A Note about This Issue Guide and NIF

Each guide in this series for National Issues Forums (NIF) outlines a public issue and several choices for addressing that issue. Each choice reflects widely held concerns and principles, rather than conforming to any single public proposal. Panels of experts review manuscripts to make sure the choices are presented accurately and fairly. By intention, issue guides do not identify individuals or organizations with partisan labels such as Democrat, Republican, conservative or liberal. The goal is to present ideas in a way that encourages readers to judge them on their merit. Issue guides include quotations from experts and public officials when their views appear consistent with the principles of a given approach. But these quoted individuals might not endorse every aspect of the approach as it is described here.

National Issues Forums or the “NIF network” is a nonpartisan, informal association of educational and community organizations that convene forums for citizens to deliberate about public issues. The network includes libraries, churches, schools, community and neighborhood associations, as well as chapters of national organizations and associations of community groups. The associations and organizations select topics based on citizens’ concerns, then design and coordinate their own forum programs, using NIF guides such as this one or issue guides they create themselves. These abridged editions have been rewritten for both adult and young new readers.

Public deliberation or choice work is a way for a diverse group of people to make decisions together about the common problems they face. Deliberation is a form of talk that is different from everyday conversation or adversarial debate. The deliberative process helps people — who use choice work to weigh the costs and benefits of various options for action — to see issues from other points of view. Deliberation seldom ends in complete agreement but it can identify common directions and shared purposes. As first reactions mature into more reflective and shared judgments, deliberation may enable the citizens to speak in a public voice.

About NIFI

Encouraging public deliberation is the objective of the National Issues Forums Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, and independent organization. For more information on forums, log on to the NIFI Web site: www.nifi.org.

This issue guide, adapted from materials written by Richard C. Harwood, was prepared by the Kettering Foundation for the National Issues Forums network.
Introduction
Good news reporting is very important for a strong democracy. But many Americans no longer trust the media. How did this happen? And how can we fix it?

Approach #1: Strengthen Journalists’ Conduct
It is a journalist’s job to gather and write the news. There should be a clear set of standards for doing that job. Journalists need to follow those rules. And they need to be held responsible for breaking them.

Approach #2: Open Up the Marketplace
Most news sources are owned by only a few huge companies. Often, they care more about profits than about good news reporting. We must break up the big companies that control the news. We need more voices in the marketplace.

Approach #3: Get the Public In
The media make all the choices about the news we get. The public has almost no say. There should be more talk between journalists and citizens. The media may not like it. But citizens should insist.

Comparing Approaches

What Are National Issues Forums?

Post-Forum Questionnaire
September 11 reminded us how important the media are in America. We rushed to our TV sets and radios. We read about the event in our newspapers. And we turned to the Internet for the latest news. We followed the story for weeks and months.

The news media tell us what is happening in the world. They help us learn what is going on in the nation. The media not only inform us. They also get us started thinking and talking about public issues.

But what do people really think about the media? “Not much,” many Americans say. One group of 20 citizens in California had a lot to say. They were brought together to talk about the media.

Some accused the media of lying and of using people. Others called the media mean and spiteful. And they said the media focus too much on sex and violence. Only 2 of the 20 people felt differently. They thought the media were doing a good job.

Of course, there are good news media to choose from. But people say that there are far more bad ones. We need news media we can trust. What has gone wrong? How can we restore citizens’ trust in the media?
Many journalists see the problem, too. They see different causes. And they have different ideas about what needs to be done. But they all agree that the news media need fixing.

**A Big Problem**

High-tech advances have greatly changed American life in the past 50 years. We can now get news faster than ever. And we can get it 24 hours a day. This puts more pressure on journalists to “get the story first.” This can sometimes work against certain rules journalists should follow. One rule is to get the facts right. What happens to that rule in the rush to get the story first?

The role of big business has changed the media picture a lot. A few huge companies have bought many smaller media companies. Take the Gannett Company, for example. In 2000, it was already the largest newspaper owner in the U.S. It then
away from reporting the news citizens in a democracy need.

But there is another way to look at this issue. What if what we have is what Americans really want? We may complain, when asked about the state of the media. But many of us read the latest gossip about the rich and famous. We follow all the hot stories.

So, many people have mixed feelings. They do not approve of such stories taking over the media. But they cannot resist reading and watching them.

**What Should We Do?**

Of course there are no quick or easy answers. Many people have the same sense of the problem. But they do not agree on its causes. And they vary in their ideas of what to do about it.

This book lays out three different approaches to the issue. Each reflects a different view of the causes of the problem. Each suggests a different course of action to help solve it:

**Approach #1** says journalists have lost sight of their responsibilities to be honest and fair. The media should adopt a set of standards for good reporting. Journalists who do not follow these rules should be held responsible.

**Approach #2** says too many news sources are owned by too few companies. This makes profits more important than civic duty. We must break up these huge media businesses. We must make more room for different voices.

**Approach #3** says that the public and the media are too far apart. There should be give-and-take between citizens and journalists. The media may not like this. But citizens must take strong action to make it happen.
The video was awesome. Two pickup trucks crashed into each other and exploded. Wow, what a story!

But it was all a fake.

It was a story on NBC’s “Dateline.” The story was about a claim that GM trucks were not safe. NBC wanted to make the point in a big way. They filled the gas tanks to overflowing. They put on gas caps that did not work. And they attached explosive devices to the truck frames.

NBC admitted all this, later. They said they should have told viewers what they had done.

Then there were the two writers on The Boston Globe. Patricia Smith was always finding interesting people. For years, she wrote many great stories about them. There was only one problem. These people did not exist. She made up the stories.
Mike Barnicle was another star on *The Boston Globe*. It turned out that he had been copying from other people’s writing. He also stole ideas and made up people. Both journalists were finally fired. Neither of them cared about the truth. The public trust has been broken by these journalists and many others.

According to Approach #1, journalists themselves are the problem. Joann Byrd of the *Washington Post* put it this way: People do not see the media as serving the public anymore. They believe journalists are just in it for themselves. For some journalists, the goals are to make money or advance their careers. Some just want to become famous. They do not care what they have to do to succeed.

What can be done? In this view, journalists must follow clear standards for gathering and writing the news. And they must pay a price if they fail to do so.

**Standards**

The trouble is that there are no clear standards for journalists. Approach #1 says journalists must develop such standards. And they should post them to let citizens know what to expect. Many Americans argue that setting standards is the least the media should do. Without them, there are no responsible news media.

Recently, some news media groups have been talking about standards. They have also discussed how to get journalists to live by them. One of these groups is the American Society of Newspaper Editors. They have listed six standards for good news reporting.

> News of a community should be balanced and fair. It should cover all the voices in the community.
> The reporters should get the facts right. And they should get the right facts. That means getting all the
facts that will help readers understand the story.

▶ The paper or broadcast station must act as a leader. It must cover the important news. And it must help people see how to move forward.

▶ Journalists must help connect the public to important issues in the community.

▶ Journalists must understand the community they serve. And they must stick with good standards of writing over time.

▶ Journalists must make good choices about what to report on. They should cover the events that are important to the community.

Other press and broadcast groups have also developed sets of rules. Station KGUN-TV in Tucson has created a Viewers’ Bill of Rights. The station has posted this list on its Web site.

Some say setting standards is not enough. Journalists will have to be trained to follow them. Journalists tend to follow their instincts. They are used to reporting on exciting human interest stories. They are drawn to gossip about the stars. They are attracted by awful crimes. And they like to cover famous trials.

The media must be committed to steering journalists away from such stories. In this view, they have a much more important job to do. A democracy depends on informed citizens. Citizens depend on the news media to keep them informed. Reporters should be better trained for that job in schools and newsrooms.

**Licensing Lawyers?**

Some people say journalists should be licensed. Doctors and lawyers are licensed by the state. And they are required to follow rules of ethical practice.

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**KGUN Viewers’ Bill of Rights**

**A SUMMARY**

- You have a right to know what is going on.
- You have a right to ethical news gathering.
- You have a right to privacy.
- You have a right to good news.
- You have a right to newsworthy crime coverage.
- You have a right to stories that suggest answers to problems.
- You have a right to ask us questions and get the answers.

Albert Shanker was head of a teachers’ union. He argued that teachers should be tested before they could teach. Others did not agree. “Teachers have graduated from college,” they said. “Why should they be tested?”

“That’s easy,” Shanker replied. Lawyers are college graduates, too. “But they have to take a bar exam.” Other professionals also have to take exams. They get licenses to practice only if they pass the test. Teachers should be required to do this, too, Shanker said.

Why not apply Shanker’s ideas to journalists, Approach #1 supporters ask. It would help restore public trust in the news media. A 1996 survey of 3,000 people showed support for the idea. Some 54% favored licensing of journalists.

**Admitting Mistakes**

Reporters often do stories about other peoples’ mistakes. They say that the public has a right to know. In this view,
journalists should come clean as well. They should be willing to explain why they do certain things. The public has a right to know about them as well.

Some journalists do not favor the idea of admitting mistakes. They fear it will lead to public distrust of the media. But this is wrong, according to ethicist Michael Josephson. A public accounting is just what the public wants, he says.

People are not shocked to hear that someone may have done something wrong. What feeds public distrust is the media’s view that “we know what’s best.” Too much of that is going on behind closed newsroom doors.

So, let us say that the media develop standards. Let us even say that journalists have to become licensed. They would still have to learn to admit mistakes. That would be a big step forward, Approach #1 supporters say.

One example of this came out during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The *New York Times* took a hard look at its own reporting. They put out “Trust Me: A Media Guide,” written by Jane Fritsch. She traced the source of rumors that had been reported as facts. The paper found that very few of them were, for sure, facts.

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**What Can Be Done?**

- Journalists should develop standards that let citizens know what to expect of them.
- Journalists should be better trained in good journalistic practices.
- Journalists should be licensed to ensure that they will follow accepted standards.
- Journalists should be made to account to the public for their actions.
The *Times* found out something else as well. Some of the worst rumors had come from the most respected media. These included *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*. It even included the *New York Times* itself.

Admitting to these kinds of mistakes is rare, according to Howard Kurtz. Kurtz writes about the media for the *Washington Post*. Most news media do not share these things with the public. Here is what that says, according to Kurtz. It says that media practices can stay behind closed doors. The public has no right to look in.

The public is aware of this double standard: The media can get into everyone’s business. But nobody can get into theirs. That helps drive the public anger at the media, Kurtz says.

### Other Views

Some people do not think this approach will work. It will not change what is happening today, they say. The media have tried ways to improve themselves before. They have not been much of a success. One group, called the National News Council, was started in the 1970s. It was made up of media people and concerned citizens. The group died in the 1980s, for lack of interest.

Licensing journalists is not an answer either, some say. The accountants who worked for Arthur Andersen were licensed. These accountants were supposed to oversee Enron’s financial records. The records turned out to be a mess. And many people suffered from Enron’s collapse.

Being licensed did not prevent these accountants from doing wrong. A license is just a piece of paper. It does not control how you behave.

### Costs and Tradeoffs

- **Who should set the standards: journalists? citizens? media owners? And who should be in charge of enforcing standards?**
- **Tough exams for licensing do not stop bad conduct. Look at the terrible mess at Enron and other big companies. Many licensed accountants knew their jobs. But they did not do their jobs.**
- **Standards mean that there have to be rules. Who do we want looking over the shoulders of news editors?**
- **Holding journalists to tough standards could cause them to be too careful. Some of the best stories result when reporters take chances.**

Here is another thing that may be wrong with this approach. It calls for developing standards for journalists. But who is to say what good journalism standards are? The journalists themselves? Citizens? Owners of the news media?

And suppose standards would make a difference. How much time would it take to agree on standards? How long would it take for them to be put into practice? Can we afford to wait that long?

There is a different kind of question to think about as well. Is the conduct of journalists the real problem today? Robert Gabordi, executive editor of the *Asheville Citizen-Times*, does not think so. He says that most journalists are committed to their work. “This is not a job we do. It’s not just work. It’s about leaving this community a better place.”

The next two approaches suggest that there are different forces at work. Higher standards alone cannot restore public trust in the media.
“Nightline” has been on the air every night for 22 years. On the show, Ted Koppel talks about the most important news stories of the day. The show always gets high ratings. Critics like it, too.

In March 2002, ABC thought about making a change. They began talking to David Letterman about filling Koppel’s time slot. ABC wanted to get rid of “Nightline.”

Why would ABC want to do that? It was one of the best news shows on the air. It was getting plenty of viewers. The problem was that these were not the right kind of viewers. The viewers that advertisers want to reach are aged 18 to 49. They say that this age group buys most of the products they sell. They wanted to get more ad income for the network.

The hunt for profits seems to be taking over the news media. Newsman Dan Rather complains about the constant pressure to stay within budget. He says it acts like a choke-hold on newsmen. The choices they make are more about money, than about news.

Newspapers face the same pressure. Jay Harris was a publisher of the San
Jose Mercury News. He quit rather than make budget cuts in the newsroom. Here is what he told a meeting of newspaper editors:

“A good newspaper and a good business go hand in hand.” But what does it mean to be a good business, Harris asked. How much profit is enough? How do you balance business concerns with serving the public?

“Maybe that is the most important question,” he said. A newspaper is a public trust, as well as a business. That makes it different from other businesses.

This is the basis for Approach #2. Supporters of this approach agree with Approach #1 about one thing. There is too much trash in the news media today. But Approach #2 does not blame journalists. It blames the fact that the news media are now big businesses.

Only a few huge companies own almost all the news media. These companies want to earn profits for their investors, Approach #2 supporters say. They are less interested in serving the people. Have the media given up their duty to American democracy?

Dan Rather says heads of media companies are not bad. They are just afraid. They are afraid of ratings going down. They are afraid of costs going up. And they are afraid of the prices of their stocks going down. “They have to deliver to the bottom line,” he says.

Those who favor Approach #2 want action. They want to open up the marketplace. They want to break up the big companies that own the media. There should be more diversity among those who control the media, they say. This will lead to restoring the public’s trust.

Wild Times

Media companies have been going a little crazy in the marketplace. Big companies are being swallowed up by bigger companies. Disney now owns ABC. Viacom brings us MTV and Showtime. It also owns CBS. NBC is now a part of General Electric.

Notice the makeup of some of these companies. Many of them combine news and entertainment businesses. Mixing them together is not good for democracy, some say. News values should be different from entertainment values. But it seems that entertainment values have been taking over news values.

For example, before September 11, many officials were predicting terrorist attacks. They warned that security at airports was breaking down. But news reporters were busy with stories about JonBenet and sex scandals. There was plenty of news to cover in Washington, D.C. But the public was hearing about...
Congressman Gary Condit. Condit had been accused of having an affair with an aide. She was later found murdered.

**What about the Public Interest?**

The government used to regulate the media industry pretty strictly. It was done to stop just what is happening today. That is, only a few big businesses control the news media. And business values are taking over public service values. This has happened because the government has mostly given up regulating the media.

It started almost 30 years ago with the airlines. The government used to regulate their prices and routes. It no longer does that. The airlines now do business in the open market. That means fighting for their share of the market. It means getting bigger. And it means focusing on profits. This is now true of other industries as well.

The government agency that regulates the media is called the FCC. That stands for the Federal Communications Commission. The FCC used to protect the public from certain market pressures. But that has changed.

► In 1976, TV channels were required to include some public interest programs. But starting in the 1980s these rules were relaxed. Some were thrown out. TV stations were now allowed to decide what to broadcast.

► Once, there were limits to how many TV stations one company could own. It could own TV stations that reached 25% of the nation’s people. In 1996, that limit was raised to 35%. In 2002, a court ordered the FCC to review all its limits. The FCC kept cable companies from owning TV stations in the same market. But in 2002, the court struck down that rule, too.

► For 25 years, one company could not take over a media market. They could not own a newspaper and TV station in the same area. The FCC is now thinking of changing that rule. Of course, huge companies already own most of the media. The change is that they could soon own them in the same town.

This trend is the heart of the problem, according to Approach #2. This is what lets the media ignore important issues. This allows them to favor entertainment over news. It allows them to focus on profits. Yet the public owns the airwaves. The media have a broader duty to serve citizens, in this view.

Walter Cronkite has been watching all these changes. He says media company owners should understand their responsibility. Some profits should be enough for them. They do not need the huge profits they are getting.
So, what can be done?

One idea is for the FCC to make tougher rules again. It should stop allowing media companies to make their own rules. It should once again act to protect the public interest. That means going back to some of their old rules. It means limiting how many media outlets one company can own.

More Voices in the Marketplace

There is another way to open up the market. It is to get more voices into it. Public broadcasting is one way.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) has a mission. It is to provide new kinds of programs that educate the public. CPB also wants to provide local programs. And they want to reflect the culture of a diverse group of listeners.

Many people have listened to programs CPB has funded. They include “NewsHour” and “Frontline” on TV. They support programs in Spanish and provide Native American programs. They provide links to classroom programs and lesson plans for teachers.

Supporters of Choice #2 want more of these kinds of programs. They say Americans need a mix of voices.

What Can Be Done?

- The news media have a special role in our democracy. The marketplace should reflect this. These companies should not expect to make huge profits.
- We need to limit the size of companies that own media outlets.
- The FCC should more clearly define the “public interest.” The agency should require media companies to serve the public interest.
- We should increase support for public broadcasting.

New York Times Co. Operating Profits

How else can we do our jobs as citizens? Regular networks will not put money into programs like this. That is because these programs will not get enough viewers. These programs will not bring in the profits networks want.

CPB gets very little of our federal tax money. Taxes cover only 12% of the income for public broadcasting. Now, think about this:

There are six stars in the TV program, “Friends.” Together, they make $125 million in one season. That is half the total that CPB gets for a whole year. More could be done to fund public radio and TV. Yet recent debates in Congress are about cutting funds for CPB.

In this view, we must find ways to broaden programming choices.

Other Views

Some people say that Choice #2 misses the point. We need “bigness” in the media to get the news we want. It costs a lot to gather the news. Besides, not all companies are just out to make money.

TV networks lost money after September 11. They broadcast around-the-clock news. These broadcasts were not supported by sponsors. So they earned no income. But networks still had to pay their people.

Anyhow, the marketplace works and it works well. Today, we have many choices. Just look at the Discovery Channel and The Learning Channel. Without big companies, would there be money for this kind of programming? This is just the kind of programming many people say they want.

Remember Jay Harris? He is the publisher who quit rather than make newsroom budget cuts. Here is what one journalist replied:

“Times are a lot harder in 2001 in the newspaper industry…. No one knows how long a downturn will last. Nor … how severe it will be,” he said. So you have to be ready for whatever hard times may be ahead.

If a newspaper or TV station keeps losing money, it will die.

The FCC only has control over network broadcasting. Many media messages come over cable or the Internet. The FCC has no control over these media.

This brings up another question. Do people really want something different?

Approach #2 complains about what we are getting from the media. But maybe we are getting just what we want.
In the 1980s, Columbus, Georgia, was a town in trouble. The local economy had hit hard times. There were problems with local schools. And citizens did not seem to feel they could do much to change things.

The local newspaper was called the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*. Reporters on the paper wrote some stories about the town’s problems. Nobody paid much attention. But the paper did not give up. They called a meeting of citizens to see what they thought. People told the reporters and editors how they saw the issues. After talking to citizens and experts, the paper wrote another group of stories.

This time, the stories caused a lot of excitement. So the newspaper decided to call a town meeting. About 300 people showed up to talk about what could be done.

And the paper didn’t stop there. The paper’s editor, Jack Swift, held a picnic in his own backyard. About 75 people came. They formed a new group called United Beyond 2000. Swift became one of its leaders.

What would happen if such efforts took place in other communities? There would be more give-and-take between citizens and the media. The *Ledger-Enquirer* showed that it cared...
about citizens in their town. People developed trust in their newspaper.

In fact, newspapers in other towns have tried out this approach. Big city papers in Kansas, Florida, and Ohio are among them. They have brought citizens together to talk about community problems.

Approach #3 starts just where the other two approaches start. They all understand that people distrust the kind of news they get. But Approach #1 blames the journalists. Approach #2 blames big money.

Approach #3 points to a different problem. In this view, there is a big wall between the media and the public. Reporters and editors are on one side of this wall. They decide what the public wants to know. And they decide how that news will be presented.

The public is on the other side of that wall. Citizens have little say about what the media cover. People read, watch, and listen to the news. But often they do not trust what the media tell them. Many people are disgusted by the kind of news they are getting. Problems the media cover often do not reflect their concerns.

The wall between citizens and the media must come down, according to Approach #3. Journalists should work more closely with citizens. They should find out what citizens are interested in knowing. They should ask citizens about how they see the issues.

There are many ways to get citizens and journalists together. A newspaper, such as the Ledger-Enquirer, can take the lead. Citizen groups can put pressure on local media. Citizens can even create their own news sources.

**Minnesota News Council**
Working Together

Andrea Garza knows her San Antonio neighborhood. She has raised her kids there. She is active in her church. And she helps out with community causes.

Garza has a new job. She is the neighborhood reporter for KVDA. This Spanish TV station has invited everyday citizens to become journalists. KVDA has given Garza an easy-to-use video camera. She uses that to make her stories real.

This is good for viewers, Garza says. They want to hear from “regular people like us” about issues they care about. It encourages people to get more involved in their communities, she adds.

In this view, there are many reasons to support this approach:

► It brings out new ideas for news.
► It produces news from sources people can trust.
► It creates room for more stories that matter to local citizens.

Garza’s work with KVDA proves the point, Approach #3 supporters say. The media improve when they listen to the public.

Public Referee

The Minnesota News Council is another example of citizens and news media working together. The council was started 30 years ago. It serves as a sort of referee between the press and the public. Its goal is to make sure that news stories are correct and fair.

Here is how it works: A citizen complains about a news story. The council sets up a meeting between the citizen and the news manager. The idea is to see if they can work it out. So, right from the start, they are talking to each other.

If they cannot find an answer, the council hears the case. Members of the council include 12 people from the news media. Twelve citizens also serve on the council. When the case is decided, the council puts out a press release. The news outlet that was involved is encouraged to report the finding.

Newspaper editor Donald Q. Smith is a member of the council. He tells about when he first joined. The council ruled against the news media in the first four cases. That bothered him a little, he says. But these papers did the things that brought on the complaints. That proved to him that the council was needed.

The council also organizes forums and educational programs. It puts out a newsletter on media ethics. It has helped sort out 100 complaints about how the news is covered. In about half, journalists have been asked to change their practices.
Approach #1 calls for journalists to set standards. Approach #3 gives this job to the public. Citizens help set the standards and make sure journalists are meeting them.

**Breaking Ties**

But what if none of this works? Tearing down the wall between the media and the public is not easy. For some, there is only one way to do it. That is to tear it down themselves.

The “off” button is one way to think about this approach. Quit reading the paper. Stop watching the news on your TV. Better yet, start your own news source.

Sometimes, people organize a boycott. They get together to stop using a product or a service. A boycott can be a powerful tool. Remember the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1956? Black citizens stopped riding the buses. They were protesting segregated seating practices. They did not want to be forced to sit in the back of the bus. The bus boycott was a big success. It was a turning point in the civil rights movement.

Boycotts can force the news media to rethink their practices. A few years ago, the NAACP said they would boycott the networks. The issue was the lack of minorities on TV shows. The networks agreed to change this.

A group meeting in Bethesda, Maryland, talked about today’s media. One man said what many were thinking. He said he was fed up. He thought most other people were, too. But he thought citizen action could help. “If enough people get mad all at once it can make a difference,” he said.
Each of us can push the “off” button, of course. But then what?

Some people are creating their own news sources. In some places, groups have started new little weekly newspapers. And then, there is the Internet. The Internet makes it possible for anyone to put out a newsletter.

Take, for instance, The Daily Dog. It was started in 1999 in Dallas, Texas. Its goal was to be a community newspaper. Its stories were “about what happens here every week.”

The Daily Dog has a mix of stories. Mostly they are written by people in neighborhoods. They are about zoning issues and the Dallas city council. They include profiles of local citizens everyone knows. Some stories come from other sources, if the editors think they are written well. Some bigger news media even turn to The Daily Dog, for local stories.

Things can and do change.

Other Views

These are all nice ideas, some people say. But that is all they are. Sure, it would be nice to be a journalist for a day. It might be nice to sit on a news council. It might even be great to start your own newsletter. Mounting a boycott that works is also an appealing idea.

But the real issue is different. People expect good journalism from journalists. It is they who will have to improve to regain citizens’ trust.

The news council approach has been tried at a national level. The National News Council was a group of media people and citizens. It was concerned about news coverage. It fell apart after ten years. This was due to lack of interest by those who managed newspapers.

Bringing down the wall might only bring more problems. How many people want the media more involved in their lives? Maybe it was a good idea in Columbus, Georgia. But for the rest of us? Communities do not need newspapers to act as civic clubs. We should keep some space between those who make the news and those who report it.

We live in a big and complex world. Most of the news does not take place in our backyards. It happens in places far from where we live. We have to rely on journalists to bring us these stories. They have to decide what is important.

Finally, many people say there are lots of news sources out there. We are free to pick and choose. The problem is not lack of good sources. It is that people need to choose which sources they like.

Costs and Tradeoffs

- It takes a lot of time to police the news media. Very few citizens have that time.
- We live in a big world. Much of the news happens in places far from where we live. Only journalists can bring us that kind of news. We have to rely on them to sort out what is important.
- Organizing boycotts against the media is a complex task. Are most citizens willing to spend the time for this cause?
- We might bring down the wall between the public and the media. But do we want the media involved in our lives? What about the space we need between those who make the news and those who report it?
Good news reporting is very important for a strong democracy. But more and more Americans do not trust the news media. We must change that. This issue book offers three ways of looking at the problem. Each suggests different ways of dealing with it. The ideas come from citizens and experts across the nation. This section of the book presents a short outline of each approach.

**Approach One: Strengthen Journalists’ Conduct**

Journalists need a clear set of standards to follow. And they should be required to do so. Their job in a democracy is to report the news correctly and fairly.

**What Can Be Done?**

- Develop a set of standards for good reporting. Journalists should be required to follow these standards.
- Improve training for journalists. Help them see the difference between good and bad reporting.
- Require journalists to pass a test before they can practice.
- Make reporters explain their stories if citizens complain.

**Costs and Tradeoffs**

- Accountants have to pass tough exams. This did not prevent the scandals at Enron and WorldCom.
- Like drivers’ licenses, licenses for reporters would be given by the state. That could lead to government censoring of the media.
- If standards are written, whose job would it be to enforce them?
- Holding journalists to tough standards might choke off new ideas. Would it make reporters unwilling to take risks?
**Approach Two: Open Up the Marketplace**

Only a few huge companies own most of the news media. This often means that profits are more important than good news reporting. We should break up these big companies to ensure different views.

**What Can Be Done?**
- Change the idea that huge media companies must make huge profits.
- Limit how much of one media market can be owned by one company.
- Define “public interest” more clearly. Then, insist that the news media serve that interest.
- Provide more funds for public broadcasting.

**Costs and Tradeoffs**
- Making more rules for the news media could choke off free speech.
- Huge media companies have lots of money. Without that, we would have fewer choices of programs.
- The news media are already giving many people the news they want. More government rules could make it harder for the media to do that.
- This approach calls for stricter rules for network broadcasting companies. Will these same rules also apply to cable companies and the Internet?

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**Approach Three: Get the Public In**

There must be more give-and-take between the media and the public. Citizens must have more say about the kind of news they get. And the media should become more active in community affairs.

**What Can Be Done?**
- Hold more community meetings that include citizens and journalists.
- Ignore news media that do not give us the news we want. Do not buy the papers. Turn off the TV and radio.
- Complain to the news media about poor coverage. Boycott newspapers and broadcast stations that do not respond.
- Develop local sources to cover issues other media do not cover. Start a local newsletter or a Web site.

**Costs and Tradeoffs**
- Many people may not want the media more involved in their lives.
- Most citizens do not have the resources it takes to cover the news. If left to them, the news media would get worse.
- It takes time for citizens to check closely on the news media. Would people be willing to make that effort?
- It is very hard to organize a boycott that works well. It can also cost a lot of money.
What Are National Issues Forums?

National Issues Forums are forums that bring people together to talk about important issues. These are issues that concern most Americans today. They include the economy, education, health care, poverty, and crime.

Public Deliberation

People in these forums talk about issues in a special way. It is called public deliberation. People talk about the things they care most about. They talk about different causes for the problem they are discussing. And they talk about different things they could do. There are benefits to each action. But each action also has a cost. People in forums come to understand each other’s views — even those that are different from theirs. They do not always agree. But they often find that they have views and values in common. These common views and values form the basis for public action.

What to Expect

Forums are put on by local groups around the nation. These groups could be schools, churches, or civic clubs, for example. They choose subjects based on people’s concerns. Then they design and run their own forum programs.

The forums could be small meetings or large ones. But all forums are different from just everyday talk or argument. People in the forums get issue guides such as this one. Each forum has a moderator. This person outlines what will happen in the forum. A moderator does not take part in the deliberation. But he or she helps people to stay on track.

What Are the Results?

Public deliberation helps people make good decisions. It also gives citizens a more powerful voice. That is because it brings out things that are most important to people. It is the view of the problem that comes from people most concerned with it. We call this a public voice. It often differs from the way officials look at a problem. And it is not the same as the results of a poll. It is the voice that comes from exchanging ideas with others. It comes from figuring out a course of action together. It may not be an action they all agree on. But it is usually one they can all live with.
News Media and Society: 
How to Restore the Public Trust

Now that you’ve had a chance to participate in a forum on this issue, we’d like to know what you are thinking. Your opinions, along with those of thousands of others who participated in these forums, will be reflected in a summary report that will be available to all citizens, including those who took part in the forums, as well as officeholders, members of the news media, and others in your community.

1. Do you agree or disagree with the statements below?

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2. Do you favor or oppose each of these actions?

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*continued on next page*
3. Do you favor or oppose the statements listed below?
   
   a. We should hold journalists to a set of tough standards, EVEN IF that impinges on freedom of the press. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
   
   b. We should limit the size of media companies, EVEN IF smaller companies will have to reduce the number and variety of offerings large companies can afford. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
   
   c. Local media should take a more active part in the civic affairs of their communities, EVEN IF this means journalists will be part of the news they report on, which might compromise their objectivity. ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

4. Are you thinking differently about this issue now that you have participated in the forum?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No
   If yes, how?
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

5. In your forum, did you talk about aspects of the issue you hadn’t considered before?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No

6. What, if anything, might citizens in your community do differently as a result of this forum?
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

7. How many NIF forums have you attended, including this one?
   ☐ None ☐ 1–3 ☐ 4–6 ☐ 7 or more ☐ Not sure

8. Are you male or female?
   ☐ Male ☐ Female

9. How old are you?
   ☐ 17 or younger ☐ 18–30 ☐ 31–45 ☐ 46–64 ☐ 65 or older

10. Are you:
    ☐ African American ☐ Asian American ☐ Hispanic ☐ Native American
    ☐ White ☐ Other (please specify) ______________________________

Please give this form to the forum leader, or mail it to National Issues Forums, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.
About the Kettering Foundation

Studies of public deliberation are undertaken by the Kettering Foundation (KF), a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute with offices in Dayton, Ohio, Washington, D.C. and New York. Founded in 1927, it provides its research on deliberation to members of the NIF network through guides for public deliberation and through reports on findings of interest to NIF participants. KF also compiles and reports on the outcomes of National Issues Forums. For information about the Kettering Foundation or public deliberation, contact the foundation at 200 Commons Road, Dayton, OH 45459-2799 (Phone 800-221-3657) or log on to its Web site: www.kettering.org.

Ordering Information

To place an order for this guide, write to the National Issues Forums Institute, P.O. Box 41626, call 1-800-600-4060, FAX 1-937-435-7367, or order electronically at www.nifi.org. Other recent topics in this series include terrorism, violent kids, campaign spending, public schools, urban sprawl, privacy and free speech on the Internet, gambling, jobs, alcohol, physician-assisted suicide, Social Security, and Medicare. These may be ordered from Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 4050 Westmark Drive, Dubuque, Iowa 52002. Phone 800-228-0810.

The NIF issue books — both the standard edition and the abridged version at a lower reading level, as well as videocassette versions of the same material — can be ordered from Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 4050 Westmark Drive, Dubuque, Iowa, 52002. Phone 1-800-228-0810.

The following titles are available:

By the People: Americans’ Role in the World
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Money and Politics: Who Owns Democracy?
Crime and Punishment: Is Justice Being Served?
Violent Kids: Can We Change the Trend?
A Nice Place to Live: Creating Communities, Fighting Sprawl
Public Schools: Is There a Way to Fix Them?
Alcohol: Controlling the Toxic Spill
Protecting Our Rights: What Goes on the Internet?
Gambling: Is It a Problem? What Should We Do?
Our Nation’s Kids: Is Something Wrong?
At Death’s Door: What Are the Choices?
Illegal Drugs: What Should We Do Now?
Governing America: Our Choices, Our Challenge