

## 22 The Media Food Chain and the Functions of Journalism

**TO GET AN ACCURATE READ** on the current health of the media, it is important to recognize the roles historically played by different actors. While newspapers, TV, and radio all performed multiple functions in the pre-Internet age, they each had particular strengths and fed off each other in generally worthwhile ways. Newspapers tended to do the majority of accountability reporting. Because of the size of their staffs, the mobility of their reporters, and the many column inches they could dedicate to news, they could devote more time and resources to labor- and time-intensive projects, sustain ongoing beat reporting, and offer more in-depth explanation and analysis of complex issues.

The strengths of local TV flowed from the characteristics of the medium: The ability it affords to tell stories using moving images and sound, and to offer them live, has tended to make it the medium of choice for conveying a scene or a dramatic moment—whether the fall of the Berlin wall or a local traffic accident. TV was able to convey news more quickly than print, often airing a story the same day the event occurred. In terms of accountability journalism, television typically did not have sufficient staff to break as many stories as newspapers did, but it served another important function—amplifying, dramatizing, and legitimizing the accountability function of newspapers. Imagine if Watergate had never made it to network news.

Radio's role has been similar to TV's in the sense that it has usually amplified more than it has initiated original journalism. There are many exceptions to these generalities, of course, in which TV and radio stations scooped newspapers or, through their beat reporters, elevated the level of competition among reporters, improving everyone's game.

So the contraction of newspapers not only affects their readers, but the whole information food chain. In theory, TV and radio could have filled the vacuum left by newspapers, but our research indicates that they are not doing that. That means the ecosystem is missing a key element. Switching metaphors, Alex Jones of the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy refers to the basic reporting newspapers have typically done as the “iron core” of journalism.<sup>1</sup> They bring forth the basic material from which other media craft their products. If too few people are mining the ore, the rest of media output becomes lower quality.

Can the new media create a new ecosystem that is better than what we have ever had? As we discussed in Chapter 4, Internet, we come away with both encouraging and sobering conclusions. There are many ways that today's media system improves accountability—both by citizens and journalists. On the other hand, in many communities TV and radio have not so far filled the reporting gaps created by the contraction of newspapers. In some ways, many news websites now play a similar role to that of TV and radio—offering speed, amplification, analysis, and commentary, often of extraordinary value but not exactly the same as labor-intensive reporting. Finally, many of the online entities that go beyond that model—those that attempt to mine the iron ore—are struggling mightily to find sustainable business models. To be sure, this is the situation at one particular moment; it is possible that over time different players will react to new needs and take on new roles. But so far, the deficits remain.

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## Functions of Journalism

So far, we have looked at the media system from two angles: by traditional sector (TV, newspapers, radio, etc.) and by region of coverage (hyperlocal, local, national, etc.). We now turn to one more perspective: the role the press plays in ensuring a healthy democracy and a well-served citizenry. One useful template was created by Tom Rosensteil, head of the Pew Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism and author of *Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload*. He says that the 21st-century media have eight functions: Authentication, Watch Dog, Witness, Forum Leader, Sense Making, Smart Aggregation, Empowerment, and Role Model.<sup>2</sup>

How well are these functions being carried out in the new ecosystem?

*Empowerment:* In terms of their personal relationship to media, citizens have never been more empowered. They can publish their thoughts, observations, photographs, videos, treatises, and ideas, participating in a public dialogue previously restricted to a lucky or privileged few. Citizens can, as YouTube's motto urges: "broadcast yourself." They can also choose what information they want to consume, grabbing control from "gatekeepers," (a.k.a. the editors and publishers who had been deciding what the public saw), and they can customize information flow according to their interests and proclivities, producing what MIT media scholar Nicholas Negroponte first called "the Daily Me."<sup>3</sup> And, finally, they can be distributors of information. Any citizen can be reporter, publisher, and delivery boy or girl with just a few clicks. Although we see some countervailing power shifts (see below), there's no doubt that consumers in many ways have more control over what information they consume and share.

*Smart Aggregation:* The Internet offers endless volumes of information from countless sources—so anything that helps cull, curate, and package quality content to meet consumer needs and interests is invaluable. And because digitized information is so easy to manipulate (i.e., organize and reorganize, etc.) and affordable to publish (i.e., display/distribute), there is an abundance of smart aggregators that are finding and pushing out quality content quickly and inexpensively and making it available across multiple platforms. Whether the task is performed by editors, computer algorithms, crowd-sourcing, or social media, the media system has already created a variety of means for "smart aggregation."

*Authentication:* New media advocates argue that "the crowd" is usually more effective at authenticating something than an editor. Instead of having two smart reporters poring over the documents, have ten thousand citizens. And it is true that when someone posts inaccurate information on a blog, it does not take long for other people to point it out. One study by *Nature* found that Wikipedia had an average of 3.86 mistakes per entry, while *Encyclopedia Britannica* averaged 2.92 mistakes per entry.<sup>4</sup> The glass is both half full (a democratic, volunteer-based system has only a few errors per article) and half empty (Wikipedia had 32 percent more errors per article than the old-model encyclopedia).

Crowd-based fact-checking eventually works surprisingly well to correct inaccuracies. But most news is consumed when it breaks, not "eventually." Web culture places a bit less emphasis on getting it right the first time, since it relies on the speed of the post-and-correct process. Those who stay with a story as it plays out may eventually get the facts, but many people do not have the time, energy, or inclination to do that. In the old system, citizens had, in effect, outsourced that job to the editors at the newspapers they read; now they must take on more of the burden themselves.

*Witness:* Again, the picture is complex. In some ways, "witnessing" is the strength of the new media landscape. Whether the event is a tsunami or a press conference, coverage of news that transpires before our eyes, or our phone cameras, has gotten better. But in other ways, the current system is a step backward. No journalist was present in Bell City, California, to witness the Bell City Council raising the salaries of city officials again and again over the course of several years. Many parts of state and local government now go unobserved by the scrutinizing eyes of journalists. Moreover, witnessing has never been simply about watching something unfold; it also means observing situations over time, noticing slow-building crises—such as the rise in the number of soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder. Reporting of that kind does not require someone to watch a single event but to follow, and draw together, hundreds of private agonies.

*Sense Making:* The returns here are mixed. We are awash in commentary, which is a form of "sense making": it looks at facts and attempts to clarify what is important and what is not. When a story breaks, its significance may

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not be readily apparent; commentators offer interpretation and opinion, helping to give a sense of context. Hearing a range of voices—both journalists and other experts—can allow for a richer, more nuanced understanding. Although the Internet clearly has many dubious sources, over time readers can determine for themselves who is most trustworthy. On the other hand, the speed of the Internet process is sometimes a liability. The rhythms of the newspaper and newsmagazine production cycle enabled, and required, reporters to spend time sorting through competing claims, connecting dots, and providing context. That extra time they spent was time saved for the reader, who did not have to review multiple sources to assess the relative wisdom or veracity of different parties.

*Watchdog:* On this function, the current media system appears to be worse than before, at least at the local level. To be sure, the move to put more government data online has enabled a mix of citizens and reporters to hold institutions accountable. But a crucial aspect of watchdog reporting is finding out information that someone wants covered up, or, less conspiratorially, pulling together threads of information that do not at first seem related. Newspapers, local TV stations, and local radio stations employ fewer reporters now than they used to, and many of those

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that have survived have become more like 1930s wire service reporters—filing rapidly and frequently, doing fewer interviews, and spending less time pressing for information. This has resulted in a shift in the balance of power—away from citizens, toward powerful institutions. The watchdog reporter hates a press release; the busy reporter often loves it.

More government transparency will certainly help, enabling a wider range of reporters and citizens to look for problems, in a less costly way. (See Chapter 16, Government Transparency). But transparency without a critical mass of reporters will not be a panacea. The problem is human nature. People are naturally inclined to with-

hold information that makes them look bad. This is true for government, corporations, labor unions, universities, and any other type of institution, whether the information is in the form of handwritten scrawl on paper documents or digits in databases. Usually, dirty secrets must be “found out”—no easy task—and the people who are most likely to have the time, independence, and skills for the job are full-time professionals: police, prosecutors—and reporters.

### **Power Shifts**

As noted above, the Internet has been a boon for democratic engagement and citizen empowerment in many ways. However, our on-the-ground research turned up numerous examples of a countervailing power shift, away from citizens and toward institutions. Since surveys reveal that Americans hold reporters in low esteem—and may associate them with rich and powerful TV personalities—some may be skeptical about the notion that a decline in the number of journalists could shift control away from citizens and toward the powerful. But this is what we have concluded. Reporters who have less time per story become more reliant on news doled out by press release or official statement, which means that they report the news powerful institutions want us to know rather than what has been concealed. That is a power shift.

Recall the Pew study of Baltimore, which concluded that governmental institutions, increasingly, were driving stories rather than reporters:

“As news is posted faster, often with little enterprise reporting added, the official version of events is becoming more important. We found official press releases often appear word for word in first accounts of events, though often not noted as such . . . Government, at least in this study, initiates most of the news. In the detailed examination of six major storylines, 63% of the stories were initiated by government officials, led first of all by the police. Another 14% came from the press. Interest group figures made up most of the rest.”<sup>5</sup>

Investigative reporter Mark Thompson says he has access to “a million times more stuff than [he] did 30 years ago” but that “now [he’s] awash in the high tide of what the government wants [him] to see.”<sup>6</sup> Bill Girdner, owner and editor of Courthouse News Service, says that as it gets harder for reporters to get information about cases, “the

court bureaucracy has gotten stronger and stronger. . . . When journalists don't have presence, others control the information process."<sup>7</sup>

Some news organizations devote fewer resources to prying information from reluctant institutions. "As we lose resources, we lose our ability to fight Freedom of Information [law]suits," says Doug Guthrie, court reporter for the *Detroit News*. "We try to fake them out with stern letters, but they know we don't have it." When records are withheld, Guthrie says, there are more likely to be violations of citizens' rights:

"I used to think public servants in the U.S. were over-criticized and under-appreciated. But dealing with state court officials reminds me of what people complained about in socialist economies. . . . These legions of apparatchiks that are interested in their turf, their petty domains of power and made-up rules, and have no understanding of and no interest in the principles of our nation or the need for a strong press."<sup>8</sup>

Caroline Smith DeWaal, food safety director at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer advocacy organization, says that the power shift stems in part from a lack of expertise. In the past, most major news outlets had reporters who focused primarily on food safety. Now, few do, DeWaal says. "One possible effect of this is that when the administration makes a major announcement, you don't have the quality of questions or the quality of analysis that you used to have."<sup>9</sup>

Many of these examples focus on government, but the same power shift bolsters the interests of any institution inclined to hide embarrassing information. Since private institutions—such as corporations, universities, labor unions, and hospitals—have few of the legal obligations to share information that government agencies do, it has always been much easier for them to withhold damaging information, especially when they have fewer reporters biting at their heels.

In some ways, the Internet has increased the influence of press releases. Wally Dean, a longtime TV news executive, says that stations often refer to people as "beat reporters" when really they are just the point person for press releases on a particular topic. "Frequently the so-called health reporter fronts the health news but is using handouts from the health industry or using material from one of the feeds coming into the TV station," Dean says.<sup>10</sup>

In the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Ryan Chittum described a company that put out a press release with a false claim about a new deal it had made with record labels. Major news outlets, such as the *Financial Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, AP, and Reuters, among many others, published the story without verification. While most outlets followed up with corrections, few of them posted the correction along with their original article, and thus

the "uncorrected version continued to proliferate on overseas news Websites. . . . And that can only lead to grief, thanks to the magic of Google caches and message boards, where original copies of the story can still be found." Chittum explained, "Events move so fast that there often seems to be little time to check facts, and announcement-based reporting is given too much prominence."<sup>11</sup>

Amy Mengel, head of inbound marketing for public relations firm readMedia, wrote about this issue on a message board dedicated to public relations topics: "Newsrooms have been gutted and, particularly at the local level, journalists rely on press releases. . . . to help them fill their ever-increasing news hole."<sup>12</sup> By one estimate, the ratio of public relations professionals to journalists is now four to one, compared with one to one just 30 years ago.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, public relations professionals increasingly use the Internet to get press releases directly into the hands of consumers, bypassing reporters entirely. Bernadette Morris, president and CEO of Black PR Wire, says that the press release "is no longer just a media relations tool; it is now widely read online, in addition to the eyes it attracts via traditional delivery inside the newsroom."<sup>14</sup> A survey of PR professionals conducted by PR News and PRWeb found that 24 percent now view the consumer as the direct target of press releases.<sup>15</sup>

There is nothing inherently wrong with a press release or with public relations efforts. These have always been a part of the news flow, and there was never a time when every press release was cross-checked by a reporter. But as the number of reporters declines, the balance shifts toward the institutions that call the press conference or issue the press release.

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## Consequences

Does any of this matter in a concrete way? We believe that an increase in local reporters would pay for itself many times over in terms of social value—through less corruption, better health information for citizens, less wasteful government spending, safer streets, ultimately better schools, and, most amorphous, a healthier democracy. Throughout the earlier chapters, there were examples of important topics that are receiving insufficient coverage. But can it be proven that this has negative repercussions for citizens or communities?

A comparison of what reporters used to do with what they now do helps to give a sense of what is being lost. When an editor at *The (Nashville) Tennessean* recounted how a story about the regulation of incompetent doctors was being held up, because his newspaper had eliminated one of its health reporters (see Chapter 1, Newspapers),<sup>6</sup> we cannot know for sure which incompetent doctors are continuing to practice. But we can reasonably expect that someone

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will be harmed. When experts in Michigan believe that parents are probably losing custody of their children as a result of insufficient coverage of family courts (see Chapter 1, Newspapers) we cannot know which parent is losing which child. But we can nonetheless imagine how we would feel if a broken justice system unfairly dismantled our family because no one was watching.

In the case of Bell, California—in which city officials paid themselves exorbitant salaries—if a reporter earning \$50,000 had been regularly covering the city council, and salaries of those officials had therefore remained at the level of most other elected officials, taxpayers would have saved millions of dollars. Corruption costs taxpayers money, and it can continue much more easily when no one is watching. David Simon, a reporter turned screenwriter, said at a Senate hearing, “the next 10 or 15 years in this country are going to be a halcyon era for state and local political corruption. It is going to be one of the great times to be a corrupt politician.”<sup>17</sup>

And by looking at some of the outstanding journalism that has been done after tragedies—such as mine collapses or auto defects (see Chapter 21, Types of News)—we can get a feel for how many lives might have been saved had coverage begun earlier.

Scholars have attempted to take things even further, studying whether the availability of news affects conditions in quantitative ways.

UNESCO’s *Press Freedom and Development* survey of 194 countries<sup>18</sup> in 2008 found correlations between robust press freedom and higher levels of per capita GDP, higher percentages of GDP spent on health, and higher rates of primary and secondary education enrollment.<sup>19</sup> It is quite possible that these factors help generate a free press, rather than the reverse, but at a minimum these results indicate that a decline in the vigor of the press indicates *something* bad.<sup>20</sup>

Stronger evidence exists that the availability of news and information inhibits corruption. A 2003 international study found that the level of corruption in a country is largely influenced by how well informed the electorate is, as measured by the circulation of daily newspapers.<sup>21</sup> The study also showed that states that had a vibrant press were less corrupt than those that did not.<sup>22</sup>

Several studies have documented that voter turnout and the likelihood of competitive elections are higher when the electorate is well informed:

- > A study of Spanish-language TV stations found that the presence of local Spanish-language newscasts increased voter turnout among Hispanics by an estimated 5 to 10 percent.<sup>23</sup>
- > A study of more than 7,000 cities found that, in areas where voters had more information (through sample ballots and voter guides) or the presence of a local newspaper, fewer incumbents ran for or won re-election. As voters paid more attention, races became more competitive.<sup>24</sup>
- > After the *Cincinnati Post* closed in 2007, researchers at Princeton University found that “the next year, fewer candidates ran for municipal office in the suburbs most reliant on the Post, incumbents became more likely to win re-election, and voter turnout and campaign spending fell.”<sup>25</sup>
- > Areas of Los Angeles not served by either daily or weekly newspapers exhibit lower rates of voter turnout than areas that have some access to local journalism.<sup>26</sup>

In short, social science research supports at least two hypotheses: 1) better-informed communities experience higher levels of governmental responsiveness, and 2) better-informed communities experience higher rates of political participation.

Unfortunately, reality is not as simple as “more media equals a better-informed public equals more accountability.” A 2005 study found that the spread of television, “account[ed] for between a quarter and a half of the total decline in [voter] turnout since the 1950s.” The study’s author speculated that this was due to newspaper and radio covering civic matters more effectively than TV; so, at least in terms of election information, citizens had replaced a more-effective medium with a less effective one.<sup>27</sup>

The Knight Commission in 2009 observed that the mere presence of significant information within a local news environment does not guarantee its effective use. The Commission cited the example of Hurricane Katrina:

“A front-page story in the June 8, 2004, *Times-Picayune*<sup>28</sup> in New Orleans detailed a near-stoppage in the work needed to shore up the city’s levees. The mere revelation of that information in itself did not mobilize the effort that might have spared the city the worst ravages of Hurricane Katrina 14 months later. Interested or influential people did not engage with the information in timely, effective ways. Unless people, armed with information, engage with their communities to produce a positive effect, information by itself is powerless.”<sup>29</sup>

While the presence of good journalism does not guarantee a healthy democracy, it is fair to say that the absence of good journalism makes a healthy democracy far less likely.