

step, which took the paper over “the line from objectivity to advocacy.”

- The 39,000-circulation *Grand Forks* (N.D.) *Herald* “embarked on a ‘Community Conversation’ with its readers via coffee klatches, focus groups, and polls,” and even lent an editor to the local Chamber of Commerce to work on its similar project. “By opening lines of communication, the *Herald* benefited both citizens and the community,” Jurkowitz writes, but the paper should have kept the business group at arm’s length.

- The *Spokane Spokesman-Review* “offered free pizza to the 1,500 residents who gathered in backyards to discuss what they liked and didn’t like about where they lived,” then hired a consultant to turn their ideas into a lengthy report on the future of eastern Washington. To finance the \$75,000 project, the newspaper contributed \$30,000 and, in the words of a top editor, “went out, hat in hand to the banks, the movers and the shakers,” to raise the rest. This, observes Jurkowitz, “put the newspaper in the awkward position of having local, downtown powers finance a

newspaper project that directly affects their interests.”

- After two police officers in Charlotte, North Carolina, were shot while pursuing a suspect, the *Charlotte Observer* launched Taking Back Our Neighborhoods, an ongoing project that in a series of articles took an in-depth look at the city’s most crime-ridden areas. Reporters produced “some of the most unflinching, detailed urban reporting in recent memory,” Jurkowitz says. The *Observer* also formed a partnership with United Way of the Central Carolinas, which funneled hundreds of volunteers into the blighted areas. City hall and some private businesses also took some actions. “The paper’s effort fell within the bounds of legitimate, if rare, newspaper advocacy and philanthropy,” Jurkowitz says, noting the *New York Times*’ annual Yuletide appeal in behalf of the city’s neediest. The *Observer*’s project “galvanized an entire city and fueled the effort to improve blighted urban areas”—the kind of response, he concludes, that “provides the most persuasive argument for encouraging public journalism.”

Anything for a Buck

“The TV Tabs’ New Tone” by Frank Houston, in *Columbia Journalism Review* (Jan.-Feb. 1996), 700 Journalism Bldg., Columbia University, New York, N.Y. 10027.

Something almost as strange as an Elvis sighting has been happening at TV’s sleazy “tabloid” news programs, reports Houston, an editor at *Columbia Journalism Review*. As a recent commercial for *A Current Affair*—showing a dump truck rumbling through a suburban neighborhood, then plunging off a cliff—explains, “We took out the trash.”

Syndicated shows such as *A Current Affair*, *American Journal*, and *Inside Edition* have shifted their focus from gossip to investigative journalism, Houston says. While Hollywood gossip is still doled out by *Extra* and *Entertainment Tonight*, and Viacom’s top-rated *Hard Copy* is sticking with its entertainment-and-sensation recipe, the other TV tabloids have begun “digging up consumer fraud and rooting out political misdeeds with the same zeal they once applied to stories about topless donut shops and Joey Buttafuoco.” *A Current Affair*, which is a decade old and the original TV tab, has lured a new anchor away from

Dateline NBC, established a Washington bureau, hired 20 new investigative staff members, and (television being television) launched a \$4 million marketing campaign to introduce its new look. King World’s *Inside Edition*, begun in 1988, always presented some investigative pieces, but in recent years it has had a lot more of them, and some—notably a series about a flaw in the rear-door latch of Chrysler minivans—have had an impact.

The shift to investigative reporting, Houston says, has to do with ratings and demographics. *A Current Affair* began remaking its image after finishing a distant third in the ratings race last year. The syndicated TV tabloids are seen by an estimated audience of more than 20 million people, but advertisers, who want to target affluent viewers likely to purchase their products, “are increasingly looking beyond pure ratings numbers.” So—for the moment at least—the TV tabs have found “religion.”