

2012 Hays-Press Enterprise Lecture
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“Better Days to Come: Seeing the promise in journalism’s upheaval”

I gave this lecture 20 years ago, as a newly minted newspaper editor. I’m deeply moved to be invited to give it again, as a somewhat long-in-the-tooth journalism school director. This remarkable occasion gives me the opportunity to look back upon two decades in journalism (four decades for me, in total) and think with you about what has happened, reflect on where we are now, and share some thoughts about where we seem to be headed.

But let me begin, if I may, with where I am.

Perhaps you have heard of a new book called: “In Our Prime: The Invention of Middle Age,” by Patricia Cohen. The author, a *New York Times* reporter, said that, when she was researching the book, she found that the first question her interview subjects asked – quite nervously – was: “When is middle age?”

I bet a lot of you are waiting for the answer. Admit it! Well, Cohen said that sees middle age as “floating somewhere between 40 and 64.”

And there you have it: I guess you could say that that’s what I’ve been doing in the 20 years since I stood at this podium. I’ve been floating somewhere between 40 and 64. And now, in less than three weeks, I’ll hit 64 -- and apparently that’ll be the end of middle age and me!

But how about for journalism? What are we to make of ITS stage of life? Is journalism in prime time? Middle age? Over the hill?

In fact, plenty of people are only too ready to pronounce a death sentence. And indeed, for traditionalists, this is a terrifying moment. The institutions we love are diminished even threatened. The future looks frightening. But I intend this evening to remind you that journalism, as we have known it has been far from perfect. And I hope to

persuade you, too, that, at this unsettling moment -- this very beginning of a revolution -- the countless exciting new developments before us offer enormous promise for a more inclusive, more engaged democracy.

Let me begin with some THEN and NOW thoughts.

When I gave this speech 20 years ago:

-- Journalism was a thoroughly top-down undertaking. News was what we news executives said it was. The public's role was to watch it at 5 p.m. or 10 p.m., to read it in the newspaper when the newspaper arrived on your doorstep. We were the gatekeepers.

Now the fence is down. It's a participatory world. News is not what the *New York Times* will show us tomorrow morning, but rather the information we all seek -- and help create -- 24 hours a day, seven days a week, when we want it, where we want it, how we want it.

Before, it was about a news meeting where we gathered at 4 p.m. to see what would go on the front page. Now, it's about who is producing what content, how that content spreads, who has access to information, how they interact with it, contribute to it, shape it.

Before, journalists stood apart. Now, we are all in it together.

We have arrived at what Alan Rusbridger, the very interesting editor of the *Guardian*, in Britain, calls "the mutualization of journalism."

That's the primary difference, but there are others, many of them arising as a consequence.

-- Before, there was a climate of competition. When a story broke in the *Washington Post*, the chances were that the *New York Times* wouldn't even mention the Post. They'd chase the story down and make it their own. It was all about getting it first, keeping it under wraps until you broke it, and making sure everybody knew it was yours.

Now? It's all about collaboration. Everybody is sharing the info, building on what another has done. As Jeff Jarvis puts it, it's a world of "do what you do best and link to the rest. "

-- I would say too that, before, journalism tended to serve – or at least to serve WELL -- a fairly narrow band. Wide swaths of the community – the poor, people of color, women – were sorely underrepresented. News of those in power prevailed. Conventional thinking dominated.

Now, we have an opportunity to be much more inclusive. If freedom of the press belongs to those who own one, everybody essentially owns one now. The quaint old notion that you don't argue with people who buy ink by the barrel has definitely gone by the wayside.

-- In addition, I would note a tendency, before, to focus on what went wrong. We had a good justification for this: When the bride made it to the wedding, it wasn't newsworthy; it was when she didn't that we'd write about it. But the fact is that, taken as a whole, this practice has tended to produce an overly negative picture of the world. In short, an inaccurate one. And this had real consequences: Studies showed, for example, that people who watched television news had an outsized sense of the amount of crime in their neighborhood.

Now, people are reacting to that ethos and creating a sense of their own communities, focusing on what is working, as well as on the challenges.

-- Before, we were schooled in a kind of objectivity that sometimes felt very much like detachment. This distanced us from our communities. It created what Jay Rosen has called "the voice from nowhere" – an odd way of getting at the truth, at best. And it sometimes led to a reporting of false equivalency – as in, X percent of scientists believe that humans have a role in climate change, while on the other hand Y percent dispute that – even if the figures were 98 percent to 2 percent.

Now, the inclusion of so many more voices has led to a valuing of voice, and to the insertion of – or return to, depending on your notion of journalism history -- a sense of community. And having so many more active participants means that the false equivalences are called out sooner.

-- Also, it's important to acknowledge that the traditional funding model (at least to a certain degree) shaped our journalism. You understand of course that it was advertisers who footed the bill. Indeed, when I was editor of the *Des Moines Register* and folks would call me and say they objected to something, and they were very mad about it, "Because after all: I paid for this!" I had to stifle my response. Because in fact they didn't. Or not much, anyway. Advertisers typically accounted for 80 percent of a newspaper's revenue – and of course much more for television news.

I'm not implying that advertisers told any good editor what story to run on the front page or what editorial position to take. It is more macro than that. Take for example this factoid that I recently read in the online magazine *Good* – about a survey showing that most Americans would rather have a walkable neighborhood than a big house. Now consider the shape of the newspaper, the sections, what the newshole is devoted to. You've got the real estate section. The automotive section. Never saw a walkable neighborhood section. This is not a conspiracy, just a function of the economic reality. The media have been funded by advertising, which has a certain effect on them.

And now? Well....now we don't know how the heck we're going to fund it. And that's the truth. Lots of things are being tried, and advertising hasn't gone away – but honestly, this is a huge open question, about which we'll talk a bit more, shortly.

-- Finally, let's admit it, we journalists (before) were getting pretty arrogant. Prizes, a heightened social status and the power of our access had turned our heads. I recently came across a 1955 "ten commandments of journalism" printed by the Nieman Foundation at Harvard, and found among them this one: "Always take your work seriously. Never take yourself seriously." I have to say we often sinned on that score.

But now, we have surely been humbled. Our organizations are diminished, our credibility shot through. It's my hope that in our humbled state, it will be easier for others to see the critical role that

journalism DOES play in the new Wild West that is our current media landscape.

Well. I guess I've made clear that I see some flies in that honeyed era that many call a golden age of journalism. (I'm reminded of a recent *New Yorker* cartoon featuring a couple of very Louis Quatorze-looking dandies standing outside a palace, and one is saying to the other: "Yes it's a golden age, or would be if we weren't all swarming with lice.")

But if the golden age had its issues (not its *lice*, I would say, but other issues) is this particular moment so great? So many folks are running scared, newsrooms are down in numbers, the economic model gone bust. (Or, as one reporter recently told a researcher: "My old medium is dying, and my new one doesn't pay.")

Add to that the fear for the future of the kind of digging watchdog reporting that (at least so far) it's primarily professional news organizations that are capable of – because they can pay someone to pursue a story over a long period of time, they have the high profile that gives them access to people in power and they can withstand the threat of lawsuits, among other things. We used to have a shortage of voice but we did have a plenitude of reporting. Now we have an abundance of voices but a shortage of reporting -- though new tools, platforms and actors are emerging daily.

Then, as I have mentioned, you have the indefiniteness of the funding model – something we share with all creators of content: How are we going to pay for the work in a world in which (or so folks say) information wants to be free.

So what do we do with all of this – all of this opportunity, all of this unsettlement?

One thing we've been doing is talking. Unsurprisingly, these developments have resulted in a lot of conversations. Many of those that I hear are about how we will save newspapers. But often they seem to want to preserve history, as much as anything. We journalists have trouble separating our traditions from our principles. We cling to both as if they were the heart of the matter, as if democracy depended on the

inverted pyramid, as if our own thoughts and preferences mattered while those of the public did not.

During my years as ombudsman at the *Washington Post*, I remember a fellow calling me and complaining about our coverage of the war in Kosovo. I have a Ph.D. in international relations, he said, but I can't understand a word of your stories. Couldn't you give us a primer? Who are the players? What are the stakes? But we were following the forms, doing the journalism the way we were supposed to do it. I wouldn't be surprised if that fellow dropped off the Post's subscription rolls. And the truth is that, today, he can find all the background information he wants, on any story he wants, all by himself, online.

So here is the most important thing I have to say tonight: We have got to start the conversation in a different place. All of us who care about the quality of civic debate, who fear for the future of democracy, who worry about journalism – we MUST start here: What is it that the PUBLIC needs to know? What are the information needs of my community (community as defined geographically or by interest, or however)?

A couple of years ago we had at Annenberg an innovator in residence who was helping us think about next steps in the kind of groundbreaking work we were doing in communication and journalism. He said, here's the first rule: Go hang out with the customer.

That is SO not what we have been doing in journalism. I remember at the *Des Moines Register*, when we were having to reduce the size of the newspaper and really grapple with what was critically important, I asked members of my staff to go out in their neighborhoods and talk to people. Well, you'd have thought I'd asked them to shame themselves in some vile and degrading way.

Now I don't mean that a newspaper editor could lead a newspaper with one moistened finger held to the wind. But to take that independent-mindedness so far as to believe that it's somehow demeaning to find out what kind of information people are hungry for? Well, that just shows how far we got away from our commitment to public service. Our

traditions hardened around us into a kind of carapace that we wore proudly, ensuring that we didn't spoil our ideas with noise from outside.

Consider this passage, from the remarkable journalism scholar James Carey, in 1987:

“The god term of journalism—the be-all and end-all, the term without which the enterprise fails to make sense, is the public. Insofar as journalism is grounded, it is grounded in the public. Insofar as journalism has a client, the client is the public. The press justifies itself in the name of the public; it exists—or so it is regularly said, to inform the public, to serve as the extended eyes and ears, to protect the public’s right to know, to serve the public interest. The canons of journalism originate in and flow from the relationship of the press to public. The public is totem and talisman, and object of ritual homage. “

Well, we surely meandered away from *that* notion. Sometimes when I would relay reader concerns to Post reporters during my ombudsman years, the reporters would look at me in astonishment. As in: “You’re LISTENING to those folks?!”

Our own views of what we did became more important than the views of those whom we were serving. We were wrong to have thought that opting to provide what readers needed (or what we thought they did) instead of what readers wanted was so virtuous a choice that we must be sure never to let the other idea even enter our heads.

We gloried in our successes without noticing that others were not glorying with us, but rather leaving in droves. We weren't serving their needs. We were following our traditions – and proud of it! (As my friend and colleague Melanie Sill says, how can we do journalism in the public interest if we don't know what the public is interested in!)

The media historian Paul Starr talks about the role of the press as including “assembling a public.” We did that pretty effectively in the past – the assembling part, of course, was helped by our being monopolies – but we then made very sure we didn't dirty ourselves dealing with those we had assembled. Now they're not outside the walls,

any more -- they've taken over our roles -- and we don't know what to do with them.

So I suggest that we remember that innovator's answer: Go hang out with the customers. It's easier to do than it ever has been, because the customers -- the people formerly known as the audience, as Jay Rosen has said -- are everywhere.

I would ask you now to consider something that Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter in 1801: "The will of the people... is the only legitimate foundation of any government, and to protect its free expression should be our first object."

We are certainly hearing the free expression of the will of the people these days -- to a degree that Thomas Jefferson could never have imagined. We are experiencing a shift in power from institutions to people -- or, as Alec Ross, senior advisor on innovation to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, told us recently at Annenberg -- from hierarchies to citizen networks.

As Ross pointed out, the Tunisian man who lit himself on fire in his village in 2010 was far from the first to do so. But his particular death was heard around the world because it was the first to light a fire, as well, among Tunisia's Facebook users. (Tunisia went from 28 thousand to nearly two million Facebook users in two years.) And thus began the Arab spring.

Think about three more recent examples:

-- Last September, Bank of America proposed a \$5 monthly debit card fee. They rescinded it one month later, in the face of hundreds of thousands of signatures on a Website petition, and greatly increased numbers of account closings.

-- Then, in January, a massive public response to anti-piracy legislation caused Congress to shelve it. Wikipedia claimed that 162 million people saw their message, leading 8 million U.S. readers to look up their representatives via Wikipedia. Meanwhile, 4.5 million people signed Google's anti-SOPA petition.

-- And, just this month, the decision by the Susan G. Komen Foundation to cut grants to Planned Parenthood sparked a huge social-media outcry that caused them, too, to reverse course.

The possibilities inherent in all this are astounding. There really is an opportunity to democratize our civic dialogue – to make it far more inclusive. Consider this: Though African Americans make up 13 per cent of the U.S. population, they account for 22 percent of Twitter users, according to Edison Research, a market research company. In fact, Twitter users represent higher proportions of women and of Latinos than does the general population, as well.

This is very exciting stuff: Direct democracy, in fact. But then, of course, direct democracy has its problems. In a world in which information is coming from everyone and flowing everywhere and anything can gain the attention of millions: What happens to proportionality? To verifiability? To presenting all sides of an argument within one posting? How do we know what is credible? Our Annenberg colleagues at the Center for the Digital Future recently conducted a study that found that 51 percent of users said that only a small portion *or none* of the information they see on social networking sites is reliable. And only 14 percent said that most or all of this information is reliable. (I have to say when I read that, I thought -- these folks should get some different FRIENDS.)

But here is the main point. This is the new reality. It's pro-am. It's Wild West. It's scary. It's full of potential. So what do we do with it? Now that journalists and the public are partners in creation – where do we go from here? More particularly, what is the role in all this – or I should say what are the roles --for journalism? And for those of us who call ourselves journalists?

Well, let's look back at all that promise in my “then and now” opening remarks. Remember all those characterizations of this new world? Collaborative, reciprocal, networked, participatory, responsive, transparent, accountable, more constructive in its approach.

But what about how sprawling and undisciplined it is, how unfocused? What about how overwhelmed people feel by the amounts of information coming their way? What about the attention deficit?

Clay Shirky has written that, ““Journalism is about *more than dissemination of news*; it's about the *creation of shared awareness*. There I think is a key: Journalists must continue to help create shared awareness. Because if we have no shared awareness, then doesn't self-governance become a near impossibility? Don't communities lose their shape?

I am intrigued by the interplay of press and public when I think about the course of social movements. The press, in the early stages of movements such as for women's rights and for civil rights typically ignored, if not ridiculed, them, making it harder for them to gain strength. But once they achieved a certain critical mass, and the media took note of that fact, it was media coverage that enabled them to circulate throughout the culture – helping them to gain strength but also subjecting these new ideas to the rigors of public scrutiny. And thus did they become, essentially, mainstream.

That is a lesson for us to think about. It would appear, in the new environment, that movements arising from one or another sector of the population will be able to gain a following much more quickly. Think of the Tunisian Facebook users. But what about the growing public understanding and engagement that is required if the change is to be stable? What about the thoughtful examination of developments, the subjection to critical understanding, that can help shape responsible and lasting change? For this, we need a shared awareness. For this, I believe, we need journalism. (I'm reminded of a quote from David Carr's column in the *New York Times* this morning: “A funny thing happens when you report: Things get more complicated.”)

Charles Girard, an exceptionally thoughtful French academic, has written that:

“The first media revolution of the 21st century has left the press neither superfluous nor impotent. In addition to its other functions, the press is still responsible for establishing adequate conditions for democratic

debate, even if it no longer has a monopoly of the means of mass broadcasting and the process of selecting content. On the other hand, it is true that the increase in spaces for private and small-scale correspondence, and the resulting dilution of gatekeepers' individual power over the selection process, has changed the press' role. It can no longer claim to be the sole coordinator of the arena in which political points of view are publicly debated.

"There are many reasons to welcome this democratization of the means of expression," Girard continues. "However, the press can and should still intervene within the broader media landscape in order to guarantee 1) that the main opinions and arguments being expressed are available everywhere; 2) that they are sufficiently representative of the opinions that exist in society as a whole, and 3) that these points of view challenge each other effectively, so as to give members of the public the means to use their judgment. For in the end, if the public now has greatly improved access to the means of expression, it nevertheless also remains a spectator of broader political debates."

Giving "members of the public the means to use their judgment." I like that. Helping people make sense of the cacophony. Organizing that fire-hose torrent so as to make it drinkable – and thus helping people to exercise our democratic rights and carry out our responsibilities, participate more fully in our communities, live richer fuller more creative lives, connect with the boundless opportunities around us.

Journalism will continue, I think, to play a key role in exposing corruption, in providing thoughtful analysis, in bringing context and proportionality. It will continue to provide some of our most compelling storytelling. It will continue to play a role in helping establish an understanding of what matters most, in helping us make sense of the news, in bringing different voices -- and different views -- together.

But the way that journalists accomplish these goals will be much more varied. In newspapers and television broadcasts still, yes, and of course in those newsrooms' online and mobile outlets. But journalism now must also go where people are, be it on buses and in grocery stories, or on Facebook and Twitter. We must connect the journalism with people

in the community. And we will do it not just in our reporting and photography and our editing and publishing, but also in curating and aggregating and linking and whatever else comes along the technological pike and social media pike. And not just alone, but in collaboration with one another and with the public.

How does this look in the specific? We at USC Annenberg are answering that question every day in many different ways. Take collaboration. Our Center for Health Reporting, funded by the California Health Care Foundation, does deep reporting on health issues throughout the state – and it does those reports in partnership with legacy media, from KQED to the *Fresno Bee* to the *Riverside Press Enterprise*. Or take our other health-journalism center, funded by the California Endowment, which is partnering with *La Opinion* to distribute a hard-copy newspaper, *Pulso de Boyle Heights*, or *Boyle Heights Beat*.

Or take technology. We have a wonderful program that brings together students from journalism, engineering and business to work on mobile applications for news. They have partnered with everyone from KPCC to the *Orange County Register*. Or take our remarkable Annenberg Innovation Lab. You may have seen in the *Los Angeles Times* the “Oscar Senti-Meter.” That’s a tool developed by the Innovation Lab, IBM and the Times to analyze opinions about the Academy Awards race shared in millions of public messages on Twitter. The Lab has another project tracking tweets – these out of the Middle East as the fallout of Arab Spring continues.

Take Neon Tommy, Annenberg's 24/7 online news site, which is the number one most trafficked online-only university publication in America. Along with Annenberg Television News, Annenberg Radio News and Impact, our documentary program, Neon Tommy is part of a suite of news laboratories staffed mostly by students that is helping address the diminishment of news production in Los Angeles.

In fact, we are ensuring that some communities get more information than they ever got in the “golden age.” Take Intersections, the South LA Report, which serves our own very interesting and fast-changing neighborhood. Or consider Alhambra Source, serving a municipality in which three major languages are spoken. Drawing on research from our

sister school, Annenberg's more academically oriented School of Communication (remember that collaboration idea), we launched a Website in Alhambra based on the best thinking about how to serve a multi-lingual community in its challenge of solving civic problems across the language barriers.

Consider, too, that each of these represents a different kind of economic model. Some are foundation-funded. All are nonprofits. All point to the growing role that journalism schools will serve in this new media ecology. Most help build the capacity of existing legacy news organizations. And on the economic-model score, I should mention our Media, Economics and Entrepreneurship project, which aims to ensure that everyone in the school is exposed to economic literacy and to entrepreneurial thinking.

Beyond these examples, I wish I could leave you with clear and ringing pronouncements about what exactly the future holds. But that would be foolhardy – sort of like predicting where the economy is headed. (But do let me share with you my favorite prediction on the future of media -- this one from Clay Shirky: "If the old model is broken, what will work in its place? The answer is: Nothing will work, but everything might.")

So let me bring my speech to a conclusion by focusing instead on four factors that I think will help determine the future.

-- One, of course, is technology. There is so much happening here, and not just in terms of the new social networks and the cool tools, from iPhones to iPads to perhaps this year an iTV. There is also great hope in the increasing synergy between journalists and computer enthusiasts. Together, they are using mapping, and geocoding and other tools, to assemble information that enables you to navigate your neighborhood – and indeed your world. There are tools to mine big datasets, and thereby enable you to have unprecedented amounts of information at your own fingertips. There are clever and engaging games that promise to educate us about our government – and mobile platforms that enable us to have a voice in it.

-- And that leads me to a second factor that will have a lot to do with what happens from here on out. What will be the nature of the interactions of all this new technology, all these new social media – and the existing institutions of our society? How will city halls use them? How will the federal government use them? How will our schools use them? There is great opportunity here, which could, lamentably be ignored – or, worse, left in the hands of those who will use it for harm rather than good.

-- A third question is what legacy journalism institutions will do to meet the challenge of these changing times, and to take advantage of the opportunities. While online traffic means newspapers' work is seen by more and more people, the newsrooms are shrinking even as the need to innovate becomes ever more apparent. Cost cutting does not equal innovation. As Ken Doctor has written: "Most newspaper companies have cut so much, while driving out nodes of innovators here and there, that they are left half-staffed for the apps/HTML5/digital circulation revisions playing out before them." Moreover, as Ernie Wilson, our dean at USC Annenberg, asked in a recent speech in Paris, do these media companies they have the talent to lead that will enable them to survive? "The critical question then is what kind of talents have to be assembled to build a team that can make smart, strategic decisions that produce success. TALENT TRUMPS BUSINESS MODELS."

Newsrooms also -- alas -- are failing miserably at looking like the communities they cover. The number of journalists of color has been dropping while, of course, the opposite is happening in the public at large. And, as Dori Maynard has said, it is our civic life that bears the brunt of this underrepresentation and the resulting misrepresentations. "As we debate who gets what in this time of scarcity, this inaccurate and distorted coverage is helping fuel an acrimonious political debate that has left our country in gridlock," Maynard has written.

Allow me a brief aside here before the fourth and final point: One thing we must keep in mind is that there is only so much we can ask of the press.

Almost a century ago, Walter Lippmann noted that, “The problem of the press is confused because the critics and the apologists [...] expect it to make up for all that was not foreseen in the theory of democracy.”

We journalists can't make up for all democracy's deficiencies. But we can have a more democratic media. What its outlines will be, nobody can say, but it is coming, fast and furious, and we should be mindful that the roles we play – all of us – as journalists, as members of the public -- will help shape it – and help shape all of us.

We journalists must remember that, while most of us went into this field to serve the public, we got diverted by misguided notions of objectivity and by habits that distanced us from the public. We must return to this central idea of journalism as public service. And as we do, we shall find a public eager to work in partnership with us.

So, speaking of all of us, that's the most interesting question, of course -- the people's role. And that is what I want to send you off to ponder.

Joseph Pulitzer wrote in 1904 that: “A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will in time produce a people as base as itself.”

Some would say that this is exactly what has happened: A cynical press has produced a base public. But I have more hope – and more respect for journalists AND for the public -- than to believe that.

The question I think now is before us is this: Having taken the tools of creating and disseminating media into their own hands, having entered into a full partnership with journalists and other creators of content:

What sort of press will the people produce?

The answer to that, I wait with eager interest. (And, yes, I truly do believe that the best is yet to come.)