

# Updating “On Behalf of Journalism: A Manifesto for Change”

By Geneva Overholser

## Overview

“Journalism as we know it is over,” I wrote in June 2006. Today I would add, “and a whole new world has opened before us.” “On Behalf of Journalism: A Manifesto for Change” was a document intended to bring hope in a time of difficulty. Two years later, there is even greater difficulty—and still more reason for hope. We wouldn’t have chosen devastating disruption as a cure, but ours was a field so fiercely resistant to change that it may have been required. In my 40 years in this craft, I often yearned for more accountability, greater democratization, increased transparency, less pomposity and insularity—in all, a clearer understanding that our reason for being was public service. Fear has fostered all those characteristics, and we who call ourselves journalists know now that we will live or die by that very understanding.

There is still good reason to fear—and not just for the survival of media as we have known them, but for the continuation of a healthy supply of reliable information in the public interest. We are far from answering the toughest question: How are we going to pay for the creation of content? And, for all the new models, it remains unclear how we will reliably provide the kind of journalism that can stand up to big government and big business, acting as watchdog, championing the powerless and ferreting out secrets.

But so much has changed for the better in the past couple of years. In many traditional media organizations, newsrooms that were once innovation’s enemy now lead it. Old hands learn Drupal, bloggers adopt ethics codes. The old straitjacket about who is a journalist has been stripped off by the fast-emerging reality of aggregators and curators, citizen journalists and crowd sourcing. Collaboration and hybridization seem now to offer enormous potential—not only the old forms of collaboration, such as a newspaper and television newsroom co-producing stories, but new forms: Universities that hire journalists to work with students to produce investigative reporting used by both new and traditional media (Brandeis, Columbia, Berkeley and others). Nonprofits that turn out national investigative work themselves (the Center for Public Integrity and the coming Pro Publica)—or nonprofits that support journalists in doing so (the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting). And even the unintentional collaborations such as the work by Joshua Micah Marshall’s Talking Points Memo and by McClatchy newspapers, which together brought out last year’s U.S. attorney scandal stories.

Amid such change it’s not surprising that the signals keep switching on us. Things we thought we knew turn out not to be so clear. Is advertising going to

continue to be linked to news? Was the old business/journalism wall our great protector—or an impediment to much-needed entrepreneurialism? Is anonymity essential to the Web (assuredly not, for information in the public interest)? And the question that looms over all: With this great proliferation of voices on the Web, what steps will it take to ensure that a sufficient proportion of it is reliable information in the public interest—and how will those sources be identifiable and discoverable for the public? Some of the answers here, too, of course, will be unexpected—just as some of the bloggers so decried early on by “legacy” media have done much to help bring accountability to journalism. This is truly an era when developments that at first seem inimical may prove over time to bring benefits.

Citizens will increasingly need to take responsibility for the condition and availability of information in the public interest, from demanding more of it to educating themselves about what is happening to it and how to judge what works for them. Individual investments are going to be essential—such as those by the Sandler family in ProPublica, and by Emily Pulitzer in the Pulitzer Center—as will the kind of individual support that public radio has made familiar. And reliable information will come from untraditional sources—from nongovernmental organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, which has 80 people collecting data across the globe—to governmental sources and, aggregations of bloggers. Those who know and care most about journalism will need to step up their efforts to differentiate it from other forms of information-provision by strengthening and adapting its core principles to a digital world. And we will need to speak out more effectively in these difficult times on behalf of journalism as a public good, a resource essential to democracy.

Amid the unsettlement, unpredictable causes for hope will continue to arise. Google CEO Eric E. Schmidt told an advertising-industry conference in April 2008 that digital media will “create new opportunities for advertisers and new opportunities for information...The scale of this is underappreciated.”<sup>1</sup> Digital identities<sup>2</sup> will enable micropayments for those selecting bits of information across the Web. Metadata—collections of data about data—will connect information and advertising in ways that can support original content. And other yet-unnamed forms will emerge.

## **Introduction**

In the face of change such as rocks the media world today a few years form an eternity. Thus I am grateful indeed for the opportunity to update the “Manifesto.” The nine propositions (See Appendix) at the base of the original were formulated for a June 2005 gathering. Though each retains merit in an examination of journalism’s prospects, some are far more vital than others. The prospects for progress on corporate social responsibility, for example, have been largely overwhelmed by the speed of the collapse of traditional media economic models. Other of the propositions, meanwhile, gained such force that they began to define my own work

without my being entirely aware of it. I have been devoting time to nonprofit journalism organizations, chairing the board of the Center for Public Integrity, serving on the boards of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, Alicia Patterson Foundation and other groups. And I have brought forward other topics into projects (the new Media, Enduring Values work I will describe below) and programs, such as the March 28, 2008, symposium commemorating the centennials of the Missouri School of Journalism and the National Press Club. “The Next Century: Journalism for a Digital Globe,” brings together four speakers on ideas from *other* countries on the future of journalism. One is a Swede speaking on how government subsidies extend the reach of media in Western Europe. One is a Canadian scholar, talking about how required courses in news literacy affect Canadians’ expectations of their media. One is the editor of the *Guardian* in the UK on how a nonprofit news organization can put transparency and accountability at the center of its commitments. A speaker from Joy FM in Ghana addresses the community-building role that radio and its online component have played there. A video of the program can be found at <http://www.press.org/library/missouri.cfm> and more information about the program, including excerpts, can be found at <http://journalism.missouri.edu/news/2008/04-08-npc-centennial.html>.

The most important generalizations about the propositions three years on, however, are two:

- To have reduced the universe that is “new forms of media” to the stature of one of nine propositions seems mind-bogglingly inadequate to the 2008 observer.
- The changes so quickly taking place have caused these nine fairly distinct-seeming ideas to blend dramatically with one another—just as journalism trends more generally seem to be melding and merging.

Thus this update, while mindful of the nine original ideas, regroups and blends the progress report on various fronts so as to reflect the reality on the ground.

The world of non-profit journalism has shown remarkable forward movement. Led by former *Wall Street Journal* Managing Editor Paul Steiger, ProPublica joins the Center for Public Integrity and Center for Investigative Reporting as an independent investigative reporting organization.<sup>3</sup> With \$10 million a year committed by Herbert and Marion Sandler, the New York City-based organization plans to employ 24 journalists and make its work available free to mainstream media outlets, as well as on its Website. Where the news establishments have long been hesitant about publishing investigative work not done by their own staff that resistance is breaking down as news budgets decline. *The Boston Globe* is regularly publishing work by classes at Northeastern University headed by former *Globe* investigative reporter, Walter Robinson.<sup>4</sup>

Other signs of vitality are plentiful. New forms of nonprofit journalism, such as the public Radio Exchange, New America Media, the National Black Programming Consortium, Linktv and ITVS have joined the more familiar PBS, NPR and

American Public Media. In practically the same time frame in late April of 2008, three gatherings with nonprofit journalism at the core of their discussions will take place in Berkeley, Baton Rouge and New York City, each involving a mix of leaders of existing nonprofits, prospective funders, legacy media leaders and academics.

Nonetheless, nonprofit journalism is hardly poised to supplant the prevailing commercial model in American media. And concerns remain about whether individual benefactors or foundations will unduly constrain the journalism of the organizations they support—or whether nonprofits' work will be weakened by the absence of the value of commercial discipline. Still, it's clear that the collapse of commercial media is dramatically strengthening existing nonprofit journalism organizations and spawning new ones rapidly.

Indeed, it is in this arena we find one of the meldings of the nine ideas, with, new media models emerging daily as the collapse of traditional media's economic underpinnings makes itself evident in daily reports of staff and newshole cuts, stock-price plunges and ownership changes. Former journalists, or community activists concerned about the poverty of information in the public interest in their hometowns, band together to launch new (mostly Web-based, but sometimes niche print publications) media outlets. The models are sometimes for-profit, often not-for-profit, but they typically encompass a broad range of support mechanisms.

Emails from founders of two of these outlets offer a more complete look at the range of models, which typically include individual gifts, foundation support, user support, advertising and collaboration with other media. A look at [www.MinnPost.com](http://www.MinnPost.com) (see page 160) illustrates a community approach to the news that links richly to others (for example, to [TCDailyPlanet](http://www.tcdailyplanet.net) at [www.tcdailyplanet.net](http://www.tcdailyplanet.net), an aggregation of local ethnic and neighborhood information sources), enjoys collaboration (find a death certificate by linking on partnering Minnesota Historical Society or see who is funding your national representatives through a nifty interactive project with the Sunlight Foundation) and roams widely over the news and information landscape.

Are these new media outlets one more threat to a challenged traditional-media world? Former *Minneapolis Star Tribune* reporter Eric Black, now a MinnPoster, answered in an email to me: "Papers like the Strib are dying the death of a thousand cuts. You know... the list of the cuts. At this point, something like Minnpost is a very small additional nick. Most people who read Minnpost probably still read the paper. But they are unhappy with the dumb-down. Minnpost wants to fill the need those readers feel for 'thoughtful approach' news. The audience is small, but seems to be growing. And many of them really like it, which may loosen the bonds that connect them to their lifelong addiction to a paper on their doorstep and could, if it catches on, become a more serious cut.

"People I talk to at the Strib are afraid, very very afraid, but not much of us MinnPosters. They're mostly just jealous of us because we got the buyout and because we aren't heading into contract negotiations with an employer that's sinking."<sup>5</sup>

Is this model likely to become a common nationwide phenomenon? Watching MinnPost and other such developments, James B. Shaffer, Dean of the School of Business at the University of Southern Maine and former chief financial officer of the *Los Angeles Times*, thinks perhaps so. He believes there are concerned citizens with means who might well step up to address the information needs of local communities. Noting the challenges so publicly facing the *Times's* current owner, Tribune Co., as well as the feuding among the owner and top editors at the privately owned *Santa Barbara News-Press*, Shaffer wrote me: "Just as in Santa Barbara, I suspect there is a huge reservoir of money and passion that can be tapped to create a new news organization in LA. If I weren't so busy with two jobs at the University of Southern Maine, I'd be packing my carpetbag for either LA or Santa Barbara and trying to get something going. I'll bet someone will." <sup>6</sup>

The Manifesto looked at the role of the citizen in two ways—through the lens of their own responsibility to be informed, and through the lens of the need to make the changes in the media world clearer to the public so that the citizens' role in demanding information in the public interest would be strengthened. In both these arenas—and in an important additional one—there has been a burst of activity in the past several years.

The additional role, of course, is that of citizens not just as *consumers* of media, but also as *providers* of it. Much has been done in the last three years to strengthen this enormous rise of interest in citizen contributions. The Knight Citizen News Network at [www.kcnn.org](http://www.kcnn.org) for example is "a self-help portal that guides both ordinary citizens and traditional journalists in launching and responsibly operating community news and information sites." KCNN has learning modules on the principles of good journalism, instruction on media law, on making videos and much more. Meanwhile, David Bennahum's Center for Independent Media at <http://newjournalist.org/about/> supports bloggers by providing journalism training and helping them place their work.

Most traditional news organizations understand by now that citizens want their media to be less lecture, more seminar, but too many have responded with a kind of reader-contribution ghetto of pet photos. Other news organizations are reaching out to bring user-generated content into their mix in richer forms, and some are working to develop crowd-sourcing into a strong component of their news report. Public Insight Journalism, instituted by Minnesota Public Radio, is a particularly interesting example of how to tap systematically the wisdom of news consumers so as to better inform the reporting that MPR journalists do.

Wikipedia, of course, is the ultimate in inclusive sourcing, and its merits are debated breathlessly—a debate that does nothing to slow its steamrolling progress.<sup>7</sup>

Broad inclusiveness also has its downside. Kevin Kelly, a self-described booster of what "decentralized, out-of-control systems can accomplish," and a man who says the success of Wikipedia "keeps surpassing my expectations," has also recently written on The Technium at <http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/> a piece called "The Bottom is Not Enough:"

“Throughout my boosterism I have tried to temper my celebration of the bottom with my belief that the bottom is not enough for what we really want. To get to the best we need some top down intelligence, too.” Kelly adds that “the supposed paragon of adhocracy—the Wikipedia itself—is itself far from strictly bottom-up. In fact a close inspection of Wikipedia’s process reveals that it has an elite at its center, (and that it does have an elite center is news to most). Turns out there is far more deliberate top-down design management going on than first appears. This is why Wikipedia has worked in such a short time.”<sup>8</sup>

There are countless ways for citizens to contribute to and shape journalism, including (increasingly) sites that invite readers to submit news tips or that show citizens how to do local journalism in partnership with media organizations. These exciting developments do not however address a major concern of those watching the decline in journalism produced by large companies. In this nation of big government and big business, who will continue to have the deep pockets, tenacity, Rolodex and access to hold power accountable? With all the questions afoot about how to pay for content on the Web—for journalists as well as artists and others—this challenge remains troubling.

Even as so many citizens show such promising eagerness to engage, this is still true: Our experience has trained Americans to expect that media will be virtually free to them, and that its supply will continue without any citizen responsibility for it—the kind of responsibility that citizens feel, say about education, even in a nation where public education is universally available. If information in the public interest is to find sound new footing, this must change.

Happily, efforts to awaken that sense of responsibility for an adequate supply of journalism in the public interest—in essence, how to engender an understanding of journalism as a public good—are another area in which action has picked up recently. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation is urging community foundations to put support for local journalism on their agendas and has teamed with the Aspen Institute—the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy. In February 2008, Knight co-hosted a symposium on the same topic. The American Society of Newspaper Editors, meanwhile, is considering a national campaign to “promote the First Amendment in American Life.”

Another approach is to strengthen the public’s demand for better journalism by teaching news literacy. Howard Schneider’s work on this issue at Stony Brook University—where every undergraduate takes a news literacy course—has expanded to include a “News Literacy Center” on how to judge credibility in news. And a former *Los Angeles Times* reporter is forming a speakers bureau that will bring journalists, including retirees, into middle schools throughout the nation.

Some citizens have actually created an active media-reform movement, as I learned at the 2007 National Conference for Media Reform, which drew some 3000 people to Memphis. Its aims have typically focused on such measures as saving community Internet, opposing media consolidation, supporting low-power radio,

bringing back the Fairness Doctrine, seeking network neutrality for the Internet, and pointing the FCC spectrum auction toward public airwaves. In other words, substantial overhaul of the system—not efforts to foster concern about challenges undermining the industry—has been the movement’s emphasis, though Free Press, the group that hosts the conference, is inviting traditional journalists to the 2008 event in Minneapolis in an effort to broaden the conversation.

One remaining activity with a focus on corporate responsibility can be found in the work of Trillium, an asset management corporation that, according to an email from Farnum Brown, the vice president in charge of the project, has “incubated and has now spun out a freestanding media responsibility non-profit called Open MIC: the Open Media and Information Companies Initiative. Together Trillium and Open MIC are approaching a host of media and telecom firms, raising issues ranging from freedom of political speech to diversity in media content to access to information technology. In each case, discussions are guided by the belief that the values we promote as citizens are the same as those we seek as investors: diversity and competition, creativity and innovation, openness and transparency. Trillium and Open MIC are currently engaged in formal discussions with AT&T, urging the telecom giant to adopt a formal policy against censoring any form of political expression.”<sup>9</sup>

A prospect mentioned some three years ago as an interesting one to watch was the conversion by publicly owned companies to private ownership—with the potential that a lower expectation of return could encourage investment in news. The conversion has certainly proceeded, but mostly as the consequence of failing newspaper profits or sales from one company to another that have involved a resale of the unwanted newspapers. Thus newspapers like the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, once owned by Knight Ridder and now privately held, are confronting today’s sped-up economic decline under new private ownership. Equity investors, layering new debt onto already shaky newspaper operations, have found the transition a rocky one, and cutbacks among these newspapers have been, to say the least, no less stringent on average than among publicly held newspaper companies.<sup>10</sup>

How are “legacy” media handling the burgeoning of platforms and models? Many say poorly indeed. Consider this view from our colleague Robert Picard in his Shorenstein Center paper “Journalism, Value Creation and the Future of News Organization,” Spring 2006: “Corporate executives have little vision...News executives have been turned into relatively passive administrators and managers who no longer lead by stature and vision. Everyone talks of decline and only feeble efforts to respond to the changing environment are underway. No one talks of achieving greatness, few are innovative, few produce quality content, and fewer still seek to increase value.”<sup>11</sup>

At a Knight Fellowships gathering at Stanford in May 2007 on “How will we pay for the journalism we need?” Salon founder David Talbot said newspapers made bad deals early on with the Web portal giants. “They devalued their own content.

At this point, it's getting the genie back in the box" to try to ensure that their products are not taken for free or sold cheaply. "Sometimes I feel guilty because I was at the cutting edge of the murder of the newspaper industry," said Talbot. "But in my defense, I think the industry was already committing suicide."<sup>12</sup> Most newspaper leaders *have* behaved fairly helplessly in the face of the "information wants to be free" Web ethos. An exception is Walter Hussman, publisher of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. His paper offers, for free online, only headlines and sometimes a few paragraphs—in a bid to entice people to read the newspaper. His circulation, unusually enough, is up.<sup>13</sup>

Lem Lloyd, vice president of the Yahoo! Newspaper Consortium, countered the gloom at the Stanford gathering about newspapers' fortunes on the Web with descriptions of what the consortium does in leveraging ad content for its 271 member newspapers. "I'd like to shed a tear for optimism," he said. "Local online advertising is going to [be worth] \$9 billion by 2010."<sup>14</sup>

Still, Google, Yahoo!, AOL and MSN - each of them among the top ten sites on the Net—all rely on news gathered by others. And their Websites dwarf the traffic of those others, even the top tier of news organizations, according to "Creative Destruction: An Exploratory Look at News on the Internet," by Thomas E. Patterson. The brighter news is that for "name-brand" newspapers and television sites, the growth is good, though still slower than that for aggregators and search engines. It's local newspaper sites that are not doing as well, wrote Patterson.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, it's the public need for reliable information that matters, not what platform it arrives on. If all newspapers and network broadcasts died, but a rich flow of good journalism reached more Americans than ever, there would be no problem (except of course for lots of journalists and media organizations!). But some impediments to that prospect are evident today. For one thing, the promise of democratization afforded by the Web lies still in the future, with heavy users (and generators) skewing male, young and higher-income, particularly among blog readers, according to Nielsen,<sup>16</sup> though the demographics are changing. And then there is that previously noted question about who does the big, expensive, hard-to-get investigative story?

Amid such questions, a new one arises: is the old media/new media divide *passé*? An article in *Harper's Magazine* last year focused on the Prelinger library in San Francisco as a "post-digital" library. Rejecting the disparaging of a stark conflict between "treeware" and the digital culture, the library's owners said we should stop celebrating—or lamenting—the discontinuous story of how the circuits will displace the shelves, and start telling a continuous story about how the two will fit together, enriching each other, to the benefit of us all.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly, different kinds of reading are more effective on different platforms. Those media that figure out how best to deliver what kind of information where will be miles ahead of those less nimble.

The propositions that news media clarify their own ethics, agree on what sets journalism apart from other forms of information, and then more powerfully

communicate these matters to the public meld now with the need on the part of the public for greater assistance in judging the ever more chaotic world of media.

To that end, the Poynter Institute is working on a project suggested by Jim Naughton, its former president, that he described in an email this way: “I’ve been trying to persuade Poynter to create a daily digest of the best journalism on the Internet—capsule summaries, similar to Romenesko’s—that guide the user to things like an ongoing series in a regional newspaper or a brilliant piece of correspondence in a magazine or an investigative piece of substance on a broadcast website or an evocative photo-essay from Darfur. The digest (call it WOW, for What’s On the Web) would be available to newspapers to run on, say, page 2A where they increasingly are focusing on late-breaking personalities, and to all media to use on websites. If Poynter creates it, I’d hope they would earn income to support training. If Poynter does not, I’d love to persuade Knight or someone to fund it. The idea stems from the belief that newspapers withstood any real threat from radio in part by becoming the source of reliable information about what’s on the radio. Then they did the same with television. But newspapers and other mainstream news organizations have not yet mastered the ability to help people navigate to what’s worthwhile on the Web, not on a consistent and timely basis.”<sup>18</sup>

Poynter’s Bill Mitchell wrote me in a more recent email that “Part of WOW is in the works, at least the online component, in the form of a Best Practices/Winning Work/Backstory feature (name still under discussion) that would highlight good stuff, probe how they did it and link to it.”<sup>19</sup>

Accountability and transparency are today’s watchwords for many media ethicists. The two existing state news councils, with their emphasis on holding news media accountable, were hoping in 2007 to replicate themselves. It seemed at first that they had succeeded in two cases—New England and Southern California—though the latter failed and had to return its start-up funds to the Knight Foundation.<sup>20</sup> Bill Densmore, who heads the New England News Forum, lists these long-term objectives for that new effort:

- (a) Strengthening the journalist-educator connection
- (b) Training/advice for ‘citizen journalists’
- (c) Media-accountability/watchdog efforts
- (d) Sponsoring forums on public issues affected by media”<sup>21</sup>

Often discussed as an aid to a public baffled by the Wild West of new media options is some kind of signal of reliability—a Good Housekeeping seal of approval, if you will. In some realms of knowledge, examples exist. Healthnet.org is a global health information network that “breaks down barriers to information access” on medical issues internationally, as it describes itself on its Website. More broadly, Newstrust.Net is a site that enables viewers to evaluate information according to key journalistic standards at <http://www.newstrust.net/about/>. A committee I am part of at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences is considering as a principle

recommendation the establishment of something comparable for science information—or perhaps the systematic stewardship of science information on Wikipedia—toward the same goal of providing a reliable resource.

The Missouri School of Journalism and the Committee of Concerned Journalists joined forces on a project called New Media, Enduring Values, aimed at addressing concerns about what happens to journalism's essential principles as old forms give way to new. With Minnesota Public Radio, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and WHO-TV in Des Moines, we have sought to develop prototypes for how to translate even more richly online such tenets as the creation of a public forum, verification, and making important news interesting. Some possibilities began to emerge as we tried to separate the traditions that could be jettisoned from the principles that must be kept.<sup>22</sup>

But the effort to translate requires a recognition that new platforms have their own cultures, making the translation of, say, the commitment to named sources even more difficult in the anonymity-loving Web than in print. J-Lab's Jan Schaffer offered another interesting example relating to credibility and citizen journalism: "Surprisingly trust grows in the cit-j world in exactly opposite ways than journalists protect it. For instance, journalists maintain cred by taking pains not to cover anything they care about or have a hands-on association with. Cit journalists grow trust by covering the things they care about and are associated with. They assert that their hands-on knowledge is exactly what adds value."<sup>23</sup>

Any attempt to codify journalism ethics in today's world also runs smack up against the increasingly difficult question: What exactly IS journalism? New-media whiz Adrian Holovaty recently took his *chicagocrime.org* at once national and also broader with *everyblock.com*—an aggregation of all kinds of datasets made searchable for individual addresses, now available for New York, San Francisco and Chicago. I asked Holovaty if he considered *everyblock* to be journalism. "That's an academic question," he replied.

Academic or not, the difficult debate, "What is a journalist?" is perhaps best supplanted by, "What is journalism?" James Carey wrote in "The Culture in Question," afterword to "James Carey: A Critical Reader," about the importance of a "return to practice:" "We must ask not what the ideals of journalists are but what the spirit that is expressed in practice is and to what degree that spirit and practice are consistent with our needs as a democratic people."<sup>24</sup>

For a sense of just how many ways that spirit might manifest itself, consider this list of terms from a Journalism that Matters conference at Yahoo in May 2008, supplied by those attempting to update the outdated terminology of "journalists" to fit the emerging media world: curator, aggregator, news-recommender, beat blogger, community host, finder, network reporter, information architect, database manager, programmer, developer, group filter, sense maker. Whatever we call them, surely Holovaty's work, the interactive timelines on conflict in the Middle East provided by the Council on Foreign Relations, the U.S. attorney questions first raised by blogger Joshua Micah Marshall, the games in the public interest designed

by Ian Bogost for the *New York Times*—and countless other forms of media provided by NGOs or individuals—are providing information in the public interest.

A final proposition addresses the role of government. I have been party to several conversations—among media reformers and guild members and FCC staffers—in the past couple of years aimed at attempting to join forces on initiatives of one kind or another, but all have foundered. Various ongoing efforts, principally by media reformers as mentioned, concentrate on issues such as ownership rules, Net neutrality and the spectrum auction. Mainstream media interests have stepped up their support for a federal shield law and for strengthening of the FOIA, with recent success on the latter. A rich list of suggestions from our colleague Jay Hamilton (see page 164) focuses on some of the issues above and adds changes in inheritance-tax law, addressing legal hurdles to establishment of nonprofit journalism organizations, campaign finance reform, and expansion of grants to creation of information about public affairs. These topics are eminently worthy of public engagement, yet they remain significantly under-covered by media and poorly understood by many citizens. Surely the simplistic and inaccurate notion that the government HAS no role to play in media, still the knee-jerk reaction among many journalists and in much of the public, is one of several explanations for lack of effective action in this arena.

It has become almost a commonplace to hear calls for a new Hutchins Commission, a blue-ribbon panel, or a Marshall Plan of one kind or another in order to address the challenges that today's cauldron of media-change seems to pose. Meanwhile, the new media world is rapidly (and obliviously) birthing itself. Ethnic media are flourishing, new models are being born, more voices are heard than ever. No one really knows what lies ahead. But thoughtful observers CAN see what stands out among recent changes, and I asked two of my favorite in-the-know media types to do that: Merrill Brown, MSNBC.com's first editor-in-chief and now a consultant; and Jan Schaffer, a Pulitzer-winning *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter and editor now directing J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism. They had strong agreement on both the most noteworthy developments and the most regrettable failure.

First, Schaffer's response:

"My sense of major developments is:

- 1) the rise of non-narrative news forms—video, games, twitter, audio—forms of news and information that don't necessarily require a narrative arc.
- 2) the rise of "Search" as a new definition of journalism and search and find sites like Holovaty's new Everyblock.com that allow users to find their own stories.
- 3) certainly the rise of social networking to amplify and discuss news.

"It is heartening to see, in the hyperlocal citizen media area, how the desire for a "sense of place" is fueling user generated content."

And the disappointment? “Traditional news organizations are still painfully slow to ‘get it.’”<sup>25</sup>

Brown put it this way in a phone call from the We Media conference in Miami: “The simplest most obvious thing is the development of Facebook as a medium. If you’d said two years ago that Geneva and Merrill and a whole bunch of our friends would be pretty engaged in Facebook, we’d have scoffed.” Merrill added that what Facebook could mean for many who support journalism is hard even to imagine. “As an information-sharing, money-raising, communication device and platform, the social network development is at its infancy. I think that’s a big deal. The power of social networking is really transformational.”

As for the thing that didn’t happen, Merrill’s lament about traditional media’s tardy responsiveness was virtually identical to Jan’s.<sup>26</sup>

The original Manifesto ended with a quote from Michael Riley, then editor of the *Roanoke (VA) Times*, who was presiding over one of the more innovative newsrooms around, thanks to a “corporate culture [that] willingly embraces change.” Three years later, it seemed a good idea to track Riley down to see how things had played out. Here’s what he told me:

“In summer of 2006, Bob Merry, the president and editor-in-chief at Congressional Quarterly, called to discuss with me the job of top editor at CQ. I knew CQ well and had been watching it, and in the past five years had seen that it was one of the few media companies that really embraced wholeheartedly and unreservedly the digital publishing platform of the future through CQ.com, a news and information juggernaut built on nearly two score deep databases and a robust (and growing) newsgathering force.

“I wasn’t looking to leave Roanoke, but the opportunity at CQ was enticing. CQ had built what I consider the ideal type of journalistic business designed for the future. They understood the Web and how to reach their audience through it; they had a robust and flexible digital publishing platform; they served a demanding niche audience (those interested in Congress, politics and public policy) with rich and deep content. Nearly 65 percent of CQ’s revenues came from online sales. That compared to 5-7 percent of newspaper revenues derived from online sales. That’s a huge difference, and a marker of their success.

“The more I learned, the more I realized that CQ’s vision for the future made great sense. It combined a strong commitment to journalistic excellence, a track record of innovation, and a robust and growing business model. So I decided it was the right next step for me.” And what happened to the newspaper?

“Sadly, after I left Roanoke the tsunami that had inundated much of the industry hit that newspaper, which was recently put up for sale along with all the other properties of Landmark Communications, including the Weather Channel. They are continuing their innovative work, but the financial realities, I gather, are making it much harder to make progress.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Addendum 1: From “On Behalf of Journalism: A Manifesto for Change,”**

[http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/Overholser/20061011\\_JournStudy.pdf](http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/Overholser/20061011_JournStudy.pdf)

In June 2005, a group of journalists, scholars and others concerned about the challenges confronting American journalism gathered at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

The nine propositions below served as starting points for their discussion.

- A greater role for nonprofits—organizations such as the Center for Public Integrity, the *St. Petersburg Times* and National Public Radio, along with foundation support—could help lift all media.
- Citizens of a democracy have a responsibility to be informed. Media literacy courses, stronger civics education and other tools can create the environment of vigorous debate in which the press can thrive.
- Our society would be better served if journalists could make their voices heard more effectively - in response to freedom of information challenges, reporters threatened with jailing, concerted efforts at misrepresentation of the press, and so forth.
- The media can significantly strengthen their own position by doing a better job of holding themselves accountable and making their work transparent.
- The essential role of a free and responsible press must be made a primary concern of the public. Only they can protect and sustain it. The discussion must be brought to public attention.
- More responsible corporate governance among media companies is essential if the costly work of original journalism is to be sustained.
- In this period of challenge and change, journalists would profit by seeking a clearer common understanding of ethics and good practices, and a deliberate recommitment to journalism’s public-service role.
- New forms of media, the engagement of a richer array of people in producing media, and new ways of using media are transforming the landscape. An understanding of these changes, their potential and the challenges they pose, is essential to addressing the problems and opportunities confronting journalism.
- The government role in protecting, regulating, and supporting a free and responsible press demands thoughtful consideration and public discussion.

### **Addendum 2: Email from Jay Hamilton to author, Feb. 27, 2007**

Policy proposals in part would depend on what a person thinks is behind the current problems with journalism. I think the lack of coverage of public affairs arises from a) changes in technology and costs structure that make it harder to

generate revenue for newspapers (competition from Internet, demise of classifieds) b) lack of expressed demand for some hard news, even if citizens would benefit from the information (the ‘rational ignorance’ problem) and c) change in ownership structure that means fewer families/media company founders exist who are willing to trade off profits for doing the right thing and covering government. I think the biggest market failure probably exists at the local level in terms of the dwindling support for local watchdog investigations by newspapers.

What is to be done? Unfortunately I think that many of the frustrations people feel with journalism are often phrased in good guy/bad guy analysis (e.g., owners are too big, too greedy), when really most of the downfalls of journalism simply arise from profit maximization and shareholder interests. I find it difficult to prove all of the above, which is why I am not submitting comments in FCC proceedings. But since you asked for ideas, here are some suggestions:

- A. Relax cross-ownership restrictions. Newspapers really do provide the local information that most people get, even if they watch local tv (since local tv gets its facts from local newspapers). Local newspapers are hurting. They are still very profitable, but investors are upset because the profits are below the anticipated levels that shareholders had when they bought in. IF relaxation of cross-ownership strengthened newspapers by allowing them to get better video for their websites and use their information in another platform, then the FCC might want to consider this relaxation. Ultimately I view both tv and newspaper outlets as demand driven, so if the same person owns both in a town they still might offer diverse coverage if the audiences for print and tv were different. Talking with newspapers large and small (e.g., *Washington Post*, smaller town newspaper) might yield insights into how cross-ownership relaxation might work.
- B. Inheritance taxes and newspapers: I think that families are sometimes willing to tradeoff profits for high quality coverage (think dual stock ownership and the *Times*, *Post*; perhaps family influence too at *WSJ*). Historically the record is mixed on individual influence on papers (e.g., *Tribune* and the *Colonel*). But if one were willing to roll the dice, changes in the inheritance tax for media properties might help preserve a subset of newspapers in family hands. Frank Blethen has well developed ideas on this! The LSU volume you’ve seen (News in the Public Interest, available on the web via the Reilly Center at the Manship School) details this proposal.
- C. Nonprofits and news provision: More cities/wealthy folks are talking about running newspapers as nonprofits (or as for profit entities owned by nonprofits). Poynter would be the place to talk about legal hurdles to this.

Note that at times people talk as if a family would have to ‘give it all away’ to establish a new Poynter, but at the LSU event we did talk about how an entity

could buy a paper from a family and promise payments over time in debt as the paper was run, so the family would not be giving it away. It would be getting payments (perhaps lower than profit max) from a paper owned by a nonprofit.

- D. Public interest requirements and satellite/digital: I don't think requiring all broadcasters to provide certain levels of public affairs programming would work, because the First Amendment would prevent the FCC from being really specific about what this means. And more research is showing information impacts from soft news. But I think that there are ways to require folks using the airwaves to provide some dedicated channels with nonprofit public affairs programming (e.g., PBS, CSPAN). I am not up to speed on this area, but I know NC public broadcasting is having a hard time getting its expanded digital channels taken up by satellite folks. NC public broadcasting head would be a good source.
- E. Freedom of Information Act: FOIA lowers the cost to reporters of really finding out what is going on in government. Under the Bush administration/Republican congress agencies have been given signals to dry up/slow down information provision. The Democratic Congress could have oversight hearings on this.
- F. Campaign Finance Reform: when people consider regulation of campaign funds, they often stress corruption/appearance of impropriety/equity and downplay that ultimately funds are often translated in political information. With the decline of newspaper coverage, partisan sources of information are an alternative source of political information. The quality is different, but people do learn some facts/impressions from political ads.
- G. Hands off the web: The FEC sometimes creates fear about chilling speech on blogs, as people begin to worry about whether campaign finance laws apply to them. To the extent that the FEC can clarify/stay out of regulating Internet speech that would help discussion of public affairs proceed (even if it is subsidized by campaigns).
- H. Support Digital Trust Fund legislation that would expand the types of grants envisioned to include the creation of information about public affairs. Right now Digital Trust Fund legislation (from Minow and Grossman) targets infrastructure and digitalization of some types of information. But I think the market failures involved in public affairs coverage mean that the Trust Fund could be used to subsidize creation of public affairs information. As you know, the Trust fund proposal would tap auction revenues. This use of funds would be controversial.

- <sup>1</sup> Stuart Elliott, "Telling the Heavyweights How to Avoid Extinction," *New York Times*, April 30, 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> For a fascinating look at the many possible faces of one persona's digital ID, from where you work to what you buy to what your hobbies are to what information you seek and how, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/fredcavazza/278973402/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Perez-Pena, "Group Plan to Provide Investigative Journalism," *New York Times*, October 15, 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> Northeastern University Campus News "In the Spring and Fall semesters of '07, the students produced six page one investigative stories that ran in the *Boston Globe*." [http://www.northeastern.edu/nupr/news/0907/Walter\\_Robinson.html](http://www.northeastern.edu/nupr/news/0907/Walter_Robinson.html).
- <sup>5</sup> Email from Eric Black to author, Feb. 26, 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> Email from James Shaffer to author, Feb. 26, 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> See Nicholson Baker, "Why Wikipedia Wins," *The New York Review of Books*, March 20, 2008, or Stacy Schiff, "Know It All," *New Yorker*, July 31, 2006.
- <sup>8</sup> Kevin Kelly, "The Bottom is Not Enough," [http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/02/the\\_bottom\\_is\\_n.php](http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/02/the_bottom_is_n.php).
- <sup>9</sup> Email from Farnum Brown to author, Feb. 29, 2008.
- <sup>10</sup> David Carr, "Newspapers' New Owners Turn Grim," *New York Times*, March 24, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert G. Picard, "Journalism, Value Creation and the Future of News Organizations," Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy Research Paper Series, Spring 2006.
- <sup>12</sup> Knight News, "Journalists and media analysts debate how to pay for quality news coverage," February 2008, page 20.
- <sup>13</sup> Walter E. Hussman Jr., "How to Sink a Newspaper," *Wall Street Journal*, opinion page, May 7, 2007.
- <sup>14</sup> Knight News, "Journalists and media analysts debate how to pay for quality news coverage," February 2008, page 20.
- <sup>15</sup> Thomas E. Patterson, "Creative Destruction: An Exploratory Look at News on the Internet," Shorenstein Center, Harvard University, August 2007.
- <sup>16</sup> "Blog Traffic Grows, and It's Mostly Male," *New York Times*, January 29, 2007, page C3.
- <sup>17</sup> Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "A World in Three Aisles: Browsing the Post-Digital Library," *Harper's Magazine*, May 2007, page 47.
- <sup>18</sup> Email from Jim Naughton to author, Oct. 21, 2006.
- <sup>19</sup> Email from Bill Mitchell to author, Jan. 29, 2008.
- <sup>20</sup> Email from Bill Babcock to author, Feb. 27, 2008.
- <sup>21</sup> Email from Bill Densmore to author, Feb. 27, 2008.
- <sup>22</sup> See more information at <http://rji.missouri.edu/projects/new-media-enduring-values/index.php>.
- <sup>23</sup> Email from Jan Schaffer to author, Feb. 28, 2008.
- <sup>24</sup> James Carey, "The Culture in Question," from "James Carey: A Critical Reader," Stryker and Warren, eds, University of Minnesota, 1997.
- <sup>25</sup> Email from Jan Schaffer to author, Feb. 28, 2008.
- <sup>26</sup> Phone conversation between Merrill Brown and author, Feb. 27, 2008.
- <sup>27</sup> Email from Michael Riley to author, Feb. 27, 2008.