

## PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

Since the first edition of this book was published in 2001, the relationship between journalism and technology has evolved considerably. The disaggregation of the audience that consumes the news has accelerated, and the crisis of confidence among journalists who produce the news has heightened. These changes leave us even more persuaded, however, that the elements of journalism remain fundamental and enduring.

To survive, journalism must adapt in form and style to reflect changes in culture, politics, taste, and technology. But as journalism changes, those who produce the news also must keep in mind the purpose and principles of producing accurate information on behalf of the citizens. Those principles and that purpose, which form the theory and function of news in civil society, are what this book tries to outline.

Many things have occurred in the last five years that seem at first glance to stand in the way of journalism's resurgence. At the turn of the millennium, first fear of change and then the dot-com bust made journalists too leery of the new medium of the Web, and it delayed their engagement with technological developments that by early 2006 had spawned countless forms of self-publishing and editing.

In 1999, a California company called Pyra Labs launched Blogger.com, a publishing system that allowed technically unsophisticated users to create and publish their own content on the Internet. These sites were known as "weblogs" or "blogs," and many citizens seized the opportunity to become their own editors. Blogs were but one factor in a spate of

x PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

technology that allowed citizens to control information. Developments in digital photography and other portable electronics made laptops, cameras, and music players more versatile and more affordable. As more people acquired the technology, Web upstarts found ways to integrate the innovations, and by 2002 people were displaying their own text, photos, audio, and video on the Internet.

While these advances were occurring, the events of September 11, 2001, played an important role in bringing millions of people online for news, community, and a chance to debate the country's future.<sup>1</sup> Internet dependency soared to new heights and hasn't dropped since. Citizens involved in the political and social dialogue helped along the notion of citizen journalism, whose early advocates foresaw a future in which anyone could create and distribute information.

Adding to the challenges facing traditional media are news aggregators like Yahoo! and Google, which launched news services that produced no original content but carried stories reported by traditional organizations around the world. While most blogs were little more than personal diaries, some emerged as opinion leaders across the American political spectrum. For example, in late 2002, bloggers helped unseat Trent Lott from his position as leader of the Senate Republicans by widely circulating a racist remark that the Mississippi senator had made at Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party.<sup>2</sup> Traditional media had all but ignored the episode.

By 2004, blogs were playing a role in the presidential primaries and nearly helped nominate a dark horse candidate in Howard Dean. That same year, a 10-minute video envisioning the media landscape of 2014 was developed by two young journalists who met at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida. This future was dominated by a Google spin-off called EPIC that produced "a custom content package for each user, using his choices, his consumption habits, his interests, his demographics, his social network—to shape the product." Most journalists now see the scenario as plausible.

At the same time, mainstream journalism has been racked by a series of scandals seemingly at every level. The fabrications and plagiarism of a young reporter on a fast track at the *New York Times* named Jayson Blair not only exposed deeper problems in the newsroom but also

triggered a staff revolt that led to the forced ousting of the paper's executive editor—an embarrassment without precedent for the nation's most important newspaper.<sup>3</sup> The desire for scoops at *USA Today*, the nation's largest-circulation newspaper, and the inability of the paper's culture to produce them properly, allowed a rogue foreign correspondent named Jack Kelley to make up lies, put them in the paper, and be protected by top editors along the way, despite concerns from below. Other controversies have cast shadows on the motives of Pulitzer Prize winners like Judith Miller and Bob Woodward. And elsewhere journalists less well known, but holding great responsibility, have also been exposed for their serious sins. On that list are Stephen Dunphy at the *Seattle Times*, fired for plagiarism,<sup>4</sup> or Diana Griego Erwin at the *Sacramento Bee*, who resigned after editors found forty-three different people she had quoted whose existence could not be substantiated,<sup>5</sup> or Chris Cecil, a young managing editor at the Cartersville (Georgia) *Daily Tribune News*, who was fired after his bosses at the 8,000-circulation daily learned that he had plagiarized columns from a syndicated Pulitzer Prize winner.<sup>6</sup> It is impossible to determine whether such transgressions were on the rise or the monitoring of the press was merely exposing more of them—or both.

There were signs of hope along the way as well. In 2005, the BBC harnessed the power of citizens in its coverage of the July London bombings, running amateur video, witness accounts, and pictures snapped with cellphone cameras. Just weeks later American news organizations proved able to provide regularly updated information and use citizen-produced content when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. Outside the traditional media, citizens gathered in chat rooms dedicated to breaking news and created perpetually updating resources, pulling information from all sources and editing each other's content to fix errors and add depth.

The ability of almost anybody to produce and disseminate text, video, and audio has also increased user demand to personalize the content they consume from other sources and preferably store it all on one site or manage it with one piece of software. In April 2006, the *New York Times* was putting the finishing touches on My Times, a service that "lets you create a personalized page with what you like best in *The*

xii PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

*New York Times* and your favorite sites and blogs from all over the Web,” and was launching blogs by editors and reporters that combined reported news with opinions and links to material produced by others.

The news is becoming less of a prepared lecture and more of an open-mike conversation, with all the pluses and minuses that implies.

The technology has continued to foment tensions between media and citizens. Journalists are under intense scrutiny from bloggers, and many organizations are struggling to integrate their online operations into the newsroom without lowering standards of reporting and verifying information. Much of that pressure is healthy. Clear away the rhetoric and animus of those who yearn for the annihilation of traditional journalism (the hated “MSM,” or mainstream media), and journalism will be better for the scrutiny that the blogosphere offers.

This flurry of activity online would not have been possible without an explosion of infrastructure. Internet penetration in American homes by 2006 stood at more than 70 percent, and more than 74 million people used broadband connections—a nearly fourfold growth since 2002. These broadband users, regardless of age, tend to consume a lot more news online than do other groups.<sup>7</sup>

This newly updated edition of *The Elements of Journalism* tries to capture the effect of these developments. This work is also enriched by deeper insights that have resulted from discussions with journalists in hundreds of newsrooms around the country through the Committee of Concerned Journalists Traveling Curriculum, a training program based on the first edition. In addition, we have been able to more finely craft the lessons of journalism history and to correct some errors of fact brought to our attention by people who have read the book as well as journalism educators who have used it in their classrooms.

Readers will find changes throughout. Many of the examples have been replaced by newer ones. In other cases, newer developments have been added to the existing incidents because they build on one another and tell a more complex story together.

The chapter on allegiance and business has been recast to accommodate several changes—the failure of several major mergers since 2001, as well as the loss of leverage newspeople have in their companies and the further accumulation of influence by accountants. We little



imagined so much would change in such a short time, given how long the battle over the soul of news companies has been going on.

Some of the changes are more obvious and predictable. Among them, the press now must not only accommodate itself to a new competitive atmosphere but also must understand and adjust to the newly amplified voice of the citizen.

Other chapters have been fleshed out as the thinking of journalists and our own reflections on certain concepts have deepened. Turning to the tools by which journalists pursue their purpose, the chapter on verification, perhaps more than any other chapter in the book, has benefited from conversations with hundreds of journalists and journalism educators in newsrooms and classrooms around the country. The treatment of objectivity has especially benefited from these discussions. As a result we feel we have come closer to describing the original understanding of objectivity as a unity of method rather than aim. In particular, the idea of transparency has gained much greater prominence in the vocabulary of journalism since the first edition appeared, and the concept continues to evolve as the interactivity of the Internet opens the process by which journalism is practiced to greater public examination. And, finally, these discussions have made it much clearer to us, and we hope to the readers of this edition, how a transparent method of verification becomes the most important tool for managing the thorny problem of bias, both useful and troubling, that plagues journalists and journalism.

Each of the remaining chapters benefits likewise from our newsroom conversations on how the various roles journalism assumes in a self-governing community are impacted as news becomes an abundantly available commodity.

In the chapter on journalism as a public forum, not only has the nature of that forum exploded with the concept of "we media," but our sense is that the Argument Culture and polarization of the media have entered a new stage, where argument weighed equally to create fireworks is giving way to something new—the promise of answers, or affirmation, a more one-sided but in some ways more settled Argument Culture. The chapter on conscience in the news also has changed markedly in the wake of scandals and upheavals large and small.

xiv PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

Perhaps most notably, readers will notice a new element of journalism here. In the first paperback edition of this book we had added A Citizen's Journalism Bill of Rights. In this new edition, the interactive relationship developing between journalism and the public has convinced us that the question of the citizen's role rises to the status of a tenth principle, The Citizen's Rights and Responsibilities.

As we approach the end of the first decade of this century, the need for structural change in the press is more widely accepted than it was five years ago. The signs of understanding are not across the board. Local TV news, for instance, does not appear to be building a future online the way network news is. In turn, some newspapers are moving more seriously online than others.

Readers may also notice that many questions remain unresolved. One question is whether the news industry has waited too long, letting too many opportunities slip by, including offers years ago to buy startup companies that now are major new-media rivals. Another question is whether consumers will care about the values that the old press embodies, or the brands—such as CBS News or the *New York Times*—that represent these values. A third question, and perhaps the most important one, is whether journalists have sufficiently mastered the principles that have sustained them over generations to ensure their place in the future.

How news is gathered is becoming more open and accessible to the public. The reaction of many journalists in the past was to tell themselves: "Never let them see how the sausage is made." The fact that this notion was never expressed openly suggested its hypocrisy even then, and the transparency of today has made it unthinkable.

Nothing since the confusion and doubt that inspired the Progressive movement early in the twentieth century has required journalists to think more deeply and creatively about what they do, how they do it, and why it is crucial to an informed democracy. The voices speaking in this book, as well as the research that supplements those voices, reveal how journalists today are returning to the issues that thinkers of that earlier era grappled with as they redefined journalism for a new century.

W  
light to

ENDN

1. PEV  
Oct
2. Oliv  
Gua  
stor
3. CN  
ww
4. Poy  
avai
5. Sack  
Her
6. Poy  
3, 20
7. PEV  
able

We hope this updated edition of *The Elements of Journalism* adds light to that discussion.

*Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel*

#### ENDNOTES

1. PEW Internet and American Life Project, "The Commons of the Tragedy," October 10, 2001; available at [www.pewinternet.org/ppf/r/46/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/ppf/r/46/report_display.asp).
2. Olivia Burkeman, "Bloggers Catch What Washington Post Missed," *The Guardian*, December 21, 2002; available at [www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,863964,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,863964,00.html).
3. CNN.com, "Top New York Times Editors Quit," March 1, 2004; available at [www.cnn.com/2003/US/Northeast/06/05/nytimes.resigns/](http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/Northeast/06/05/nytimes.resigns/).
4. Poynter online, "Encouraging Transparency in Reporting," February 15, 2005; available at [www.Poynter.org/column.asp?id=31&aid=78491](http://www.Poynter.org/column.asp?id=31&aid=78491).
5. Sacbee.com, "Rick Rodriguez: Griego Erwin Resigns Amid Internal Enquiry into Her Columns," May 12, 2005; available at [www.sacbee.com](http://www.sacbee.com).
6. Poynter online, "Georgia Newsman Fired After Lifting from Columnist Pitts," June 3, 2005; available at [www.Poynter.org/column.asp?id=45&aid=83351](http://www.Poynter.org/column.asp?id=45&aid=83351).
7. PEW Internet and American Life Project, "Online News," March 22, 2006; available at [www.pewinternet.org/ppf/r/178/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/ppf/r/178/report_display.asp).

## INTRODUCTION

When anthropologists began comparing notes on the world's few remaining primitive cultures, they discovered something unexpected. From the most isolated tribal societies in Africa to the most distant islands in the Pacific, people shared essentially the same definition of what is news. They shared the same kind of gossip. They even looked for the same qualities in the messengers they picked to gather and deliver their news. They wanted people who could run swiftly over the next hill, accurately gather information, and engagingly retell it. Historians have pieced together that the same basic news values have held constant through time. "Humans have exchanged a similar mix of news . . . throughout history and across cultures," historian Mitchell Stephens has written.<sup>1</sup>

How do we explain the mystery of this consistency? The answer, historians and sociologists have concluded, is that news satisfies a basic human impulse. People have an intrinsic need—an instinct—to know what is occurring beyond their direct experience.<sup>2</sup> Being aware of events we cannot see for ourselves engenders a sense of security, control, and confidence. One writer has called it "a hunger for awareness."<sup>3</sup>

One of the first things people do when meeting a friend or acquaintance is to share information. "Have you heard about . . . ?" We want to know if they've heard what we have, and if they heard it the same way. There is a thrill in a shared sense of discovery. We form relationships, choose friends, and make character judgments based partly on whether someone reacts to information the same way as we do.



## 2 THE ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM

When the flow of news is obstructed, "a darkness falls" and anxiety grows.<sup>4</sup> The world, in effect, becomes too quiet. We feel alone. John McCain, the U.S. senator from Arizona, writes that in his five and a half years as a prisoner of war in Hanoi, what he missed most was not comfort, food, freedom, or even his family and friends. "The thing I missed most was information—free uncensored, undistorted, abundant information."<sup>5</sup>

Call it the Awareness Instinct.

We need news to live our lives, protect ourselves, bond with each other, identify friends and enemies. Journalism is simply the system societies generate to supply this news. That is why we care about the character of the news and journalism we get: they influence the quality of our lives, our thoughts, and our culture. Writer Thomas Cahill, the author of several popular books on the history of religion, has put it this way: you can tell "the worldview of a people . . . the invisible fears and desires . . . in a culture's stories."<sup>6</sup>

At a moment of revolution in communications, what do the stories we tell say about our worldview—our fears, desires, and values?

This book began on a rainy Saturday in June 1997, when twenty-five journalists gathered at the Harvard Faculty Club. Around the long table sat editors of several of the nation's top newspapers, as well as some of the most influential names in television and radio, several of the top journalism educators, and some of the country's most prominent authors. They were there because they thought something was seriously wrong with their profession. They barely recognized what they considered journalism in much of the work of their colleagues. Instead of serving a larger public interest, they feared, their profession was damaging it.

The public, in turn, increasingly distrusted journalists, even hated them. And it would only get worse. By 1999, just 21 percent of Americans would think the press cared about people, down from 41 percent in 1987.<sup>7</sup> Only 58 percent would respect the press's watchdog role, a drop from 67 percent in 1985. Less than half, just 45 percent, would think the press protected democracy. That percentage had been nearly ten points higher in 1985.<sup>8</sup> By 2005 some of these numbers saw

slight in  
about p

W  
journal  
agree v  
nalism,  
are cor  
another  
news. Jo  
margin:  
Univers  
mation.  
larger v  
nalism:

Im  
system  
replace  
Online  
would t

Th  
provide  
and cor  
nalism  
democr  
the nev  
again in  
capitalis  
this ma  
cial for  
to prom  
lobbyin  
boost p  
whether  
that ma

In t  
pressure

slight improvements—28 percent of Americans believed the press cared about people.<sup>9</sup>

What was different that day in Cambridge was that many of the journalists in the room—and around the country—were beginning to agree with the public. “In the newsroom we no longer talk about journalism,” said Maxwell King, then editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. “We are consumed with business pressure and the bottom line,” agreed another editor. News was becoming entertainment and entertainment news. Journalists’ bonuses were increasingly tied to the company’s profit margins, not to the quality of their work. Finally, the late Columbia University professor James Carey offered what many recalled as a summation: “The problem is that you see journalism disappearing inside the larger world of communications. What you yearn to do is recover journalism from that larger world.”

Implied in that was something more important. If journalism—the system by which we get our news—was being subsumed, what would replace it? Advertising? Entertainment? E-commerce? Propaganda? Online news aggregators? Some new hybrid of all these? And what would the consequence be?

The answers matter to the public and newspeople alike. Journalism provides something unique to a culture: independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information that citizens require to be free. A journalism that is asked to provide something other than that subverts democratic culture. This is what happens when governments control the news, as in Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. We’re seeing it again in places like Singapore, where news is controlled to encourage capitalism but discourage participation in public life. Something akin to this may be taking root in the United States in a more purely commercial form, as when news outlets owned by larger corporations are used to promote their conglomerate parent’s products, to engage in subtle lobbying or corporate rivalry, or are intermingled with advertising to boost profits. The issue isn’t just the loss of journalism. At stake is whether, as citizens, we have access to the independent information that makes it possible for us to take part in governing ourselves.

In the years since 1997, when the group met in Cambridge, those pressures have only increased. During the administration of George W.

#### 4 THE ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM

Bush, the president and other top aides openly dismissed the press as nothing more than another interest group in society with its own private agenda.<sup>10</sup> While that pose may have been partly political, and the president in early 2005 would back away from that position with an endorsement of the independence of the press, these politicians were articulating something the public increasingly felt already.<sup>11</sup>

The administration also went further than either the Clinton or the previous Bush administration in creating government-produced media. It distributed deceptive video news releases to local TV stations. It paid a company to place one-sided stories, written by the American military, in Iraqi media. It also paid columnists in the United States to produce material that supported policies on education and marriage.<sup>12</sup> And it tried to criminalize whistleblowing with investigations into press revelations about extra-legal domestic wiretapping and secret prisons overseas.<sup>13</sup>

Technology did not only help the government's efforts to create and distribute material. When blogs achieved mainstream notoriety in 2004, people increasingly began to publish on their own websites. This citizen journalism movement may have helped wash away any particular fear of the idea that government was creating its own official journalism.

In 1997, the group of journalists who met in Cambridge on the cusp of these changes decided on a plan: engage journalists and the public in a careful examination of what journalism was supposed to be. We set out to answer two questions. If newspeople thought journalism was somehow different from other forms of communication, how was it different? If they thought journalism needed to change but that some core principles needed to endure, what were those principles?

Over the next two years, the group, now calling itself the Committee of Concerned Journalists, organized the most sustained, systematic, and comprehensive examination ever conducted by journalists of news gathering and its responsibilities. We held twenty-one public forums attended by 3,000 people and involving testimony from more than three hundred journalists. We partnered with a team of university researchers who conducted more than a hundred 3½-hour interviews with journalists about their values. We produced two surveys of journalists about their principles. We held a summit of First Amendment and journalism scholars. With the Project for Excellence in Journalism

we produced nearly a dozen content studies of news reporting. We studied the history of those journalists who came before us and have conducted training in newsrooms nationwide.

This book is the fruit of that examination. It is not an argument. It is, rather, a description of the theory and culture of journalism that emerged from three years of listening to citizens and journalists, from our empirical studies, and from our reading of the history of the profession as it evolved in the United States.

We learned, among other things, that society expects journalists to apply this theory, and citizens to understand it, though it is seldom studied or clearly articulated. This lack of clarity, for both citizens and newspeople, has weakened journalism and is now weakening democratic society. Unless we can grasp and reclaim the theory of a free press, journalists risk allowing their profession to disappear. In that sense, the crisis of our culture, and our journalism, is a crisis of conviction.

There are, we have distilled from our search, some clear principles that journalists agree on—and that citizens have a right to expect. They are principles that have ebbed and flowed over time, but they have always in some manner been evident. They have survived because journalists have been able to adapt the principles to the demands of new platforms and ways of doing their basic work of informing the people. But they have adapted their work—not their principles—just as the public has adapted to the way they receive their news. These are the principles that have helped both journalists and the people in self-governing systems to adjust to the demands of an ever more complex world. They are the elements of journalism. The first among them is that the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.

To fulfill this task:

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power.



## 6 THE ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM

6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
8. It must keep the news comprehensive and in proportion.
9. Its practitioners have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience.
10. Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news.

Why these ten? Some readers will think items are missing here. Where is fairness? Where is balance? After synthesizing what we learned, it became clear that a number of familiar and even useful ideas—including fairness and balance—are too vague to rise to the level of essential elements of the profession. Others may say that this list is nothing new. To the contrary, we discovered that many ideas about the elements of journalism are wrapped in myth and misconception. That journalists should be protected by a wall between business and news is one myth. That independence requires journalists to be neutral is another. The concept of objectivity has been so mangled it now is usually used to describe the very problem it was conceived to correct.

Nor is this the first moment that the way we get news has gone through momentous transition. It has happened each time there is a period of significant social, economic, and technological change. It occurred in the 1830s and 1840s with the arrival of the telegraph, in the 1880s with the drop in the price of paper and the influx of immigrants. It occurred again in the 1920s with the invention of the radio and the rise of the tabloids and the culture of gossip and celebrity. And it occurred with the invention of television and the arrival of the Cold War.

It is occurring now with the advent of cable, followed by the Internet. The collision this time may be more dramatic. For the first time in our history, the news increasingly is produced by companies outside journalism, and this new economic organization is important. We are facing the possibility that independent news will be replaced by rumor and self-interested commercialism posing as news. If that occurs, we will lose the press as an independent institution, free to monitor the other powerful forces and institutions in society.

In the new century, one of the most profound questions for a democratic society is whether an independent press survives. The answer will depend on whether journalists have the clarity and conviction to articulate what an independent press means and whether, as citizens, the rest of us care.

This book is intended as a first step in helping journalists articulate those values and helping citizens demand a journalism connected to the principles that spawned the free press in the first place. Some may ask whether there is a specific program laid out here to do that, to "fix" journalism's problems. Our answer to that comes in two parts.

The first answer is that the yearning for a single moment, the bold action, or the formulaic solution, is not how history works. Nor is it how journalism grew up or came to be in its current predicament in the early twenty-first century. Journalism evolves continually. At any given moment, one can point to trends of improvement and disorientation simultaneously.

In 2006, there are maybe more young people observing their world and sharing what they find in a journalistic way, complete with a higher sense of public mission and public ethics, than at any other time in history. And there are self-appointed pragmatists—people in corporate settings—who are convinced that the current economics of journalism prove that quality and commitment to the public interest are quaint notions and naïve ideas that knowledgeable realists must forgo.

The second answer—the reason one will not find a five- or ten-point program to solve the problems of journalism's role in society—is that our collective experience of more than seventy years in this business suggests a clearer lesson on how to find that solution.

The answer will be found in those who produce the news mastering the principles of journalism and rigorously applying them to the way they work and think every day. The solution will be found the same way that athletes perfect performance: in the repetition of doing, until these elements become second nature. This is what will breed clarity of purpose, confidence of execution, and public respect.

The key to this, first, is to distinguish between the principles that guide journalism's purpose and the techniques that one generation

## 8 THE ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM

develops in a specific medium to fulfill those principles. Only by recognizing the primacy of principle can journalism change ethically and come out the other side still fulfilling the same democratic purpose for a new century, a new technology, and a new kind of information-wired citizen.

### ENDNOTES

1. Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), 27.
2. Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester, "News as Purposive Behavior: On the Strategic Use of Routine Events, Accidents and Scandal," *American Sociological Review*, 39 (February 1974), 101-12.
3. Stephens, *History of News*, 12.
4. Ibid.
5. John McCain, with Mark Salter, *Faith of My Fathers* (New York: Random House, 1999), 221.
6. Thomas Cahill, *The Gift of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Anchor Books, 1998), 17.
7. Committee of Concerned Journalists (CCJ) and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Striking the Balance: Audience Interests, Business Pressures and Journalists' Values," March 1999, 79.
8. Ibid.
9. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Public More Critical of Press, But Goodwill Persists," June 26, 2005; available at <http://people-press.org>.
10. Ken Auletta, "Fortress Bush," *The New Yorker*, January 19, 2004; available at [www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/040119fa\\_fact2](http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/040119fa_fact2).
11. Associated Press, "Bush to Agencies: Don't Hire Columnists to Promote Agendas," *USA Today*, January 26, 2005; available at [www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com).
12. Susan Goldenberg, "Bush Payola Scandal Deepens as Third Columnist Admits Being Paid," *The Guardian*, January 29, 2005; David Folkernflik, "Video News Releases Find News Airtime," National Public Radio, March 25, 2005; David S. Cloud, "Quick Rise for Purveyors of Propaganda in Iraq," *New York Times*, February 15, 2006; Gail Russell Chaddock, "Bush Administration Blurs Media Boundary," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 17, 2005; available at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk).
13. Scott Shane, "Criminal Inquiry Opens into Spying Leak," *New York Times*, December 31, 2005; Walter Pincus, "Prosecution of Journalists is Possible in NSA Leaks," *Washington Post*, May 22, 2006.

(60  
rev  
lou  
labo  
like  
cur  
in  
woi  
like  
ber

13,  
Not  
call  
gov

...les. Only by recog-  
...ange ethically and  
...cratic purpose for  
...of information—

# 1

## What Is Journalism For?

...ourt Brace College

... Behavior: On the  
... American Sociological

... Random House,

... Changed the Way  
... (1998), 17.

... Center for the  
... Business Pressures

... tical of Press,  
... .org.

... available at

... ate Agendas,”

... Admits Being  
... Releases Find

... “Quick Rise  
... 2006; Gail

... an Science

... , Decem-  
... SA Leaks,”

On a gray December morning in 1981, Anna Semborska woke up and flipped on the radio to hear her favorite program, *Sixty Minutes Per Hour* (60MPH). Semborska, who was seventeen, loved the way the comedy revue pushed the boundaries of what people in Poland could say out loud. Though it had been on the air for some years, with the rise of the labor union Solidarity, 60MPH had become much more bold. Sketches like one about a dim-witted communist doctor looking vainly to find a cure for extremism were an inspiration to Anna and her teenage friends in Warsaw. The program showed her that other people felt about the world the way she did but had never dared express. “We felt that if things like these can be said on the radio then we are free,” she would remember nearly twenty years later.<sup>1</sup>

But when Anna ran to the radio to tune in the show on December 13, 1981, she heard only static. She tried another station, then another. Nothing. She tried to call a friend and found no dial tone. Her mother called her to the window. Tanks were rolling by. The Polish military government had declared martial law, outlawed Solidarity, and put the



## 10 THE ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM

clamps back on the media and on speech. The Polish experiment with liberalization was over.

Within hours, Anna and her friends began to hear stories that suggested something this time was different. In a little town called Świdnik near the Czech border, there were the dogwalkers. Every night at 7:30, when the state-run television news came on, nearly everyone in Świdnik went out and walked his or her dog in a little park in the center of town. It became a daily silent act of protest and solidarity. We refuse to watch. We reject your version of truth.

In Gdansk, there were the black TV screens. People there began moving their television sets to the windows—with the screens pointed out to the street. They were sending a sign to one another, and the government. We, too, refuse to watch. We also reject your version of truth.

An underground press began to grow, on ancient hand-crank equipment. People began carrying video cameras and making private documentaries, which they showed secretly in church basements. Soon, Poland's leaders acknowledged that they were facing a new phenomenon, something they had to go west to name: the rise of Polish public opinion. In 1983, the government created the first of several institutes to study public opinion. Similar institutes would soon sprout up throughout Eastern Europe. But public opinion was something totalitarian officials could not dictate. At best, they could try to understand it and then manipulate it, not unlike Western democratic politicians. They would not succeed.

Afterward, leaders of the movement toward freedom would look back and think that the end of communism owed a good deal to the coming of the new information technology and the effect it had on human souls. In the winter of 1989, the man who shortly would be elected Poland's new president visited journalists in Washington. "Is it possible for a new Stalin to appear today who could murder people?" Lech Walesa asked rhetorically. No, he answered himself, in the age of computers, satellites, faxes, VCRs, "it's impossible." Technology now made information available to too many people, too quickly. And information created democracy.<sup>2</sup> We may look back and think Walesa was caught up in the euphoria of the moment. But his sentiment was less a

experiment with

stories that sug-  
gested that  
called Świdnik  
every night at 7:30,  
everyone in Świdnik  
the center of town.  
refuse to watch.

there began  
screens pointed  
other, and the  
your version of

hand-crank  
making private  
basements.  
a new phe-  
rise of Polish  
of several  
soon sprout  
something  
to under-  
strategic politi-

would look  
deal to the  
it had on  
would be  
gton. "Is it  
people?"  
the age of  
logy now  
and infor-  
alesa was  
was less a

reflection of naivete than a burst of optimism coming from a part of the world that was just discovering technology and its power to do good and inspire people to fight for their freedom.

What is journalism for? For the Poles and others in the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe, the question was answered with action. Journalism was for building community. Journalism was for citizenship. Journalism was for democracy. And as Czech president Vaclav Havel told a group of journalists gathered in Prague in 1991, journalism was for taking back the language from a government that had subverted it with propaganda that undermined freedom of thought itself. Millions of people, empowered by a free flow of information, became directly involved in creating a new government and new rules for the political, social, and economic life of their country. Is that always journalism's purpose? Or was that true for one moment, in one place?

In the United States for the last half century or so the question "What is journalism for?" has rarely been asked, by citizens or journalists. You owned a printing press or a broadcasting license and you produced journalism. In the United States journalism has been reduced to a simple tautology: it is whatever journalists say it is. As Maxwell King, the former editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, has said, "We let our work speak for itself." Or, when pressed, journalists take it as a given that they work in the public interest.<sup>3</sup>

This simplistic answer is no longer sufficient—if it ever really was to an increasingly skeptical public. Not now that the new communications technology means anyone with a modem and a computer can claim to be "doing journalism." Not now that the technology has created a new economic organization of journalism in which the norms of journalism are being pulled and redefined, and sometimes abandoned.

Perhaps, some suggest, the definition of journalism has been exploded by technology so that now anything is seen as journalism. But on closer examination, as the people of Poland demonstrated, the purpose of journalism is not defined by technology, nor by journalists or the techniques they employ. As we will show, the principles and purpose of journalism are defined by something more basic: the function news plays in the lives of people.

## 12 THE ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM

For all that the face of journalism has changed, indeed, its purpose has remained remarkably constant, if not always well served, since the notion of "a press" first evolved more than three hundred years ago. And for all that the speed, techniques, and character of news delivery have changed, and are likely to continue to change ever more rapidly, there exists a clear theory and philosophy of journalism that flows out of the function of news that has remained consistent and enduring.

**The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing.**

As we listened to citizens and journalists, we heard that this obligation to citizens encompasses several elements. The news media help us define our communities as well as help us create a common language and common knowledge rooted in reality. Journalism also helps identify a community's goals, heroes, and villains. "I've felt strongly for a long time that we proceed best as a society if we have a common base of information," then NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw told our academic research partners.<sup>4</sup> The news media serve as a watchdog, push people beyond complacency, and offer a voice to the forgotten. "I want to give voices to people who need the voice . . . people who are powerless," said Yuen Ying Chan, a former reporter for the *New York Daily News* who created a journalism training program in Hong Kong.<sup>5</sup> The late James Carey, one of the founders of our committee, has put it this way in his own writing: perhaps in the end journalism simply means carrying on and amplifying the conversation of people themselves.<sup>6</sup> The rise of the Internet, blogs, and citizen journalism obviously make that purpose seem more relevant.

This definition has held so consistent through history, and proven so deeply ingrained in the thinking of those who produce news through the ages, that it is in little doubt. It is difficult, in looking back, even to separate the concept of journalism from the concept of creating community and later democracy. Journalism is so fundamental to that purpose that, as we will see, societies that want to suppress freedom must first suppress the press. They do not, interestingly, have to suppress capitalism. At its best, as we will also show, journalism reflects a subtle

need, its purpose  
served, since the  
hundred years ago.  
news delivery  
more rapidly,  
that flows out  
enduring.

#### citizens with governing.

at this obliga-  
media help us  
common language  
helps identify  
for a long  
common base of  
our academic  
push people  
want to give  
powerless,"  
*Daily News*  
g.<sup>5</sup> The late  
it this way  
ans carrying  
The rise of  
that purpose

and proven  
ws through  
ack, even to  
eting com-  
that pur-  
dom must  
press cap-  
is a subtle

understanding of how citizens behave, an understanding that we call the Theory of the Interlocking Public.

Yet the longstanding theory and purpose of journalism are being challenged today in ways not seen before, at least in the United States. Technology is shaping a new economic organization of information companies, which is subsuming journalism within it. The threat is no longer simply from government censorship. With new technology, government is more likely to try to subvert the press by trying to discredit its integrity and dilute its influence. It has more tools to do that in the twenty-first century, creating pseudo-journalism in the form of faux news websites, video news releases, subsidies to "media personalities" willing to accept money to promote policy, and more. Government will inevitably also try to imitate citizen journalism as it evolves further. And the threat from government is compounded by a new danger that independent journalism may be dissolved in the solvent of commercial communication and synergistic self-promotion: corporatism. The real meaning of the First Amendment—that a free press is an independent institution—is threatened for the first time in our history, even without government meddling.

There are some who will contend that defining journalism is dangerous. To define journalism, they argue, is to limit it. Maybe doing so violates the spirit of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech or of the press." This is why journalists have avoided licensing, like doctors and lawyers, they note. They also worry that defining journalism will only make it resistant to changing with the times, which probably will run it out of business.

Actually, the resistance to definition in journalism is not a deeply held principle but a fairly recent and largely commercial impulse. Publishers a century ago routinely championed their news values in front-page editorials, opinion pages, and company slogans, and just as often publicly assailed the journalistic values of their rivals. This was marketing. Citizens chose which publications to read based on their styles and their approaches to news. It was only as the press began to assume a more corporate, more homogenous, and monopolistic form that it became more reticent. Lawyers advised news companies against codifying their principles in writing for fear that they would be used against



#### 14 THE ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM

them in court. Thus, avoiding definition was a commercial strategy. It was not born of the meaning of the First Amendment.

On the other side, some will argue that not only should journalism's purpose be unchanging but its form should be constant as well. They see changes in the way journalism looks from when they were young and they fear that, in the memorable phrase of Neil Postman, we are "amusing ourselves to death." They miss another fact. Every generation creates its own journalism. But the purpose and the underlying elements of journalism, we have found, are the same.

Though journalists are uncomfortable defining what they do, they fundamentally agree on their purpose. When we set out in 1997 to chart the common ground of newspeople, this was the first answer we heard: "The central purpose of journalism is to tell the truth so that people will have the information that they need to be sovereign." It came from Jack Fuller, an author, novelist, lawyer, and then president of the Tribune Publishing Company, which produces the *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>7</sup>

Even people who resist the label of journalist, who work on the Web, offer a similar goal. Omar Wasow, a self-described "garage entrepreneur" who founded a website called New York Online, told us at one forum that his aim, in part, was to help create citizens who are "consumers, devourers and debunkers of media . . . an audience who have engaged with the product and can respond carefully."<sup>8</sup>

Were these just disparate voices? Not really. In collaboration with the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, we asked journalists what they considered the distinguishing feature of journalism. Those working in news volunteered this democratic function by nearly two to one over any other answer.<sup>9</sup> Open-ended, in-depth interviews with a hundred more journalists conducted by developmental psychologists at Stanford, Harvard, and the University of Chicago with whom we collaborated came to the same conclusion. "News professionals at every level . . . express an adamant allegiance to a set of core standards that are striking in their commonality and in their linkage to the public information mission," they write.<sup>10</sup>

Ethics codes and journalism mission statements bear the same witness. The goal is "to serve the general welfare by informing the people,"

says the c  
associatic  
and the p  
Company  
file with t  
self-gover

Thos  
moral ob  
2000: "W  
cannot be  
It must in  
in the kr  
been entr

This  
creating s  
ment abc  
from the  
America :

**THE AW.**  
Historian  
people's l  
tency that  
ics with v  
standards  
very little  
with a co  
in this nev  
tified the  
we call th  
over the r  
Knowledge  
and negot  
for creatir

News  
changing

commercial strategy. It  
ment.

only should journalism's  
constant as well. They  
when they were young,  
Neil Postman, we are  
ect. Every generation  
underlying elements

they do, they fun-  
in 1997 to chart  
answer we heard:  
so that people  
gn." It came from  
ident of the Tri-  
Tribune.<sup>7</sup>

who work on the  
d "garage entre-  
line, told us at  
izens who are  
audience who  
78

poration with  
e asked jour-  
of journalism.  
on by nearly  
th interviews  
tal psychol-  
with whom  
essionals at  
standards  
the public

same wit-  
people,"

says the code of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the largest association of print newsroom managers in North America. "Give light and the people will find their own way," reads the masthead of Scripps Company newspapers. Indeed, every newspaper mission statement on file with the American Society of Newspaper Editors names advancing self-government as the primary goal of the news organization.<sup>11</sup>

Those outside journalism, too, understand a broader social and moral obligation for journalism. Listen to Pope John Paul II in June 2000: "With its vast and direct influence on public opinion, journalism cannot be guided only by economic forces, profit, and special interest. It must instead be felt as a mission in a certain sense sacred, carried out in the knowledge that the powerful means of communication have been entrusted to you for the good of all."<sup>12</sup>

This democratic mission is not just a modern idea. The concept of creating sovereignty has run through every major statement and argument about the press for centuries, not only from journalists but also from the revolutionaries who fought for democratic principles, both in America and in virtually every developing democracy since.

### THE AWARENESS INSTINCT

Historian Mitchell Stephens studied how news has functioned in people's lives throughout history, and he found the remarkable consistency that we talked about at the beginning of this book. "The basic topics with which . . . news accounts have been concerned, and the basic standards by which they evaluate newsworthiness, seem to have varied very little," he writes. "Humans have exchanged a similar mix of news with a consistency throughout history and cultures that makes interest in this news seem inevitable, if not innate."<sup>13</sup> Various scholars have identified the reason for this. People crave news out of basic instinct—what we call the Awareness Instinct. They need to know what is going on over the next hill, to be aware of events beyond their direct experience. Knowledge of the unknown gives them security; it allows them to plan and negotiate their lives. Exchanging this information becomes the basis for creating community, making human connections.

News is that part of communication that keeps us informed of the changing events, issues, and characters in the world outside. In time,

## 16 THE ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM

historians have suggested, rulers used news to hold their societies together. It provided a sense of unity and shared purpose. It even helped tyrannical rulers control their people by binding them together around a common threat.

History reveals one other important trend. The more democratic the society, the more news and information it tends to have. As societies first became more democratic, they tended toward a kind of pre-journalism. The earliest democracy, ancient Greece, relied on an oral journalism in the Athens marketplace in which "nearly everything important about the public's business was in the open," journalism educator John Hohenberg writes.<sup>14</sup> The Romans developed a daily account of the Roman Senate and political and social life, called the *acta diurna*, transcribed on papyrus and posted in public places.<sup>15</sup> As European societies became more authoritarian and violent in the Middle Ages, communication waned and written news essentially disappeared.

### THE BIRTH OF JOURNALISM

As the Middle Ages ended, news came in the form of song and story, in news ballads sung by wandering minstrels.

What we might consider modern journalism began to emerge, in the early seventeenth century, literally out of conversation, especially in public places. In England, the first newspapers grew out of coffeehouses—numerous enough for some to be known for specializing in certain kinds of information. They became so popular that scholars complained that "nothing but news and the affairs of Christendome is discussed."

Later, in America, journalism grew out of pubs, or publick houses. Here, the bar owners, called publicans, hosted spirited conversations about information from travelers who often recorded what they had seen and heard in log books kept at the end of the bar. The first newspapers evolved out of these coffeehouses when enterprising printers began to collect the shipping news, tales from abroad and more gossip, and political arguments from the coffeehouses and to print them on paper.

With the evolution of the first newspapers, English politicians began to talk about a new phenomenon, which they called public

hold their societies  
ed purpose. It even  
nding them together

the more democratic  
to have. As societies  
ard a kind of pre-  
re, relied on an oral  
nearly everything  
en," journalism edu-  
ed a daily account  
ed the *acta diurna*,  
As European soci-  
Middle Ages, com-  
eared.

ing and story, in

gan to emerge,  
ation, especially  
out of coffee-  
specializing in  
that scholars  
Christendome is

public houses.  
conversations  
that they had  
the first news-  
ing printers  
more gossip,  
rit them on

politicians  
led public

opinion. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, journalists/printers began to formulate a theory of free speech and free press. In 1720, two London newspapermen writing, under the pen name "Cato," introduced the idea that truth should be a defense against libel. At the time, English common law had ruled the reverse: not only that any criticism of government was a crime but that "the greater the truth, the greater the libel," since truth did more harm.<sup>16</sup>

Cato's argument had a profound influence in the American colonies, where discontent against the English Crown was growing. A rising young printer named Benjamin Franklin was among those who republished Cato's writings. When a printer named John Peter Zenger went on trial in 1735 for criticizing the royal governor of New York, Cato's ideas became the basis for his defense. People had "a right . . . both of exposing and opposing arbitrary power . . . by speaking and writing the truth," argued Zenger's lawyer, who was paid by Franklin, among others. The jury acquitted Zenger, shocking the colonial legal community, and the meaning of a free press in America began to take formal shape.

The concept became rooted in the thinking of the Founders, finding its way into the Virginia Declaration of Rights written partly by James Madison, the Massachusetts constitution written by John Adams, and most of the new colonial statements of rights. "No government ought to be without censors & where the press is free, no one ever will," Thomas Jefferson would tell George Washington.<sup>17</sup> Neither Franklin nor Madison thought such language was necessary in the federal Constitution, but two delegates, George Mason of Virginia and Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, walked out of the convention, and with men like Thomas Paine and Samuel Adams, they agitated the public to demand a written bill of rights as a condition of approving the Constitution. A free press thus became the people's first claim on their government.

Over the next two hundred years the notion of the press as a bulwark of liberty became embedded in American legal doctrine. "In the First Amendment," the Supreme Court ruled in upholding the *New York Times's* right to publish the secret government documents called the Pentagon Papers in 1971, "the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors."<sup>18</sup> The idea that was



## 18 THE ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM

affirmed over and over by the courts, First Amendment scholar Lee Bollinger, then president of the University of Michigan, told us at one committee forum, is a simple one: out of a diversity of voices the people are more likely to know the truth and thus be able to self-govern.<sup>19</sup>

Even when journalism was in the hands of the yellow-press mavens at the turn of the twentieth century or the tabloid sheets of the 1920s, building community and promoting democracy remained a core value. At their worst moments, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst appealed to both the sensational tastes and the patriotic impulses of their audiences. Pulitzer used his front page to lure his readers in, but he used his editorial pages to teach them how to be American citizens. On election nights he and Hearst would vie to outdo each other, one renting Madison Square Garden for a free party, the other illuminating campaign results on the side of his newspaper's skyscraper.

Whether one looks back over three hundred years, or even three thousand years, it is impossible to separate news from community and, over time, even more specifically from democratic community.

### A FREE PRESS IN AN ELECTRONIC AGE

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, what relevance does this have? Information is so free, the notion of journalism as a homogeneous entity might seem quaint. Perhaps the First Amendment itself is an artifact of a more restricted and elitist era.

Certainly, the notion of the press as a gatekeeper—deciding what information the public should know and what it should not—no longer strictly defines journalism's role. If the *New York Times* decides not to publish something, at least one of countless other websites, talk radio hosts, blogs, and partisans will. We now see examples of this regularly. When *Newsweek* delayed breaking the initial Lewinsky scandal, Matt Drudge went ahead and published. Or when traditional news media ignored Trent Lott's praise of Strom Thurmond's 1948 presidential bid centered on racial segregation, the blogs pounced hard, eventually leading to Lott's stepping down as leader of the Senate Republicans.

The rise of the Internet, the blogosphere, the concepts of "citizen journalism," "we media," and the democratization of broadband, do not mean, as some have suggested, that the idea of applying judgment to

...ndment scholar Lee  
...gan, told us at one  
...of voices the people  
...self-govern.<sup>19</sup>

...low-press mavens  
...spects of the 1920s,  
...med a core value.  
...Randolph Hearst  
...impulses of their  
...in, but he used  
...izens. On elec-  
...er, one renting  
...ing campaign

...or even three  
...community and,  
...unity.

...e does this  
...a homoge-  
...ent itself is

...ing what  
...no longer  
...es not to  
...alk radio  
...regularly.

...al, Matt  
...media  
...al bid  
...actually  
...ans.

...itizen  
...o not  
...ent to

the news—of trying to decide what people need and want to know to self-govern—is obsolete. On the contrary, they make the need all the greater.

Technology is transforming citizens from passive consumers of news produced by professionals into active participants who can assemble their own journalism from disparate elements. As people Google for information, graze across a seemingly infinite array of outlets, and read blogs or write them, they are becoming their own editors, researchers, and even correspondents. What was called journalism is only one part of the mix, and its role as intermediary and verifier, like the roles of other civic institutions, is weakening. We are witnessing the rise of a new and more active kind of American citizenship—with new responsibilities that are only beginning to be considered. The journalism of the twenty-first century must recognize this and help arm the public with the tools it needs to perform this more active form of citizenship.

John Seeley Brown, the former director of Xerox PARC, the legendary think tank in Silicon Valley, saw early on that rather than rendering the democratic public service notion of journalism moot, technology has instead changed how journalists fulfill it. "What we need in the new economy and the new communications culture is sense making. We have a desperate need to get some stable points in an increasingly crazy world." This means, Brown explained, that journalists need "the ability to look at things from multiple points of view and the ability to get to the core" of matters.<sup>20</sup> Futurist Paul Saffo described this task as applying journalistic inquiry and judgment "to come to conclusions in uncertain environments."<sup>21</sup>

The new journalist is no longer deciding what the public should know—this was the classic role of gatekeeper. He or she is helping audiences make order out of it. This does not mean simply adding interpretation or analysis to news reporting. The first task of the new journalist/sense maker, rather, is to verify what information is reliable and then order it so people can grasp it efficiently.

In an era when anyone can be a reporter or commentator on the Web, the journalist becomes "a forum leader," or a mediator rather than simply a teacher or lecturer, Seeley Brown suggested.<sup>22</sup> The audience

becomes not consumers but "pro-sumers," a hybrid of consumer and producer.

Some advocates of "we media" believe that no one controls information anymore, thus the need for journalists per se may become obsolete. Since citizens can communicate with each other more easily, they will be closer to real truth and more accurate information. No doubt they can communicate more easily. Millions read blogs, although the data suggest that those numbers may already be stabilizing. But one must also ask a series of questions. Do these citizens have the time, the motivation, and the skills this requires? If not, then do those who try to cover the news professionally have the skills and the will to help citizens gain these tools?

Whether or not the end result is more verified and truthful information will depend on the degree of commitment to those goals that the "we media" culture develops. The driving force of the Age of Enlightenment, out of which grew the notion of individual worth and a public press, was the search for truthful information. This information freed the public from control by the kind of centralized dictatorial or dogmatic power we see developing in our society today. If the journalism of verification is to survive in the new Information Age, then it must become a force in empowering citizens to shape their own communities based on verified information.

It is an epochal transformation, at least as momentous as the invention of the telegraph or the television. The former created the capacity for people divided by great distance to learn things at the same time; the latter added the ability for people to see the news for themselves.

Today, people go from passive consumers to proactive assemblers of their own journalism and views of the world. Among other things, people have the ability to interact with the news itself as well as the professionals delivering it. Some use the Web to present their own accounts of events, complete with photographs, video, or audio. Some contact the journalists covering a story through e-mail or feedback forms to either correct the record or offer new facts. And some participate in discussions about the process that brought forth the news, building an almost immediate record of press criticism and scrutiny.

hybrid of consumer and

that no one controls  
per se may become  
each other more easily,  
erate information. No  
read blogs, although  
stabilizing. But one  
have the time, the  
do those who try to  
one will to help citi-

truthful informa-  
those goals that the  
Age of Enlighten-  
orth and a public  
information freed  
atorial or dog-  
journalism of  
then it must  
communities

as the inven-  
the capacity  
the same time;  
themselves.  
assemblers  
among other  
self as well  
ent their  
or audio.  
or feed-  
and some  
th the  
and

If citizens have a problem with the news, they know whom to e-mail to correct the record (papers increasingly print e-mail addresses and websites put authors' names in hypertext, making it simple to contact writers, editors, and publishers). Audiences expect their new facts to become part of the record. The dialogue with the audience is thus an integral part of the story as it evolves.

This kind of high-tech interaction is a journalism that resembles conversation again, much like the original journalism that occurred in the public houses and coffeehouses four hundred years ago. Seen in this light, journalism's function is not fundamentally changed by the digital age. The techniques may be different, but the underlying principles are the same. The journalist is first engaged in verification.

How does this role—whether offered by an idealist writer from the Age of Enlightenment or a theoretician from Silicon Valley—really work in practice? How does the free press actually work as a bulwark of liberty? Does it work at all?

### THE JOURNALIST'S THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

Journalists don't usually consider these questions explicitly. It may seem slightly ridiculous to ask: what is the theory of democracy that drives your TV news operation or your newspaper? We have the freest press imaginable, and yet over the last thirty years the number of Americans who can even name their congressman is often as low as three out of ten.<sup>23</sup> Fewer than half of Americans vote—even in presidential elections—far fewer than in countries without a First Amendment.<sup>24</sup> Most people get their news from local television, a medium that largely ignores the process of governing.<sup>25</sup> Only 42 percent said they read a daily newspaper the day before, and people know no more about the outside world than they did fifty years ago.<sup>26</sup> Maybe, when you look hard, the idea that the press provides the information necessary for people to self-govern is an illusion. Maybe people don't care. Maybe we don't, in reality, actually self-govern at all. The government operates, and the rest of us are largely bystanders.

This argument flared briefly in the 1920s in a debate of ideas between journalist Walter Lippmann and philosopher John Dewey. It was a time of pessimism about democracy. Democratic governments in



Germany and Italy had collapsed. The Bolshevik revolution loomed over the West. There was a growing fear that police states were employing new technology and the new science of propaganda to control public will.

Lippmann, already one of the nation's most famous journalists, argued in a best-selling book called *Public Opinion* that democracy was fundamentally flawed. People, he said, mostly know the world only indirectly, through "pictures they make up in their heads." And they receive these mental pictures largely through the media. The problem, Lippmann argued, is that the pictures people have in their heads are hopelessly distorted and incomplete, marred by the irredeemable weaknesses of the press. Just as bad, the public's ability to comprehend the truth even if it happened to come across it was undermined by human bias, stereotype, inattentiveness, and ignorance. In the end, Lippmann thought citizens are like theatergoers who "arrive in the middle of the third act and leave before the last curtain, staying just long enough to decide who is the hero and who is the villain."<sup>27</sup>

*Public Opinion* was an enormous success and gave birth, according to many, to the modern study of communication.<sup>28</sup> It also deeply moved the nation's most famous philosopher, Columbia professor John Dewey. Reviewing *Public Opinion* in Lippmann's own magazine, *The New Republic*, Dewey called Lippmann's analysis about the limits of human perception "the most effective indictment of democracy... ever penned," and he acknowledged that Lippmann had diagnosed some serious weaknesses about the press and the public.<sup>29</sup>

But Dewey, who later expanded his critique in his own book, *The Public and Its Problems*, said Lippmann's definition of democracy was fundamentally flawed. The goal of democracy, Dewey said, was not to manage public affairs efficiently. It was to allow people to develop to their fullest potential. Democracy, in other words, was the end, not the means. It was true that the public could only be an "umpire of last resort" over government, usually just setting the broad outlines of debate. That, however, was all the Founders ever intended, Dewey argued, for democratic life encompassed so much more than efficient government. Its real purpose was human freedom. The solution to

democracy's problems was not to give up on it, but to try to improve the skills of the press and the education of the public.

Dewey sensed something easier to see today, after the fall of fascism and communism in the twentieth century. He believed that if people were allowed to communicate freely with each other, democracy was the natural outgrowth of the human interaction. It was not a stratagem for making government better.

Eighty years later the debate is still relevant—and unresolved. The increasingly interactive relationship between journalist and citizen has raised questions in newsrooms about whether journalists still have a role as agenda setters—trying to signal to the audience what news is important, the top stories. While that role is changing, it seems clear to us it does not disappear. Those who cover the news still have to decide how to deploy resources, which stories to cover, which to cover at length, and which to consider something that can be handled in brief, and a thousand more decisions every day.

In making those choices, journalists are also engaged in something larger than it might seem on the surface. Whenever editors lay out a page or website, or people decide what angle or element of an event or issue to emphasize and explore, they are guessing at what readers want or need to know. However unconscious, as they do so they are operating by some theory of democracy—some theory of what drives politics, citizenship, and how people make judgments. Our purpose here is to lay out a theory that we think lies implicit, and often unrecognized, in the journalism that serves us best as citizens.

A number of critics argue that Lippmann's view dominates too much of how journalists operate today.<sup>30</sup> Studies show that newspapers and TV have aimed their coverage at elite or other more narrow demographics, ignoring much of the citizenry.<sup>31</sup> Policy and ideas are ignored or presented as sport, or are couched in the context of how a certain policy position is calculated to gain someone power over a rival.<sup>32</sup> Even the practice of reporters' interviewing voters in political campaigns, reporters admit, is a vanishing art. We have developed "a journalism that justifies itself in the public's name but in which the public plays no role, except as an audience," writes James Carey.<sup>33</sup> Citizens have become an abstraction, something the press talks about but not to.

No doubt the rise of citizen media and the empowering of consumers are helping address this problem. The public is forcing itself into the conversation. The journalists with their own political agendas are more likely to be quickly exposed. The journalists whose attempts at verifying the news are scant are more likely to be found out. The journalists who claim to know what citizens care about may quickly find out they are wrong.

Yet obviously this does not solve the problem for journalists of discerning what it is citizens want and what they need. It calls instead for an even clearer theory of democracy and citizenship for the press.

As we examine the new interactive relationship between journalists and citizens, in the websites, blogs, community newspapers, and public-access television, we see a more complicated and fluid vision of the public than the traditional debates usually offer. We think this vision holds a key to how both citizens and many journalists really operate.

### THE THEORY OF THE INTERLOCKING PUBLIC

Dave Burgin, who edited newspapers from Florida to California, epitomized this vision in the way he taught scores of journalists to lay out pages. Imagine, he would say, that no more than roughly 15 percent of your readers would want to read any one story on the page. Your job was to make sure each page had a sufficient variety of stories that every member of the audience would want to read one of them.<sup>34</sup>

Implicit in Burgin's theory of a diverse page is the idea that everyone is interested and even expert in something. The notion that people are simply ignorant, or that other people are interested in everything, is a myth. As we listened to journalists and citizens talk, we realized this is a more realistic description of how people interact with the news to form a public. We call this the Theory of the Interlocking Public.

For the sake of argument let's say there are three broad levels of public engagement on every issue, each with even subtler gradations. There is an involved public, with a personal stake in an issue and a strong understanding. There is an interested public, with no direct role in the issue but that is affected and responds with some firsthand experience. And there is an uninterested public, which pays little attention

of con-  
ing itself  
agendas  
attempts  
out. The  
quickly

ists of dis-  
stead for  
ress.

journal-  
ers, and  
vision of  
ink this  
really

a, epito-  
lay out  
percent of  
our job  
at every

every-  
people  
thing, is  
and this is  
news to

levels of  
ations.  
and a  
ect role  
d expe-  
ention

and will join, if at all, after the contours of the discourse have been laid out by others. In the interlocking public, we are all members of all three groups, depending on the issue.

An autoworker in suburban Detroit, for instance, may care little about agriculture policy or foreign affairs, and may only sporadically buy a newspaper or watch TV news. But he will have lived through many collective bargaining debates and know a good deal about corporate bureaucracy and workplace safety. He may have kids in local schools and friends on welfare, and know how pollution has affected the rivers where he fishes. To these and all other concerns he brings a range of knowledge and experience. On some matters he is the involved public; on others, the interested; and on still others, remote, unknowledgeable, and unengaged.

A partner in a Washington law firm will similarly defy generalization. She is a grandmother, avid gardener, and news junkie who looks from a distance like a classic member of the involved "elite." A leading expert on constitutional law who is quoted often in the press, she is also fearful of technology and bored by and ignorant of investing and business. Her children grown, she no longer pays attention to news about local schools or even local government.

Or imagine a housewife in California with a high school education who considers her husband's career her own. Her volunteer work at children's schools gives her keen ideas about why the local paper is wrong in its education coverage, and she has an intuitive sense from her own life about people.

These sketches are obviously made up, but they bring the complex notion of the public down to earth. The sheer magnitude and diversity of the people is its strength. The involved expert on one issue is the ignorant and unconcerned member of the public on another. The three groups—which themselves are only crude generalizations—work as a check on one another so that no debate becomes merely a fevered exchange between active interest groups. What's more, this mix of publics is usually much wiser than the involved public alone.

Listen to some journalists talk about the audience they imagine as they work and you will hear a sense of the interlocking public. Byron Calame, public editor of the *New York Times*, heard it when he



interviewed colleagues. "Several editors, including Suzanne Daley, who just became national editor after a stint as education editor, noted that they must keep two kinds of readers in mind. 'One is an expert on whatever subject we are writing about, someone who will read this story no matter what, but who will be highly judgmental. . . . The other is your basically curious person, but without a lot of time, who is, in my mind, the real challenge. He or she might read the story. But it has to hook them. The game in my head is: Okay, how do we write this so that it is accurate and has weight, but is still fun to read for someone who really doesn't care much about say, college dorms or tutoring?'"<sup>35</sup>

Looked at this way, the public is far more able than Lippmann dreamed, and the press does not have as daunting a job of delivering "truth" to a passive public as he imagined. The job of the news media, as we will discuss more in the next chapter, is to give this more complex and dynamic public what it needs to sort out the truth for itself over time.

Yet this more complex understanding of the public carries with it an indictment of the modern press as well. A journalism that focuses on the expert elite—the special interests—may be in part responsible for public disillusionment. Such a press does not reflect the world as most people live and experience it. Political coverage that focuses on tactical considerations for the political junkie and leaves the merely interested and the uninterested behind is failing in the responsibilities of journalism. A journalism in which every story is aimed at the largest possible audience—all O.J. all the time—actually leaves most of the audience behind.

In short, this more pluralistic vision of the interlocking public suggests that the requirements of the old press, of serving the interests of the widest community possible, remain as strong as ever. At the same time, trends developing in the first decade of this century make it clear that recognizing the needs of the more complex interlocking public will be more difficult than ever. The conservative momentum evident in the first two national elections of the twenty-first century have been seen by many analysts to be fueled by a large body of citizens marginalized by trends of previous decades that historian Anatol Lieven concluded left them "profoundly alienated, and yearning for a 'return' to an idealized version of the country of their youth, or possibly by now their parents' youth."<sup>36</sup>

The  
of their  
way the  
strategie  
often in  
tieth cer  
timent,  
stereoty  
stereoty  
prevent  
were wi  
zens of  
facilitate  
which g

The  
concept  
by the 1  
than the  
Televisio  
soccer r  
very gro  
the cate

## THE NI

If the Tl  
nalism s  
greatest  
seeing f  
ingly di

Coi  
his com

Sing  
long  
ease  
roor

...e Daley, who  
...r. noted that  
...an expert on  
...will read this  
...The other  
...who is, in my  
...But it has to  
...write this so  
...or someone  
...tutoring?"<sup>35</sup>

Lippmann  
...of delivering  
...media, as  
...complex  
...over time.  
...with it an  
...ses on the  
...for public  
...st people  
...consider-  
...d and the  
...A jour-  
...ence—all

The failure of so many Americans to "even understand" the causes of their alienation suggests that at least part of the problem has been the way the press covered these issues as they developed and the political strategies and rhetoric they inspired that favored extreme positions. Too often in coverage of the great social issues of the latter half of the twentieth century—civil rights, the sexual revolutions, anti-Vietnam War sentiment, immigration, and globalization—the press employed labels and stereotypes and depended on spokespeople for the extremes. These stereotypes and labels became the lingua franca of the public debate and prevented the press from stopping to ask to what extent these positions were widely held, or even what they meant. If journalists work for citizens of a democratic society, then the responsibility of journalism is to facilitate the understanding that allows the sort of compromise on which governance of a complex interlocking public depends.

The Theory of the Interlocking Public also casts a shadow over the concept of niche marketing in journalism. Many of the niches created by the new information delivery platforms are much harder to define than the artificial categories identified by marketing research may imply. Television aimed at women eighteen to thirty four, or Generation X, or soccer moms, or football fans is likely to alienate larger numbers of the very group at which it is aimed. People are simply more complex than the categories and stereotypes we create for them.

### THE NEW CHALLENGE

If the Theory of the Interlocking Public reinforces the notion that journalism should enhance democratic freedom, the profession may face its greatest threat yet at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We are seeing for the first time the rise of a market-based journalism increasingly divorced from the idea of civic responsibility.

Consider modern media baron Rupert Murdoch's comment when his company won television rights in Singapore:

Singapore is not liberal, but it's clean and free of drug addicts. Not so long ago it was an impoverished, exploited colony with famines, diseases, and other problems. Now people find themselves in three-room apartments with jobs and clean streets. Material incentives

create business and the free market economy. If politicians try it the other way around with democracy, the Russian model is the result. Ninety percent of the Chinese are interested more in a better material life than in the right to vote.<sup>37</sup>

The notion of a modern publisher's advocating capitalism without democracy has no meaningful precedent in American journalism history. Yet there is a growing list of other examples of ownership subordinating journalism to other commercial interests. The day Time Inc. was acquired by Internet service provider America Online, Time Warner chairman Gerald Levin exulted that, "This really completes the digital transformation of Time Warner. . . . These two companies are a natural fit."<sup>38</sup> The fact that one company had a journalistic mission and the other had none, or that journalists at *Time*, CNN, *Fortune*, or the rest might now have conflicting loyalties when trying to cover the Internet, cable, and a host of other areas seemed incidental. Steve Case, the CEO from America Online who acquired Time Warner, enumerated for the public the great benefits it would receive from the newly merged companies. Although the new company would contain several of the nation's most powerful journalism organizations, he only mentioned entertainment, online shopping, and person-to-person communication. Six years later, Case regarded the AOL-Time merger as a failure and said in late 2005 that the "one company" strategy never got off the ground.

"Each division 'did its own thing,'" Case wrote in a *Washington Post* op-ed. "While that staved off turf wars, it did nothing to drive innovation." Case argued for the company to split into four separate entities: Time Warner Cable, Time Warner Entertainment, Time Inc., and AOL.

Other mergers at the same time evoked similar conflicts. Shortly after acquiring ABC News, Disney CEO Michael Eisner said he didn't think it appropriate that "Disney cover Disney."<sup>39</sup> In other words, in the mind of the man who runs the conglomerate in which ABC News is embedded, the news organization had not only lost its distinctive identity but now has to struggle with whether and how it can cover the "Wonderful World of Disney," a \$23 billion corporation whose global operations range from sports teams and theme parks to cable channels and Internet portals.<sup>40</sup>

The Disney acquisition also failed from an economic standpoint, at least for the journalistic enterprises inside ABC. Not long before the acquisition from Capital Cities, then ABC News president Boone Arledge told his staff that ABC News programs were No. 1 in every time slot in which they competed—morning, evening news, Sunday morning, and even its prime-time news magazine programs.<sup>41</sup> Under Disney's stewardship, along with Arledge's forced retirement as a manager difficult to control,<sup>42</sup> ABC saw virtually all of its news programs falter, a decline that may have culminated in the effort by Disney executives in 2002 to replace *Nightline* with the *David Letterman Show* from CBS. ABC eventually succeeded in driving Ted Koppel and his executive producer Tom Bettag out of the network late in 2005.

Three key forces are causing this shift away from journalism connected to citizen building. The first is the nature of the new technology. The Internet has begun to disassociate journalism from geography and therefore from community as we know it in a political or civic sense. It is easier to see how to serve the Web's commerce- and interest-based communities than its political community.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, technology offers the potential for citizens not connected through geography to interact directly with each other—a prospect that presents possibilities and challenges, which we will discuss later in the book.

The second major factor is conglomeration. Critics have long railed against the rise of news chains—companies that own outlets across different communities. A. J. Liebling, *The New Yorker* press critic, complained about it in the 1940s. We've also seen the rise of companies that owned across different mediums before. The Tribune Company in Chicago still owns radio, TV, and newspapers in the same city—something the federal government would eventually outlaw in the middle of the twentieth century and is looking to relax again. Even with publicly owned chains, however, these outlets were clearly news companies. The chief criticism against them was mediocrity or homogeneity. Gannett owned some ninety newspapers, but it was a newspaper company, led by newsmen who articulated company-wide news values, and even were able to create a set of Principles of Ethical Conduct for its newspaper division. The one exception was in the three traditional broadcast TV networks, where companies produced entertainment as



well as news. For most of their history, however, network news divisions existed to meet public-interest requirements demanded by the government in exchange for use of the public airwaves. Profit making is a more recent requirement.

As the new century began, this tradition of news companies' owning journalism was breaking down. News was becoming a smaller component inside global conglomerates. ABC News represented less than 2 percent of the profits at Disney. News once accounted for most of the revenue of Time Inc., but it was just a fraction of that inside AOL-Time. NBC News provided less than 2 percent of the profits of General Electric.<sup>44</sup>

Even newer major players in the news business were not news gatherers at all, but sources like Google News and Yahoo! News, which largely aggregated the work other people produced. Google's news service, launched in 2002, did this compiling and prioritizing without human editors. The work was done by computer algorithms.

The managers of the news subsidiaries will fight and protest for their independence, but history suggests that the shift will likely alter the nature of their journalism. "We look at the 1930s and we see steel and chemical industries starting to buy up the journalism of Europe," says James Carey. That altered how the press of Europe saw the rise of fascism. Militarism was good business. Today, he says, American journalism is beginning to be "bought up by the entertainment business—and e-commerce. Entertainment and e-commerce are today what the steel and chemical industries were in the 1930s."<sup>45</sup>

The notion of freedom of the press is rooted in independence. Only a press free of government censors could tell the truth. In a modern context, that freedom was expanded to mean independence from other institutions as well—parties, advertisers, business, and more. The conglomeration of the news business threatens the survival of the press as an independent institution as journalism becomes a subsidiary inside large corporations more fundamentally grounded in other business purposes.

This conglomeration and the idea behind much corporate synergy in communications—that journalism is simply content, or all media are indistinguishable—raise another prospect. The First Amendment ceases

work news divisions  
led by the govern-  
making is a more

companies' own-  
becoming a smaller  
represented less  
accounted for most  
of that inside  
of the profits of

were not news  
ed News, which  
Google's news  
nizing without  
ms.

and protest for  
will likely alter  
we see steel  
of Europe,"  
the rise of  
American jour-  
business—  
what the

pendence.  
truth. In a  
pendence  
and more.  
of the  
subsidiary  
her busi-

synergy  
media are  
ceases

to imply a public trust held in the name of a wider community. Instead it lays claim to special rights for an industry akin to the antitrust exemption for baseball. In this world, the First Amendment becomes a property right establishing ground rules for free economic competition, not free speech. This is a fundamental and epic change with enormous implications for democratic society. As Michael Sandel, professor of philosophy at Harvard University, has said, "There should be a nagging voice in us all asking: Is democracy going to be bought up too?"<sup>46</sup>

The third factor driving the new market journalism is globalization. As companies, especially communication companies, become corporations without borders, the notion of citizenship and traditional community becomes in a commercial sense obsolete.

Globalization changes the content these companies produce. It is one thing when Hollywood makes more action movies now because pyrotechnics require no translation and make more money in foreign sales. It is another to consider the implications for journalism of news decisions based on a similarly simplified set of cultural cues. The first reaction to globalization was to favor stories with iconic news values—about celebrities, disaster, and tragedy—that play across borders both regional and national. These included the murder trial of O. J. Simpson, the death of Princess Diana, or the plane crash of John F. Kennedy Jr.

But September 11 proved that globalization does not occur in a vacuum. The hijacked planes crashing into the World Trade Center introduced a steady diet of hard news stories of a different nature that transcended national borders: the train bombings in Madrid and London, the widespread protests over cartoons of Prophet Muhammad, and violence throughout the Middle East. While these were now distributed through a global media system, the coverage often had a strongly nationalist flavor. The coverage on Fox and CNN of these events is hardly the same as on Al Jazeera.

The question is not whether this new global media system will lose its national character. Rather, the question is to what extent can citizens rely on this new subsidiary press inside global conglomerates to monitor the powerful interests in society? Can we rely on a few large companies to sponsor that monitoring—even when it is not in their own corporate

interests? In the end, the question is this: can journalism sustain in the twenty-first century the purpose that forged it in the three and a half centuries that came before?

Doing so begins with identifying what the purpose is. The next step is understanding the principles that allow those who gather the news to sustain that purpose on behalf of the rest of us.

## ENDNOTES

1. Anna Semborska, interview by Dante Chinni, January 2000.
2. Thomas Rosenstiel, "TV, VCR's, Fan Fire of Revolution: Technology Served the Cause of Liberation in East Europe," *Los Angeles Times*, January 18, 1990, A1.
3. Maxwell King, at founding meeting of Committee of Concerned Journalists (CCJ), Chicago, June 21, 1997.
4. Tom Brokaw, interview by William Damon, Howard Gardner, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi; unpublished interviews conducted for the book *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
5. Yuen Ying Chan, interview by William Damon, Howard Gardner, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *ibid.*
6. James Carey, *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, ed. Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 235.
7. Jack Fuller, at CCJ Forum, Chicago, November 6, 1997.
8. Omar Wasow, at CCJ Forum, Ann Arbor, MI, February 2, 1998.
9. CCJ and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Striking the Balance: Audience Interests, Business Pressures and Journalists' Values," March 1999, 79; available at [www.journalism.org](http://www.journalism.org).
10. William Damon and Howard Gardner, "Reporting the News in an Age of Accelerating Power and Pressure: The Private Quest to Preserve the Public Trust," academic paper, November 6, 1997, 10.
11. In total, all twelve of the ethics codes on file with the American Society of Newspaper Editors that mention purpose describe this as journalism's primary mission. Four of the twenty-four that don't mention purpose include it inside the texts of their ethics codes.
12. Associated Press, report of Pope John Paul II's declaration of the Vatican's Holy Year Day for Journalists, by Ellen Knickmeyer, June 4, 2000; available at Associated Press Worldstream, via LexisNexis.
13. Mitchell Stephens, *History of News* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), 27.
14. John Hohenberg, *Free Press, Free People: The Best Cause* (New York: Free Press, 1973), 2.
15. Stephens, *History of News*, 53-59. The creation of this government-sponsored daily newspaper was the first formal act of Julius Caesar on becoming consul of Rome, 60 B.C.
16. Hohenberg, *Free Press*, 38. The writers were John Trenchard and William Gordon.

17. The  
for  
18. Nex  
19. Lee  
20. Joh  
futu  
Sch  
21. Pau  
22. Bro  
23. CB  
narr  
you  
ion  
24. Thi  
sion  
25. The  
Niel  
cove  
Colu  
avail  
26. The  
the l  
level  
Car  
Kno  
27. Walt  
(Nev  
28. Care  
29. John  
3 (M  
30. Two  
Chri  
York  
31. Lou  
cial is  
32. Sever  
Some  
Spira  
Order  
Medi  
Excel  
Press  
www.  
33. Carey  
34. Davic