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WHAT KIND OF JOURNALISM DOES THE PUBLIC NEED?

Carolyn Marvin and Philip Meyer

The distinctive shape of the twentieth-century press emerged from the high value of journalistic credibility to advertisers and audiences. Advertisers wanted a trustworthy platform for their messages, the public sought reliable information, and journalists needed a loyal audience and a faithful source of economic support.

In the twenty-first century, technology is threatening to break that connection. New ways of directing commercial messages to smaller and more specific audiences are undermining support for mass media that speak to the public as a whole. This development threatens to undermine journalism’s moral foundation as well.

American journalism has been conceived as a spiritual vocation with the task of combating worldly evils that threaten the democratic spirit. "A newspaper is like a church," says author-journalist David Ignatius in one of his novels. "It is built by ordinary sinners, people who in their individual lives are often petty and corrupt, but who collectively create an institution that transcends themselves."

The metaphor that takes secular journalism to spiritual heights appeals to Western moral sentiments. Hegel noted that the press provided a kind of daily morning prayer. And during the twentieth century, the standards of objectivity and detachment, the press version of divine truth, were as uncompromising as any religious doctrine, and defended with the same faith in their power to transform the world.

Like the clergy, journalists often work for low wages and respond to the same call to rise above the corruption of material concerns to minister to a congregation of believers seeking an authoritative narrative of truth and a vision of the common good.

The important threats to journalism have thus been material ones. They include technology, that most powerful expression of human pride, and com-
merce, which distracts mortal minds from higher things. Since technology and commerce were also the material foundations of the American nation, the battle for the American soul has been unending.

Two landmark expressions of concern for the spiritual welfare of journalism marked both halves of the twentieth century. They were *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippmann, and *A Free and Responsible Press* by the Commission on the Freedom of the Press (also known as the Hutchins Commission), both efforts to set the world right with the journalistic ideals of their respective postwar periods.⁵ Writing in 1922 about media transformed by the telegraph, the telephone, and the high-speed rotary press, with the changes to be wrought by radio still only a glimmer, Lippmann worried about democracy adrift in a technologically expanding universe too much out of reach, out of sight, out of mind for citizens to comprehend.

The world was always too large for direct comprehension, of course. But in Lippmann’s eyes new technologies of communication were dangerous agents of deceptive appearance. Technological pride without wisdom portrayed the world as transparent and manageable when it was treacherously complex. It thus presented a false picture of the world.

After a quarter of a century and another world war, the Hutchins Commission, on the brink of the introduction of television and sobered by the power of radio, weighed in on the commercial threat to journalistic integrity. The commission feared an increasingly monopolistic press, feeding on a commercially driven popular culture that tempted citizens to superficial pleasures at the expense of democratic responsibilities. Commercialism was a distraction from civic virtue.

**Truth**

In the twenty-first century commerce and technology continue to raise many of the same concerns in addition to some new ones. Technology is more powerful and seductive than ever. All sides acknowledge that the digital revolution has not only vastly enlarged the reach, volume, and speed of gathering and delivering information but has transformed the character of its presentation. With the addition of the Internet to broadcast media, printed books and periodicals, network and cable television, newstands and libraries, some version of full access to the day’s intelligence, the hope of the Hutchins Commission, has been achieved for most Americans.

One might expect that opening up technical capacity would deliver a more comprehensible reality. But as communications technology expands to capture the world, visions of journalistically mastering it recede. Just as printing destroyed the illusion of an authoritative biblical text and challenged a Catholic hierarchy, conflicting journalistic accounts cast doubt on the press’s ability to present the world with authority.
In response to such uncertainties, Lippmann still hoped for a best-possible truth assembled by extrajournalistic wise men. Today popular opinion is morally ambivalent toward elites of any kind. Without public confidence in the moral authority of knowledge elites, there is less reason to hope that the public will trust the final truth to come from journalism.

The good news is that giving up on final truth still leaves intact some of the most serviceable traditions of Western rationalism and journalistic practice. Central to both is the principle that knowledge is always provisional and open to testing. What technology has shattered is not truth, which never existed in the form Lippmann and other guardians hoped for, but centuries of scaffolding designed to shore up an account of the world proposed and mostly ratified by elites.

The journalism that the public needs and deserves is trustworthy and aware of its own limitations. It strives to deploy the full available range of information-gathering and -validating techniques. This is because trustworthiness in journalism belongs not to a doctrine of salvation through grace but through works that are compatible with the best professional standards. In keeping with this goal, journalists must strive relentlessly to acquire new information-retrieving and interpreting skills, and must submit to a ruthless self-imposed transparency.

Wire and broadcast communication created the pressures of the twenty-four-hour news cycle. Now that digital communications put so many in touch so much of the time, journalists face a deadline every minute. These new challenges must be met without sacrificing those sturdy workhorses of professionalism—skepticism, multiple sourcing, firsthand investigation, and contextual explanation. But journalists must also acquire the skills to assemble and frame information with techniques that can meet more demanding standards of validity.

These include the use of statistical models to search for correlations and causal models that account for patterns and structures in the political and social worlds. An example is the way in which the Miami Herald reporter Stephen Doig correlated Hurricane Andrew’s devastation of Miami homes with their year of construction, to provide evidence of time-related corruption in enforcement of the building code. Good analytical journalism also requires subject-matter specialization. The media have been slow to recognize the value of grounding familiar journalistic skills in specialist intellectual training, including extrajournalistic certification. There are some isolated exceptions. Television weather reporters are often certified by the American Meteorological Society. Thomas Friedman, the Pulitzer Prize–winning columnist for the New York Times, holds an advanced degree in modern Middle East studies from Oxford University, while the Times’ Supreme Court reporter Linda Greenhouse holds a master of studies in law from Yale Law School. (NPR’s legal correspondent Nina Totenberg, on the other hand, is the exception that proves the rule, having dropped out of college and never attended either journalism or law school.) A number of print and broad-
cast medical reporters have medical degrees. Combining substantive knowledge
with the ability to present and interpret facts in a compelling way points to the
kind of journalism informed citizens need.

Still another aspect of trustworthiness is replicability. Journalists need to pro-
vide the transparency that permits colleagues and competitors to build on their
investigative efforts and allows audiences to judge the quality of their conclusions.
The journalism of *Time* magazine’s Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele, who
follow paper trails and reveal their sources so that other investigators can check
their results, is a good example. A trustworthy journalism must identify its sources,
protecting them as a last rather than first resort so that information is accountable.

The journalism we need should not squander its credibility by fronting
questionable sources nor failing in a timely way to disclose its biases, both editor-
rial perspectives and economic interests that may arise from financial holdings,
secondary employment, or involvement in political, civic, and other organiza-
tions. This accountability is an emergent aspect of professionalism, and calls for
journalists to commit to forthright self-examination and public acknowledg-
ment of mistakes. It takes courage and honesty worthy of the best journalistic
traditions to submit one’s own performance to the inspection of ombudsmen,
public editors, professional societies, and other agents of internal and public critic-
icism, to say how stories went wrong or how internal processes may have broken
down.

A transparent journalism respects the public enough to take it behind the
scenes and explain everything from how letters to the editor are selected to how
stories are chosen for the front page. A welcome but still far too rare develop-
ment has been the willingness of national media, including the *New York Times*
and *USA Today*, to air the events by which errors come to be made, and to insti-
tute visible steps to minimize their reoccurrence.

Sometimes the spotlight on journalistic procedures must shine from outside.
The Minnesota News Council offers a model that stood alone for years before
other venues started to experiment with it. Organizations of journalists have
found it easier to write codes of ethics than to enforce them, even when enforce-
ment consists solely of inviting public attention to the infractions. But there is
some movement in this direction.

In 2000, the board of the Minnesota professional chapter of the Society of
Professional Journalists (SPJ) publicly criticized a television reporter who
obtained evidence of a crime by committing one himself, namely, removing an
incriminating videotape from its owner’s car. “Professional journalists cannot and
will not condone these types of actions in pursuit of this story,” the board said,
citing four broad violations of the SPJ code. More recently, the national board of
the ten-thousand-member society invoked the code to denounce incidents of
blending news and advertising by broadcasters, though it stopped short of nam-
ing the perpetrators.
Public Good

Just as new technology calls into question the relationship of journalism to accuracy and truth, the new commercial developments it facilitates challenge traditional notions of journalism and the public good. By this we mean the tradition in which courageous resistance by the press to commercial pressures was long thought to confer special insight into the public good on journalists and special responsibility for offering it to their audiences. It must be said that this notion of the public good included a somewhat ambivalent regard for a public not always as politically attentive as elites might have hoped, and inclined to live out many of their hopes and dreams as consumers.

Looking back, for example, on the serious and thoughtful efforts of Lippmann and the Hutchins Commission, it is striking how blinkered and suspicious was their estimation of the public. Lippmann's view of the ordinary citizen was often just short of contemptuous. To assemble a picture of the circuit of public information in American society, the Hutchins Commission never directly consulted the readers and listeners whose interests it invoked, apparently concluding that ordinary citizens lacked the capacity to contribute significantly to that circuit. They believed that a democratic public needed to be coddled and shaped into fragile existence by journalists able to convey perspectives validated by cultural elites. Exhorting journalists to identify common goals and aspirations of the citizenry, these reformers were reluctant to legitimize many of the most popular expressions of these aspirations.

Americans are not generally opposed to a commercial press in principle. They respect its resources. An advertiser-supported journalism was morally justified by the belief that a financially independent journalism can best perform the most basic obligation of a free press: to help keep the government honest. In an era of big government, perhaps only big media have the sustained resources to challenge official malfeasance, or even to keep track of what government is doing. A market model of quasi-monopoly has been legitimized by owners who use social responsibility to gain trust and strengthen market position. But the business models being developed to exploit new communications technologies too rarely take the public interest into account.

So long as successful mass media were coveted by advertisers because they garnered the largest audiences, this monopolistic model made sense. But like today's cadres of independent specialized journalists, advertisers are finding that technology makes it cost-effective to send many more messages to smaller and smaller groups of people. Operating independently of traditional mass media, advertisers can use the Internet to precisely target ads to consumers most likely to buy, and strike quickly to make a sale when targeted consumers respond within seconds of exposure. The result threatens to undermine advertiser-supported media.
These new realities push journalism increasingly toward sources of noncommercial funding. National Public Radio offers one model for direct subscriber support. Information subsidies from government and charitable organizations are also filling some of the gap. The American Press Institute, the Poynter Institute, and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting are among the federally recognized nonprofits the newspaper industry relies on for midcareer training functions.

There are also examples of direct entry by nonprofits into the field of investigative journalism. Charles Lewis left broadcast journalism to found the Center for Public Integrity, which has won awards for its journalistic efforts. Having bankrolled much of the experimentation in civic journalism, the Pew Charitable Trusts has begun to subsidize traditional reporting through the Pew Center on the States, which generates stories and reference material for statehouse reporters.

Some journalists express reservations about taking information subsidies from foundations, fearing to open breaches through which interest groups might gain undue influence. A variety of arrangements between media outlets and commercial and noncommercial sources of support is thus likely to be most beneficial for citizen audiences.

As financial pressures on media threaten the quality of information the public receives, we must ask whether journalism can be a beacon for the public good. The answer must address our changed imagination of relations between cultural elites and citizens in the public arena. In a postmodern, multicultural country ever more aware of its religiously, ethnically, and sexually diverse communities, where democratic publics overlap but never completely coalesce, it may no longer be possible to speak comfortably of the presentation of a single unified set of goals for society.

In their response to an imagined public with no unifying value center, even the most professionally prestigious outlets have often been halting and uncertain. How the press might implement a more complex vision of the public and the public good is not always clear or practicable.

One result has been the development of a privilege gap, a vigorous but closed circuit of conversation between journalists and their elite sources from which the larger public is distanced, as striking a feature of modern journalism as the amplification of its volume, reach, and speed. This development raises challenging questions not only about journalists’ distance from their audiences, but about their social and professional relationships to those they cover. Al Neuharth, who founded USA Today for “down-home” appeal, lamented years after his retirement that his paper was changing in ways favored more by those who live “east of the Potomac and east of the Hudson.”

If some celebrity journalists have become worrisomely interchangeable with the elites they cover, stakeholder elites and the public relations experts, lob-
byists, and political consultants who serve them have become adept at journalistic techniques for manipulating public information to their advantage.

**Attention**

The privilege gap plays out in other ways. Lacking the resources and the disciplined culture of the best professional reporting, lower rungs of the information ladder ape elite style with a celebrity journalism that does not deliver much critical information and covers what is cheap and attractive. Flying in and out of hotspots for thirty seconds of smartly attired visuals is not conducive to a journalism of understanding. The veneer of false intimacy that is characteristic of such journalism ultimately reinforces the cultural and demographic remoteness of celebrity journalists from their audiences and those they cover.

Such developments reinforce the status quo from two different directions. Elite journalism becomes a remote narrative of clashes among the powerful rather than a larger story that faithfully integrates the lives and interests of nonelites. Failing to see themselves treated as participants, nonelites become willing to yawn without engaging as the elite parade passes by. The hope that the movement of minorities and women into elite status would close this gap has not been fulfilled, although it has created a more diverse elite.

A press that is not read is, of all presses, the most useless. A press may not be read if audiences believe the discussion does not concern them. It may also go unread if an impenetrable forest of apparently infinite information choices overwhelms those without the cash, the technological literacy, or the time to process them. As Herbert A. Simon noted long ago, a surplus of information creates a scarcity of whatever information consumes. Just as a surplus of rabbits creates a scarcity of lettuce, a surplus of information creates a scarcity of audience attention. Thus frustrated, the public may fail even to seek access to information. Anthony Downs developed the idea that citizens may consider their chances of affecting policy outcomes so slight as to render pointless learning about issues and candidates, or even voting. He called this response "rational ignorance." Recent work by economist James T. Hamilton suggests a set of policies to address this.

Fighting the attention barrier with sensationalism and gimmicks is an arms race that serious journalism will lose. The challenge is to bring nonelite publics into the circuit of public information as active audiences and contributors. A journalism that engages its audience does not require undiscriminating surrender to commercial formulas. Both elite and popular journalism have distinctive and legitimate content and styles of appeal. We need no Lippmanesque overseers, though anyone who wants to set up shop as a critic of the press should be welcome to do so.

The public needs a press able to communicate on more than one level. Popular media are often more allusive, fluid, and inventive than traditional news
sources. What popular media can offer to debates about the public good needs to be recognized, taken seriously, and engaged in larger discussions about participation and democratic ideals. Popular culture has always been a special domain of the public sphere where dreams and nightmares are acted out and alternatives presented against the grim determinism of fate.

When young people report that a substantial portion of their political information is filtered through late-night television comedy, adults should perceive this posture, whatever they may see as its generation-going-to-hell shortcomings, as the embryo of a politically critical sensibility. Political satire has an honored place in civic discourse. Zesty gossip and broad, puncturing portraits telegraph that something is going on, offer more or less explicit criticism, and model a shrewd distance that deflates arrogance and moralistic self-righteousness.

The public needs a journalism sophisticated and generous enough to relinquish the patronizing notion of a passive citizenry. Granted, to be informed requires sustained attentiveness, which gradually cultivates sophistication. The price of achieving sophistication remains high, and there is no way around this.

Popular or vernacular media—local news media outlets and entertainment media at both national and local levels—must be engaged by journalists and citizens to think through their responsibilities as participants in public discussion. Not every interweaving of entertainment and news is dangerous. The presentation of entertaining environments from which all news interest is excluded is nevertheless a problem. Not all news and political intelligence need come in distinct, clearly labeled packages in order to contribute to public information. Human culture has never been so neat. The best condition is the most varied condition, and demonstrates a respect for the capacity and interest of all.

The New Journalists

What the public needs from journalism in the early twenty-first century is improved information gathering and analyzing skills from the established press, and new means for hungry, critical, dogged information seekers, assemblers, and distributors who lie outside the circle of information elites to join the circuit of public information and debate. Toward this latter goal, a particularly hopeful development is new forms of journalism that are reflecting and sometimes leading conversations about critical problems that confront American democracy.

An amorphous and changing collection of Web-based information producers and consumers has emerged from the same technological crucible that presents new challenges and opportunities to traditional media. These producers and consumers are independent journalists, bloggers, and occasional authors of individual pastiches of information and commentary in Web logs that are posted to the Internet and distributed to like-minded audiences of other bloggers, journal-
ists, and citizens in dense, cross-cutting networks of participants, observers, and partisans.

Since independent journalists and bloggers generally lack the institutional infrastructure that makes serious resources available for journalistic inquiry and an institutional culture of safeguards against error and distortion, their contributions often lack the reliable accuracy and honed polish that characterize professional journalism, though these may be some of the most vital discussions taking place right now in America. Fearing to be confused with amateurs who lack professional standing and whose standards they deplore, some established journalists and critics are predictably alarmed. But as a stimulus to public debate, the scrappy, rasping journalism for which blogs are known stacks up well against an established journalism that too often takes cover under a bland civility that reflects cowardice and indifference rather than professionalism.

The technological narrative of this development is a familiar one. Impertinent media horrify established media that are forced to define and sharpen their own standards in response, and impertinent media gradually adopt an increasingly professional manner until they spawn the next generation of information challengers. USA Today was first denounced, then imitated, by established journalists. Now, closing the loop, USA Today has become more mainstream, with longer stories and periodic investigative efforts.

When early radio and television practitioners challenged print media, they were just as furiously denounced for lowering journalistic sights. Although the rigor of newspaper journalism was never as great as its defenders insisted, these challengers brought their own unique gifts to the information arena and gradually absorbed the best lessons of professionalism.

Few would now turn back the clock to a time before radio and television journalism. Fair observers must acknowledge that the disclosure of serious journalistic errors by national media is a sign of higher, not failing, standards. The increased velocity of information makes errors easier to catch, and competition makes managers more eager to fix them.

The path to improved public information is not to eliminate independent, noninstitutional news efforts, but to support them with greater resources and attention. This will improve their product and pave the way for increasing self-criticism and competence. One promising site, the Campaign Desk, is a venture of the Columbia Journalism Review and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and reviewed the coverage of the 2004 presidential campaign in traditional media outlets. Other blogs have taken on the coverage of the Iraq War.8 Meanwhile, established media are rapidly incorporating the special capacities of Web sites to enhance their own information distribution and audience convenience.

There's more to the current ferment that is also hopeful. What's important about blogs, Listservs, and chat rooms is that they make participation and
response so easy. The Internet provides technically facilitated opportunities for nonelites to enter the fray, not only with innovative sources and compilations, but as civic commentators, where “civic” refers to a level of passionate and energetic engagement in public affairs and a greater willingness to exchange views and options than can be had in relation to the established press.

This is not to ignore the well-documented skew of even popular computer-based resources toward white middle-class males, though the vast majority of these folks are not culturally powerful elites. These upstart bloggers remind us of the challenge that the now idealized bourgeois public sphere emerging from eighteenth-century mercantile culture posed to monarchical absolutism. Pamphleteers, journalists, and essayists were interested and energetic, full of gossip, rumor, and partisanship and not evenly distributed in the population. But their imperfect and engaged efforts attracted the participation of the larger public with a developing range of opinions and interests.

Today’s larger public is not a blank slate, a child, or a neurotic. The people are not retarded, or emotionally or intellectually stunted. The multiple publics of the United States need journalists who take them seriously as citizens. They deserve a journalism that shares the stage with different levels of information and different perspectives, that tells the truth about where information comes from, that corrects itself publicly, that offers what well-trained and experienced fact-finders and observers believe these publics ought to know, that expects from these same publics the resources needed to get the job done.

Civic responsibility is a two-way street. To expect journalists to assume the sole responsibility for producing and managing the information environment is democratically unworkable. Citizens must support a press that does not let them off the hook of civic judgment by pretending to pronounce authoritatively on the world. To do its work successfully, journalism will always need the help of other institutions including schools, families, professional and cross-class membership associations, and all the complex infrastructure of civil society. Most of all, the press needs a public willing to take the time to inform itself, that will engage and talk to journalists and one another, that is willing to invest resources for quality information.

Journalism needs to accelerate its tentative moves to professionalize itself. This effort will have to come from the ground up. Journalism as a business is under such pressure to lower standards that its owners and managers alone cannot be counted on to maintain quality. For journalism to maintain its identity against all the commercial forces trying to co-opt it, working journalists must organize to set and maintain standards of both morality and craftsmanship.

Part of the definition of professionalism is access to an arcane body of knowledge. When journalists were hunters and gatherers of information, the existence of such a body of knowledge was questionable. But in an age of information surplus, they have become processors of information. Instead of merely
delivering it, they organize it, digest it, make it attractive and palatable, and guide users to understanding of the little subsets of the total that they need. Such work requires special skills. Add the need for procedural skill to the need for substantive understanding, and the education requirements are suddenly intense. Journalism schools that offer midcareer certification programs in such fields as medical and business reporting are a sign that the marketplace recognizes this need.

The other significant piece of professionalism is the moral component. The halting, sometimes uncertain, efforts of rank-and-file journalists to articulate and implement moral standards should be encouraged. Without these efforts, the public might get a journalism that can no longer be distinguished from entertainment, public relations, and advertising. Technical competence and morality must become more explicit parts of journalism’s self-definition lest it lose its identity altogether.

In the crisis of faith that bedevils journalism in the twenty-first century, we may not be able to depend on a journalism animated by grace to set out the true and the good. But we can hope for work undertaken with humility and virtuous devotion by journalists, and received realistically and with a readiness for public discussion on the part of citizens. Such developments can take us beyond cynicism or resignation to a more vigorous public sphere.

Notes

Bibliography


