and the business are changing—“convulsing” may be a more accurate term—in unpredictable ways.

Writers are being asked to blog, to carry video cameras or to “tweet,” and at least one newspaper has outsourced beat some reporting to India. Craigslist.org and other “click-and-buy” services have eroded the advertising-based business model for newspapers and generated a tidal wave of newsroom layoffs. On the second day of the event, the participants noted the tragic death of Tim Russert, the widely respected moderator of NBC News’ “Meet the Press,” which seemed in some way to carry a larger meaning within the context of the discussions.

The disruption has forced many of the participants to focus hard on preserving—or alternatively, reinventing—journalism at the same time as they worry about job security for themselves and their newsroom colleagues.

“My challenge is to figure out what to hold on to and preserve and what to let go of,” was the way Keith Woods, dean of faculty at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and one of the conference facilitators, summed up the situation. “And my strongest instinct has been to hold on to two things very dear to me. One is the organization that I work for and, directly connected to that is, the industry or profession that I serve and that we serve.”

Michelle McLellan, a journalist and newsroom consultant, said that reporters are being challenged to engage the public in new and often challenging ways especially because interactive media technologies have broken down the walls that separate them. She decided to turn her attention to the need to change “newsroom culture” while serving as public editor for *The Oregonian*, a job that forced her to listen daily to the complaints of readers.

“The newsroom culture is one of the most defensive, negative cultures ever studied,” she said. “This is why we see denial as a first response.”

“There is a lot of talk about the mainstream media dying,” agreed Skoler, who created Public Insight Journalism, a way to enable journalists and citizens to combine forces on complicated stories. “I am convinced that the mainstream media are committing suicide. We are our own worst enemies.”

**And finally, volatility in the personal lives of the participants.** This is a time in which the participants seemed to be asking themselves, “What’s next?”

The momentum for this change can come from within or from without. For many, the “what’s next?” question seemed to be part of a natural progression. Each participant was highly proficient in his/her work ... tested by fire ... recognized by peers ... acknowledged by their communities as leaders ... and known for setting high goals. Some noted that life experiences—and yes, age—can build one’s sense of confidence and fuel a desire to put one’s skills and influence to good use. Clearly, these were newsroom veterans, not twenty-somethings.

“One of the great things about the profession is that we really do get better with age—or at least we can,” said Connie Schultz, the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *Plain Dealer* in Cleveland. “... I keep feeling that I’m shedding with every decade. I’m shedding more of the things that held me back.”

A dramatic example of personal change came from writer Elliot Jaspin, who had recently left his job with Cox Newspapers following a dispute over his investigative project into racial violence in the U.S. His exhaustive probe showed that African American families were violently and systematically driven out of communities in many parts of the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s. In his 2007 book, *Buried in Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America*, Jaspin not only laid out the evidence but also criticized the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the chain’s flagship newspaper, for downplaying the racial violence at the time.

Jaspin told the group that he felt abandoned by the profession because no one spoke out during his battles with Cox executives. But he also was philosophical about the experience of being in “free fall.”

“Several times throughout my life I have been in the situation I am in now where everything is sort of up in the air and things are in this state vague,” he said. “There was a time I used to get very anxious about that, and what I’ve come to realize is that these periods, where everything is in flux, have been the most creative times in my life.”

In fact, Jaspin has racked up numerous credits over his career. Among them, he shared a Pulitzer Prize in 1978 for his reporting on Jimmy Hoffa, and he launched a new trend in reporting techniques when founded the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting.

For these and other journalists, therefore the perfect storm presents profound personal dilemmas and struggles: Has journalism changed so much that I no longer fit? Or, is journalism, in fact dying and no longer an option? Or, have I changed so much that I’ve outgrown the constraints of journalism—it no longer allows me to do all the things I’m capable of doing? Can I help journalism ride out the storm, and can I shape journalism so that it fits my needs?

Each participant answers these questions, and the questions that framed the beginning of this report, in his or her own way. For Siok Sian Pek-Dorji, a Singaporean journalist who began working in Bhutan in 1987, the times are ripe to focus on spreading the need for media literacy

in that country. The introduction of television to this remote South Asian country in 1999 has had a dramatic effect on the local culture. Sexy commercials, for example, have altered people's traditional definitions of beauty.

“Before TV, women in Bhutan were beautiful, no matter what, whether you're tall, thin, short or overweight” she said. “But now, with television we struggle with these images. Everybody wants to look like models on fashion TV.”

Others will plot their own courses through the perfect storm.

Renee Ferguson, the television reporter, said she wanted to develop a major project—perhaps a feature-length documentary— about a serial killer that has dogged her conscience for years. Vu Thanh Thuy, the Vietnamese radio broadcaster, decided it was time to focus on grooming a new generation of leaders who could take her place in Houston some day. Chris Palmer, the wildlife filmmaker and comic, said he wished to examine how society talks about aging and dying. Michael Skoler, the creator of Public Insight Journalism, had already made a decision to take a sabbatical to ponder his future. He was leaving directly for Mexico, with his family and a guitar, which he was learning to play.

Like the old newspaper cliché, only time will tell how these decisions will work out.

“Eventually it's all going to play out in some way,” Elliot Jaspin said of his decision to “retire” from journalism. “I'm like the guy who jumps off of a 15-story building and at the 10<sup>th</sup> story they hear him say, ‘So far so good.’”

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The preceding report was not meant to exhaustively document the four days of discussions. Rather, it presents one interpretation as offered by an informed observer.

Gayatri Naraine, the Brahma Kumaris' Representative to the United Nations, was another observer who was invited to offer a spiritual intervention from time to time. Here's how she summed up her reflections to the group at the conclusion of the program:

“On Thursday evening, your faces were very different. Your faces had deep concern, deep challenges; huge frowns, that indicated you came in with sense of knowing that this weekend was going to be a weekend for a safe environment to look at whatever you brought in.

“Today what I'm hearing is that there is a recognition that somehow, ‘The answer is within me and I'm beginning to listen to that answer.’ But it's like taking a small child in the ocean and saying, ‘Swim.’ The kid is looking for the parent to tell me, ‘What I'm about to do is safe.’ This is a paradox. You really know what you want to do—but you want someone to tell you how to do it.

“Maybe the time has come to move out on your own rights. When we talk about empowerment— not just feeling good about myself, but having something awakened within me

about what the world means to me—it means giving it with grace. It means not having someone to tell you whether it is right or wrong. We have a saying, ‘We’re the ones the world is waiting for.’”

## Reflections from the Participants

### *International Dialogues for Thought Leaders in Media: Journalism*

*“I am inspired to use all this accumulated negative stuff, all this bad stuff that’s been happening around me the past 15 or so years, and to turn it into something creative and positive.”*

**Dejan Anastasijevic**, senior investigative reporter, *VREME* weekly, and freelance Balkan correspondent, *Time Magazine*.

*“I’ve been inspired by a lot of individuals in the nonprofit sector... What Just Media is about is helping to more effectively tell those stories.”*

**Henry Ansbacher**, founder and executive director, Just Media.

*“I discovered this talent I probably inherited to be a mediator. Somebody was questioning, am I doing activism or journalism? You’re doing pure journalism when you are trying to change things.”*

**Patrice Barrat**, managing director, Article Z, and founder the NGO Bridge Initiative.

*“I was a real journalism snob, and I thought unless you were in New York or Washington or running around a war zone you weren’t doing important news.”*

**Maud “Missy” Beelman**, deputy managing editor, *The Dallas Morning News*.

*“It’s the electronic overload ... People need electronic shepherds to haul them through the wilds of the digital world.”*

**Margaret “Peggy” Engel**, director, Alicia Patterson Journalism Foundation, and managing editor, The Newseum.

*“Yeah, who is going to call out the racists? Who’s going to call out the misogynists and the bigots?”*

**Renee Ferguson**, investigative reporter, NBC5 News (Chicago).

*“What really to me is courage is when you are true to your beliefs ... and that’s an internal thing. The world may say you are an idiot, but you say that I was true to what I believe in.”*

**Elliot Jaspin**, freelance journalist and author, *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing*.

*“It takes courage to break new ground—to go against the ‘easy way’ of the majority. And it also takes courage to rethink the way we do what we do—knowing our real motivation, our ethic and the moral values guiding us.”*

**Eric LeReste**, senior producer, Canadian Public Television’s Enquête.

*“The traditional journalism paradigm does not allow you to go to people and get them personally invested in taking action. There’s a level of engagement that you really can’t accomplish even with really good journalism.”*

**Michele McLellan**, journalist and newsroom consultant.

*“We’re almost chained to our desks. We’re almost tied to the old way of thinking of things.”*

**Victor Merina**, freelance writer and senior fellow, Institute for Justice and Journalism.

*“The reason shark numbers are plummeting all around the world is because to some extent the negative portrayal of sharks in the media. So for someone like me who’s a conservationist, we try to convey to people that sharks are important and should be treated with respect.”*

**Chris Palmer**, environmental and wildlife film producer and Distinguished Film Producer in Residence, American University.

*“When I looked for the Caribbean on the Internet, I would see only certain things ... tourism, reggae, some calypso. I just wanted to kind of add to that in whatever small way I could.”*

**Georgia Popplewell**, managing director, Global Voices, and founder, Caribbean Free Radio.



*“Here’s why we can’t be afraid: Fear cripples you, period. It cripples you personally as well as professionally. It’s just a bad thing.”*

**Connie Schultz**, columnist, *Plain Dealer*  
(Cleveland).

*“This village elder was telling me, ‘You know, I never felt that I was part of the town ‘til I heard the name of our place mentioned on the radio.’ That really struck me.”*

**Siok Sian Pek-Dorji**, founder, The Center for  
Media, Democracy and Civic Education (Bhutan).

*“Courage in journalism is often believing that what you do matters ... even in the face of declining audiences, big stories that seem to face into obscurity all too quickly, and constant demands to do more with less.”*

**Michael Skoler**, executive director, Center for  
Innovation in Journalism.

*“Journalism to me is not a job, it is a commitment.”*

**Vu Thanh Thuy**, CEO, Radio Saigon Houston,  
editor-in-chief, *Saigon Weekly News*.

### **Program Committee**

**Roberta Baskin**, director of the Investigative Team, ABC7/WJLA-TV (Washington, DC).

**Jon Funabiki**, professor of journalism and director of the Renaissance Journalism Center, San Francisco State University.

**Linda Gerber**, founder, Linda Gerber Productions, Inc. (Chicago, IL).

**Gayatri Naraine**, representative to the United Nations, Brahma Kumaris, (New York).

**Judy Rodgers**, founder, Images & Voices of Hope (Haines Falls, NY).

**David Sluyter**, retired president, the Fetzer Institute (Kalamazoo, MI).

**Dr. Robert M. Steele**, Eugene S. Pulliam Distinguished Visiting Professor of Journalism,  
DePauw University (Greencastle, IN).

**Keith M. Woods**, dean of faculty, The Poynter Institute for Media Studies (St. Petersburg, FL).

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