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In 1887, a young reporter left her job at the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* to seek her fortune in New York City. Only twenty-three years old, Elizabeth “Pink” Cochrane had grown tired of writing for the society pages and answering letters to the editor. She wanted to be on the front page. But at that time, it was considered “unladylike” for women journalists to use their real names, so the *Dispatch* editors, borrowing from a Stephen Foster song, had dubbed her “Nellie Bly.”

After four months of persistent job-hunting and freelance writing, Nellie Bly earned a tryout at Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*, the nation’s biggest paper. Her assignment: to investigate the deplorable conditions at the Women’s Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island. Her method: to get herself declared mad and committed to the asylum. After practicing the look of a disheveled lunatic in front of mirrors, wandering city streets unwashed and seemingly dazed, and terrifying her fellow boarders in a New York rooming house

by acting crazy, she succeeded in convincing doctors and officials to commit her. Other New York newspapers reported her incarceration, speculating on the identity of this “mysterious waif,” this “pretty crazy girl” with the “wild, hunted look in her eyes.”¹

Her two-part story appeared in October 1887 and caused a sensation. She was the first reporter to pull off such a stunt. In the days before so-called objective journalism, Nellie Bly’s dramatic first-person accounts documented harsh cold baths (“three buckets of water over my head—ice cold water—into my eyes, my ears, my nose and my mouth”); attendants who abused and taunted patients; and newly arrived immigrant women, completely sane, who were committed to this “rat trap” simply because no one could understand them. After the exposé, Bly was famous. Pulitzer gave her a permanent job, and New York City committed \$1 million toward improving its asylums.

Within a year, Nellie Bly had exposed a variety of shady scam artists, corrupt politicians and lobbyists, and unscrupulous business practices. Posing as an “unwed mother” with an unwanted child, she uncovered an outfit trafficking in newborn babies. And disguised as a sinner in need of reform, she revealed the appalling conditions at a home for “unfortunate women.” A lifetime champion of women and the poor, Nellie Bly pioneered what was then called *detective* or *stunt* journalism. Her work inspired the twentieth-century practice of investigative journalism—from Ida Tarbell’s exposés of oil corporations in the early 1900s to the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting, awarded to Paige St. John of the

Sarasota Herald-Tribune for her work on “the weaknesses in the murky property-insurance system vital to Florida homeowners, providing handy data to assess insurer reliability and stirring regulatory action.”²

One problem facing journalism today is that in the last few years, traditional print and broadcast newsrooms have dramatically cut back on news investigations, which are expensive and time-consuming, even though readers and viewers want more of them, not less. Mary Walton, reporting about investigative work for *American Journalism Review*, made this point in 2010: “Kicked out, bought out or barely hanging on, investigative reporters are a vanishing species in the forests of dead tree media and missing in action on Action News. I-Teams are shrinking or, more often, disappearing altogether. Assigned to cover multiple beats, multitasking backpacking reporters no longer have time to sniff out hidden stories, much less write them.”³ She reported that Investigative Reporters and Editors [IRE] membership “fell more than 30 percent, from 5,391 in 2003, to a 10-year low of 3,695 in 2009.”⁴

But encouragingly the slack has been picked up, at least partially, by nontraditional and online media. In 2013 Jason Stverak, writing for Watchdog.org, notes: “Today, nonprofit news groups across the country are providing the ‘unsexy and repetitive’ coverage that the old-guard press began abandoning at the turn of the century. . . . [N]onprofit news groups will lead the way in conducting investigative reports and keeping elected officials open and honest.”⁵ And in 2013 IRE reported that its membership had climbed up to 4,400.

▲ **JOURNALISM IS THE ONLY MEDIA ENTERPRISE** that democracy absolutely requires—and it is the only media practice and business that is specifically mentioned and protected by the U.S. Constitution. However, with the major decline in investigative reporting and traditional news audiences, the collapse of many newspapers, and the rise of twenty-four-hour cable news channels and Internet news blogs, mainstream journalism is searching for new business models and better ways to connect with the public.

In this chapter, we examine the changing news landscape and definitions of journalism. We will:

- Explore the values underlying news and ethical problems confronting journalists
- Investigate the shift from more neutral news models to partisan cable and online news
- Study the legacy of print-news conventions and rituals
- Investigate the impact of television and the Internet on news
- Consider contemporary controversial developments in journalism and democracy—specifically, the public journalism movement and satirical forms of news

As you read this chapter, think about how often you look at the news in a typical day. What are some of the recent events or issues you remember reading about in the news? Where is the first place you go to find information about a news event or issue? If you start with a search engine, what newspapers or news organizations do you usually end up looking at? Do you prefer opinion blogs over news organizations for your information? Why or why not? Do you pay for news—either by buying a newspaper or news magazine or by going online? For more questions to help you understand the role of journalism in our lives, see “Questioning the Media” in the Chapter Review.

Modern Journalism in the Information Age

In modern America, serious journalism has sought to provide information that enables citizens to make intelligent decisions. Today, this guiding principle faces serious threats. Why? First, we may just be producing too much information. According to social critic Neil Postman, as a result of developments in media technology, society has developed an “information glut” that transforms news and information into “a form of garbage.”⁶ Postman believed that scientists, technicians, managers, and journalists merely pile up mountains of new data, which add to the problems and anxieties of everyday life. As a result, too much unchecked data—especially on the Internet—and too little thoughtful discussion emanate from too many channels of communication.

A second, related problem suggests that the amount of data the media now provide has questionable impact on improving public and political life. Many people feel cut off from our major institutions, including journalism. As a result, some citizens are looking to take part in public conversations and civic debates—to renew a democracy in which many voices participate. For example, one benefit of the controversial *Bush v. Gore* 2000 post-presidential election story was the way its legal and political complications engaged the citizenry at a much deeper level than the predictable, staged campaigns themselves did.

What Is News?

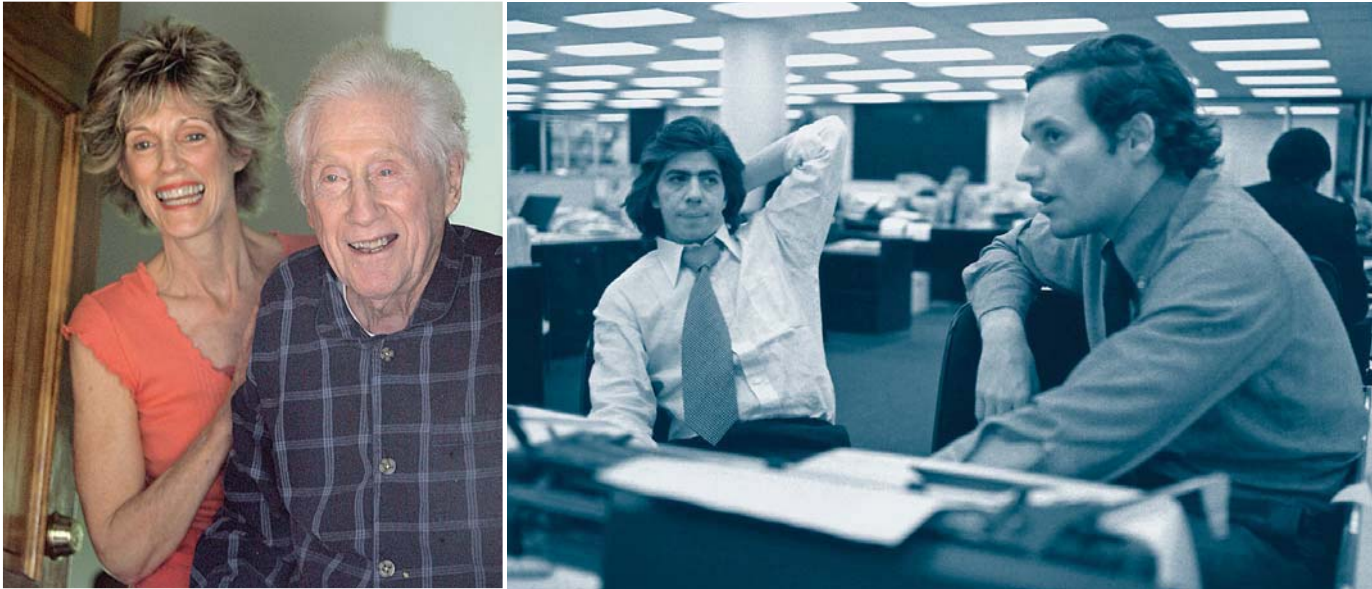
In a 1963 staff memo, NBC news president Reuven Frank outlined the narrative strategies integral to all news: “Every news story should . . . display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising and falling action,

“A journalist is the lookout on the bridge of the ship of state. He peers through the fog and storm to give warnings of dangers ahead. . . . He is there to watch over the safety and the welfare of the people who trust him.”

JOSEPH PULITZER,
1904

“When watchdogs, bird dogs, and bull dogs morph into lap dogs, lazy dogs, or yellow dogs, the nation is in trouble.”

TED STANNARD,
FORMER UPI
REPORTER



“DEEP THROAT”

The major symbol of twentieth-century investigative journalism, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's (above right) coverage of the Watergate scandal for the *Washington Post* helped topple the Nixon White House. In *All the President's Men*, the newsmen's book about their investigation, a major character is Deep Throat, the key unidentified source for much of Woodward's reporting. Deep Throat's identity was protected by the two reporters for more than thirty years. Then in summer 2005 he revealed himself as Mark Felt (above), the former No. 2 official in the FBI during the Nixon administration. (Felt died in 2008.)

a beginning, a middle, and an end.”⁷ Despite Frank's candid insights, many journalists today are uncomfortable thinking of themselves as storytellers. Instead, they tend to describe themselves mainly as information-gatherers.

News is defined here as the process of gathering information and making narrative reports—edited by individuals for news organizations—that offer selected frames of reference; within those frames, news helps the public make sense of important events, political issues, cultural trends, prominent people, and unusual happenings in everyday life.

Characteristics of News

Over time, a set of conventional criteria for determining **newsworthiness**—information most worthy of transformation into news stories—has evolved. Journalists are taught to select and develop news stories relying on one or more of these criteria: timeliness, proximity, conflict, prominence, human interest, consequence, usefulness, novelty, and deviance.⁸

Most issues and events that journalists select as news are *timely* or *new*. Reporters, for example, cover speeches, meetings, crimes, and court cases that have just happened. In addition, most of these events have to occur close by, or in *proximity* to, readers and viewers. Although local TV news and papers offer some national and international news, readers and viewers expect to find the bulk of news devoted to their own towns and communities.

Most news stories are narratives and thus contain a healthy dose of *conflict*—a key ingredient in narrative writing. In developing news narratives, reporters are encouraged to seek contentious quotes from those with opposing views. For example, stories on presidential elections almost always feature the most dramatic opposing Republican and Democratic positions. And many stories in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, pitted the values of other cultures against those of Western culture—for example, Islam vs. Christianity or premodern traditional values vs. contemporary consumerism.

Reader and viewer surveys indicate that most people identify more closely with an individual than with an abstract issue. Therefore, the news media tend to report stories that feature *prominent*, powerful, or influential people. Because these individuals often play a role in shaping the rules and values of a community, journalists have traditionally been responsible for keeping a watchful eye on them and relying on them for quotes.

But reporters also look for the *human-interest* story: extraordinary incidents that happen to “ordinary” people. In fact, reporters often relate a story about a complicated issue (such as unemployment, war, tax rates, health care, or homelessness) by illustrating its impact on one “average” person, family, or town.

Two other criteria for newsworthiness are *consequence* and *usefulness*. Stories about isolated or bizarre crimes, even though they might be new, near, or notorious, often have little impact on our daily lives. To balance these kinds of stories, many editors and reporters believe that some news must also be of consequence to a majority of readers or viewers. For example, stories about issues or events that affect a family’s income or change a community’s laws have consequence. Likewise, many people look for stories with a practical use: hints on buying a used car or choosing a college, strategies for training a pet or removing a stain.

Finally, news is often about the *novel* and the *deviant*. When events happen that are outside the routine of daily life, such as a seven-year-old girl trying to pilot a plane across the country or an ex-celebrity involved in a drug deal, the news media are there. Reporters also cover events that appear to deviate from social norms, including murders, rapes, fatal car crashes, fires, political scandals, and gang activities. For example, as the war in Iraq escalated, any suicide bombing in the Middle East represented the kind of novel and deviant behavior that qualified as major news.

Values in American Journalism

Although newsworthiness criteria are a useful way to define news, they do not reveal much about the cultural aspects of news. News is both a product and a process. It is both the morning paper or evening newscast and a set of subtle values and shifting rituals that have been adapted to historical and social circumstances, such as the partisan press values of the 1700s or the informational standards of the twentieth century.

For example, in 1841, Horace Greeley described the newly founded *New York Tribune* as “a journal removed alike from servile partisanship on the one hand and from gagged, mincing neutrality on the other.”⁹ Greeley feared that too much neutrality would make reporters into wimps who stood for nothing. Yet the neutrality Greeley warned against is today a major value of conventional journalism, with mainstream reporters assuming they are acting as detached and all-seeing observers of social experience.

Neutrality Boosts Credibility . . . and Sales

As former journalism professor and reporter David Eason notes: “Reporters . . . have no special method for determining the truth of a situation nor a special language for reporting their findings. They make sense of events by telling stories about them.”¹⁰

Even though journalists transform events into stories, they generally believe that they are—or should be—neutral observers who present facts without passing judgment on them. Conventions such as the inverted-pyramid news lead, the careful attribution of sources, the minimal use of adverbs and adjectives, and a detached third-person point of view all help reporters perform their work in an apparently neutral way.

Like lawyers, therapists, and other professionals, many modern journalists believe that their credibility derives from personal detachment. Yet the roots of this view reside in less noble territory. Jon Katz, media critic and former CBS News producer, discusses the history of the neutral pose:

*The idea of respectable detachment wasn’t conceived as a moral principle so much as a marketing device. Once newspapers began to mass market themselves in the mid-1880s, . . . publishers ceased being working, opinionated journalists. They mutated instead into businessmen eager to reach the broadest number of readers and antagonize the fewest. . . . Objectivity works well for publishers, protecting the status quo and keeping journalism’s voice militantly moderate.*¹¹

“The ‘information’ the modern media provide leaves people feeling useless not because it’s so bleak but because it’s so trivial. It doesn’t inform at all; it only bombards with random data bits, faux trends, and surveys that reinforce preconceptions.”

SUSAN FALUDI,
THE NATION, 1996

“Real news is bad news—bad news about somebody, or bad news for somebody.”

MARSHALL McLUHAN,
UNDERSTANDING MEDIA, 1964



OCCUPY WALL STREET

On September 17, 2011, a group of protestors gathered in Zuccotti Park in New York's financial district and officially launched the Occupy Wall Street protest movement. Their slogan, "We are the 99 percent," addressed the growing income disparity in the United States, furthering the idea that the nation's wealth is unfairly concentrated among the top-earning 1 percent. Although forced out of Zuccotti Park on November 15, 2011, the movement's efforts resonated with people across the country and around the world. By the end of 2011, Occupy protests had spread to over 951 cities in eighty-two countries.

To reach as many people as possible across a wide spectrum, publishers and editors realized as early as the 1840s that softening their partisanship might boost sales.

Partisanship Trumps Neutrality . . . Especially Online and on Cable

Since the rise of cable and the Internet, today's media marketplace offers a fragmented world where appealing to the widest audience no longer makes the best economic sense. More options than ever exist, with newspaper readers and TV viewers embracing cable news, social networks, blogs, and Twitter. The old "mass" audience has morphed into smaller niche audiences who embrace particular hobbies, storytelling, politics, and social networks. News media outlets that hope to survive no longer appeal

to mass audiences but to interest groups—from sports fans and history buffs to conservatives or liberals. So, mimicking the news business of the eighteenth century, partisanship has become good business. For the news media today, muting political leanings to reach a mass audience makes no sense when such an audience no longer exists in the way it once did, especially as in the days when only three major TV networks offered evening news for one-half hour, once a day. Instead, news media now make money by targeting and catering to niche groups on a 24/7 news cycle.

In such a marketplace, we see the decline of a more neutral journalistic model that promoted fact-gathering, documents, and expertise, and that held up "objectivity" as the ideal for news practice. Rising in its place is a new era of partisan news—what Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel call a "journalism of assertion"—marked partly by a return to journalism's colonial roots and partly by the downsizing of the "journalism of verification" that kept watch over our central institutions.¹² This transition is symbolized by the rise of the cable news pundit on Fox News or MSNBC as a kind of "expert" with more standing than verified facts, authentic documents, and actual experts. Today, the new partisan fervor found in news, both online and on cable, has been a major catalyst for the nation's intense political and ideological divide.

Other Cultural Values in Journalism

Even the neutral journalism model, which most reporters and editors still aspire to, remains a selective and uneven process. Reporters and editors turn some events into reports and discard many others. This process is governed by a deeper set of subjective beliefs that are not neutral. Sociologist Herbert Gans, who studied the newsroom cultures of CBS, NBC, *Newsweek*, and *Time* in the 1970s, generalized that several basic "enduring values" have been shared by most American reporters and editors. The most prominent of these values, which persist to this day, are ethnocentrism, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, and individualism.¹³

By **ethnocentrism** Gans means that, in most news reporting, especially foreign coverage, reporters judge other countries and cultures on the basis of how "they live up to or imitate American practices and values." Critics outside the United States, for instance, point out that CNN's international news channels portray world events and cultures primarily from an American point of view rather than through some neutral, global lens.

Gans also identified **responsible capitalism** as an underlying value, contending that journalists sometimes naïvely assume that businesspeople compete with one another not primarily

to maximize profits but “to create increased prosperity for all.” Gans points out that although most reporters and editors condemn monopolies, “there is little implicit or explicit criticism of the oligopolistic nature of much of today’s economy.”¹⁴ In fact, during the major economic recession of 2008–09, many journalists did not fully understand the debt incurred by media oligopolies and other financial conditions that led to the bankruptcies and shutdowns of numerous newspapers during this difficult time.

Another value that Gans found was the romanticization of **small-town pastoralism**: favoring the small over the large and the rural over the urban. Many journalists equate small-town life with innocence and harbor suspicions of cities, their governments, and urban experiences. Consequently, stories about rustic communities with crime or drug problems have often been framed as if the purity of country life had been contaminated by “mean” big-city values.

Finally, **individualism**, according to Gans, remains the most prominent value underpinning daily journalism. Many idealistic reporters are attracted to this profession because it rewards the rugged tenacity needed to confront and expose corruption. Beyond this, individuals who overcome personal adversity are the subjects of many enterprising news stories.

Often, however, journalism that focuses on personal triumphs neglects to explain how large organizations and institutions work or fail. Many conventional reporters and editors are unwilling or unsure of how to tackle the problems raised by institutional decay. In addition, because they value their own individualism and are accustomed to working alone, many journalists dislike cooperating on team projects or participating in forums in which community members discuss their own interests and alternative definitions of news.¹⁵

Facts, Values, and Bias

Traditionally, reporters have aligned facts with an objective position and values with subjective feelings.¹⁶ Within this context, news reports offer readers and viewers details, data, and description. It then becomes the citizen’s responsibility to judge and take a stand about the social problems represented by the news. Given these assumptions, reporters are responsible only for adhering to the tradition of the trade—“getting the facts.” As a result, many reporters view themselves as neutral “channels” of information rather than selective storytellers or citizens actively involved in public life.

Still, most public surveys have shown that while journalists may work hard to stay neutral, the addition of partisan cable channels such as Fox News and MSNBC has undermined reporters who try to report fairly. So while conservatives tend to see the media as liberally biased, liberals tend to see the media as favoring conservative positions. (See “Case Study: Bias in the News” on page 492.) But political bias is complicated. During the early years of Barack Obama’s presidency, many pundits on the political Right argued that Obama got much more favorable media coverage than did former president George W. Bush. But left-wing politicians and critics maintained that the right-wing media—especially news analysts associated with conservative talk radio and Fox’s cable channel—rarely reported evenhandedly on Obama, painting him as a “socialist” or as “anti-American.”

According to Evan Thomas of *Newsweek* magazine, “the suspicion of press bias” comes from two assumptions or beliefs that the public holds about news media: “The first is that reporters are out to get their subjects. The second is that the press is too close to its subjects.”¹⁷ Thomas argues that the “press’s real bias is for conflict.” He says that mainstream editors and reporters traditionally value scandals, “preferably sexual,” and “have a weakness for war, the ultimate conflict.” Thomas claims that in the end journalists “are looking for narratives that reveal something of character. It is the human drama that most compels our attention.”¹⁸

“Your obligation, as an independent news organization, is to verify the material, to supply context, to exercise responsible judgment about what to publish and what not to publish and to make sense of it.”

BILL KELLER, FORMER EXECUTIVE EDITOR, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 2011, WRITING ABOUT USING MATERIAL FROM WIKILEAKS

CASE STUDY

Bias in the News

All news is biased. News, after all, is primarily selective storytelling, not objective science. Editors choose certain events to cover and ignore others; reporters choose particular words or images to use and reject others. The news is also biased in favor of storytelling, drama, and conflict; in favor of telling “two sides of a story”; in favor of powerful and well-connected sources; and in favor of practices that serve journalists’ space and time limits.

In terms of political bias, a 2012 Pew Research Center study reported that 37 percent of Americans see “a great deal of political bias” in the news—up from 31 percent in 2007 and 25 percent back in 1989 (see below). In terms of political party affiliation, 49 percent of Republicans in this 2012 survey reported “a great deal” of bias, while only 32 percent of Democrats and 35 percent of Independents reported high levels of political bias. Since the late 1960s, public perception says that mainstream news media operate mostly with a liberal bias. This would seem to be supported by a 2004 Pew Research Center survey that found that 34 percent of national journalists self-identify as liberal, 7 percent as conservative, and 54 percent as moderate.¹

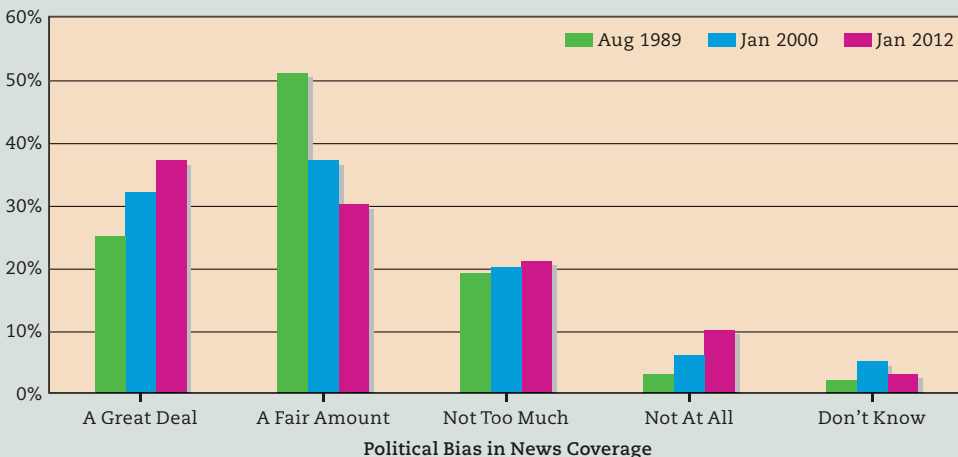
Given primary dictionary definitions of *liberal* (adj., “favorable to progress or reform, as in political or religious affairs”) and *conservative* (adj., “disposed to preserve existing conditions, institutions, etc., or to restore traditional ones, and to limit change”), it is not surprising that a high percentage of liberals and moderates gravitate to mainstream journalism.² A profession that honors documenting change, checking power, and reporting wrongdoing would attract fewer conservatives, who are predisposed to “limit change.” As sociologist Herbert Gans demonstrated in *Deciding What’s News*, most reporters are socialized into a set of work rituals—especially getting the story first and telling it from “both sides” to achieve a kind of balance.³ In fact, this commitment to political “balance” mandates that if journalists interview someone on the Left, they must also interview someone on the Right. Ultimately, such balancing acts require reporters to take middle-of-the-road or moderate positions.

Still, the “liberal bias” narrative persists. In 2001, Bernard Goldberg, a former producer at CBS News, wrote *Bias*. Using anecdotes from his days at CBS, he maintained that national news slanted to the Left.⁴ In 2003, Eric

Alterman, a columnist for the *Nation*, countered with *What Liberal Media?* Alterman admitted that mainstream news media do reflect more liberal views on social issues but argued that they had become more conservative on politics and economics—displayed in their support for deregulated media and concentrated ownership.⁵ Alterman says the liberal bias tale persists because conservatives keep repeating it in the major media. Conservative voices have been so successful that one study in *Communication Research* reported “a fourfold increase over the past dozen years in the number of Americans telling pollsters that they discerned a liberal bias in the news. But a review of the media’s actual ideological content, collected and coded over a 12-year period, offered no corroboration whatever for this view.”⁶ However, a 2010 study in the *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* reported that both Democratic and Republican leaders are able “to influence perceptions of bias” by attacking the news media.⁷

Since journalists are primarily storytellers, and not scientists, searching for liberal or conservative bias should not be the main focus of our criticism. Under time and space constraints,

most journalists serve the routine practices of their profession, which calls on them to moderate their own political agendas. News reports, then, are always “biased,” given human imperfection in storytelling and in communicating through the lens of language, images, and institutional values. Fully critiquing news stories depends, then, on whether they are fair, represent an issue’s complexity, provide verification and documentation, represent multiple views, and serve democracy. ▲



Note: Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.
Source: Pew Research Center Survey, January 5–8, 2012.

Ethics and the News Media

A profound ethical dilemma that national journalists occasionally face, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, is: When is it right to protect government secrets, and when should those secrets be revealed to the public? How must editors weigh such decisions when national security bumps up against citizens' need for information?

In 2006, Dean Baquet, then editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, and Bill Keller, executive editor of the *New York Times*, wrestled with these questions in a coauthored editorial:

Finally, we weigh the merits of publishing against the risks of publishing. There is no magic formula. . . . We make our best judgment.

When we come down on the side of publishing, of course, everyone hears about it. Few people are aware when we decide to hold an article. But each of us, in the past few years, has had the experience of withholding or delaying articles when the administration convinces us that the risk of publication outweighed the benefits. . . .

We understand that honorable people may disagree . . . to publish or not to publish. But making those decisions is a responsibility that falls to editors, a corollary to the great gift of our independence. It is not a responsibility we take lightly. And it is not one we can surrender to the government.¹⁹

What makes the predicament of these national editors so tricky is that in the war against terrorism, some politicians claimed that one value terrorists truly hate is “our freedom”; yet what is more integral to liberty than the freedom of an independent press—so independent that for more than two hundred years U.S. courts have protected the news media's right to criticize our political leaders and, within boundaries, reveal government secrets?

Ethical Predicaments

What is the moral and social responsibility of journalists, not only for the stories they report but also for the actual events or issues they are shaping for millions of people? Wrestling with such media ethics involves determining the moral response to a situation through critical reasoning. Although national security issues raise problems for a few of our largest news organizations, the most frequent ethical dilemmas encountered in most newsrooms across the United States involve intentional deception, privacy invasions, and conflicts of interest.

Deploying Deception

Ever since Nellie Bly faked insanity to get inside an asylum in the 1880s, investigative journalists have used deception to get stories. Today, journalists continue to use disguises and assume false identities to gather information on social transgressions. Beyond legal considerations, though, a key ethical question comes into play: Does the end justify the means? For example, can a newspaper or TV newsmagazine use deceptive ploys to go undercover and expose a suspected fraudulent clinic that promises miracle cures at a high cost? Are news professionals justified in posing as clients desperate for a cure?

In terms of ethics, there are at least two major positions and multiple variations. First, *absolutist ethics* suggests that a moral society has laws and codes, including honesty, that everyone must live by. This means citizens, including members of the news media, should tell the truth

at all times and in all cases. In other words, the ends (exposing a phony clinic) never justify the means (using deception to get the story). An editor who is an absolutist would cover this story by asking a reporter to find victims who have been ripped off by the clinic, telling the story through their eyes. At the other end of the spectrum is *situational ethics*, which promotes ethical decisions on a case-by-case basis. If a greater public good could be served by using deceit, journalists and editors who believe in situational ethics would sanction deception as a practice.

Should a journalist withhold information about his or her professional identity to get a quote or a story from an interview subject? Many sources and witnesses are reluctant to talk with journalists, especially about a sensitive subject that might jeopardize a job or hurt another person's reputation. Journalists know they can sometimes obtain information by posing as someone other than a journalist, such as a curious student or a concerned citizen.

Most newsrooms frown on such deception. In particular situations, though, such a practice might be condoned if reporters and their editors believed that the public needed the information. The ethics code adopted by the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) is fairly silent on issues of deception. The code "requires journalists to perform with intelligence, objectivity, accuracy, and fairness," but it also says that "truth is our ultimate goal." (See Figure 14.1, "SPJ Code of Ethics," on page 495.)

Invading Privacy

To achieve "the truth" or to "get the facts," journalists routinely straddle a line between "the public's right to know" and a person's right to privacy. For example, journalists may be sent to hospitals to gather quotes from victims who have been injured. Often there is very little the public might gain from such information, but journalists worry that if they don't get the quote, a competitor might. In these instances, have the news media responsibly weighed the protection of individual privacy against the public's right to know? Although the latter is not constitutionally guaranteed, journalists invoke the public's right to know as justification for many types of stories.

One infamous example is the recent phone hacking scandal involving News Corp.'s now-shuttered U.K. newspaper, *News of the World*. In 2011, the *Guardian* reported that *News of the World* reporters had hired a private investigator to hack into the voice mail of thirteen-year-old murder victim Milly Dowler and had deleted some messages. Although there had been past allegations of reporters from *News of the World* hacking into the private voice mails of the British royal family, government officials, and celebrities, this revelation on the extent of *News of the World*'s phone hacking activities caused a huge scandal and led to the arrests and resignations of several senior executives. Today, in the digital age, when reporters can gain access to private e-mail messages, Twitter accounts, and Facebook pages as well as voice mail, such practices raise serious questions about how far a reporter should go to get information.

In the case of privacy issues, media companies and journalists should always ask the ethical questions: What public good is being served here? What significant public knowledge will be gained through the exploitation of a tragic private moment? Although journalism's code of ethics says, "The news media must guard against invading a person's right to privacy," this clashes with another part of the code: "The public's right to know of events of public importance and interest is the overriding mission of the mass media."²⁰ When these two ethical standards collide, should journalists err on the side of the public's right to know?

Conflict of Interest


Journalism's code of ethics also warns reporters and editors not to place themselves in positions that produce a **conflict of interest**—that is, any situation in which journalists may stand to benefit personally from stories they produce. "Gifts, favors, free travel, special treatment or

FIGURE 14.1

SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS' CODE OF ETHICS

Source: Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ).

Code of Ethics



Preamble

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility.

Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

Seek Truth and Report It

Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story.
- Never plagiarize.
- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.
- Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.
- Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.
- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

Minimize Harm

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

Act Independently

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

Be Accountable

Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.

Journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.



FAREED ZAKARIA, *Time* magazine editor-at-large and host of CNN's *GPS*, was briefly suspended from both *Time* and CNN in August 2012 when media blogs accused him of plagiarizing scholar Jill Lepore's essay on gun control in one of his columns. Reinstated after both *Time* and CNN found no evidence of deliberate plagiarism, Zakaria apologized for his "terrible mistake," which he explains came as a result of mixing up different notes from different sources. Zakaria's scandal underscored the potential consequences of one ethical lapse, even for journalists as high-profile as Zakaria.

"In the era of YouTube, Twitter and 24-hour cable news, nobody is safe."

VAN JONES, FORMER SPECIAL ADVISOR TO THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION ON ENVIRONMENTAL JOBS, WHO WAS FORCED TO RESIGN IN 2009 BECAUSE OF HIS PAST CRITICISMS OF REPUBLICAN LEADERS THAT SURFACED ON TV AND TALK RADIO

privileges," the code states, "can compromise the integrity of journalists and their employers. Nothing of value should be accepted."²¹ Although small newspapers with limited resources and poorly paid reporters might accept such "freebies" as game tickets for their sportswriters and free meals for their restaurant critics, this practice does increase the likelihood of a conflict of interest that produces favorable or uncritical coverage.

On a broader level, ethical guidelines at many news outlets attempt to protect journalists from compromising positions. For instance, in most cities, U.S. journalists do not actively participate in politics or support social causes. Some journalists will not reveal their political affiliations, and some even decline to vote.

For these journalists, the rationale behind their decisions is straightforward: Journalists should not place themselves in a situation in which they might have to report on the misdeeds of an organization or a

political party to which they belong. If a journalist has a tie to any group, and that group is later suspected of involvement in shady or criminal activity, the reporter's ability to report on that group would be compromised—along with the credibility of the news outlet for which he or she works. Conversely, other journalists believe that not actively participating in politics or social causes means abandoning their civic obligations. They believe that fairness in their reporting, not total detachment from civic life, is their primary obligation.

In the digital age, conflict of interest cases surrounding opinion blogging have grown more complicated, especially when those opinion blogs run under the banner of traditional news media. For example, in 2010 David Weigel, whom the *Washington Post* hired to blog about the conservative movement, was forced to resign after private e-mails and Listserv messages were exposed in which he had used inflammatory rhetoric to vent about well-known conservatives like Matt Drudge, Ron Paul, and Rush Limbaugh. A *Post* editor commented at the time, "We can't have any tolerance for the perception that people are conflicted or bring a bias to their work. . . . There's abundant room on our Web site for a wide range of viewpoints, and we should be transparent about everybody's viewpoint."²² Critics afterward noted that mainstream news media sites should make clear to their readers whether the bloggers are actually opinion writers or professional journalists trying to write fairly on subjects about which they may not agree. In this case, Weigel's credibility regarding his ability to blog fairly about right-wing politicians and pundits was compromised when his personal exchanges ridiculing conservatives came to light. This case illustrates the increasingly blurry line between the old journalism of verification and the new journalism of assertion.

Resolving Ethical Problems

When a journalist is criticized for ethical lapses or questionable reporting tactics, a typical response might be "I'm just doing my job" or "I was just getting the facts." Such explanations are troubling, though, because in responding this way, reporters are transferring personal responsibility for the story to a set of institutional rituals.

There are, of course, ethical alternatives to self-justifications such as "I'm just doing my job" that force journalists to think through complex issues. With the crush of deadlines and daily duties, most media professionals deal with ethical situations only on a case-by-case basis

as issues arise. However, examining major ethical models and theories provides a common strategy for addressing ethics on a general rather than a situational basis. The most well-known ethical standard, the Judeo-Christian command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” provides one foundation for constructing ethical guidelines. Although we cannot address all major moral codes here, a few key precepts can guide us.

Aristotle, Kant, Bentham, and Mill

The Greek philosopher Aristotle offered an early ethical concept, the “golden mean”—a guideline for seeking balance between competing positions. For Aristotle, this was a desirable middle ground between extreme positions, usually with one regarded as deficient, and the other excessive. For example, Aristotle saw ambition as the balance between sloth and greed.

Another ethical principle entails the “categorical imperative,” developed by German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). This idea maintains that a society must adhere to moral codes that are universal and unconditional, applicable in all situations at all times. For example, the Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) is articulated in one form or another in most of the world’s major religious and philosophical traditions, and operates as an absolute moral principle. The First Amendment, which prevents Congress from abridging free speech and other rights, could be considered an example of an unconditional national law.

British philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) promoted an ethical principle derived from “the greatest good for the greatest number,” directing us “to distribute a good consequence to more people rather than to fewer, whenever we have a choice.”²³

Developing Ethical Policy

Arriving at ethical decisions involves several steps. These include laying out the case; pinpointing the key issues; identifying involved parties, their intents, and their competing values; studying ethical models; presenting strategies and options; and formulating a decision.

One area that requires ethics is covering the private lives of people who unintentionally have become prominent in the news. Consider Richard Jewell, the Atlanta security guard who, for eighty-eight days, was the FBI’s prime suspect in the city park bombing at the 1996 Olympics. The FBI never charged Jewell with a crime, and he later successfully sued several news organizations for libel. The news media competed to be the first to report important developments in the case, and with the battle for newspaper circulation and broadcast ratings adding fuel to a complex situation, editors were reluctant to back away from the story once it began circulating.

At least two key ethical questions emerged: (1) Should the news media have named Jewell as a suspect even though he was never charged with a crime? (2) Should the media have camped out daily in front of his mother’s house in an attempt to interview him and his mother? The Jewell case pitted the media’s right to tell stories and earn profits against a person’s right to be left alone.

Working through the various ethical stages, journalists formulate policies grounded in overarching moral principles.²⁴ Should reporters, for instance, follow the Golden Rule and be willing to treat themselves, their families, or their friends the way they treated the Jewells? Or should they invoke Aristotle’s “golden mean” and seek moral virtue between extreme positions?

In Richard Jewell’s situation, journalists could have developed guidelines to balance Jewell’s interests and the news media’s. For example, in addition to apologizing for using Jewell’s name in early accounts, reporters might have called off their stakeout and allowed Jewell to set interview times at a neutral site, where he could talk with a small pool of journalists designated to relay information to other media outlets.

“We should have the public interest and not the bottom line at heart, or else all we can do is wait for a time when sex doesn’t sell.”

SUSAN UNGARO,
EDITOR, *FAMILY CIRCLE*, ON MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE CLINTON-LEWINSKY SCANDAL, 1998

Reporting Rituals and the Legacy of Print Journalism

Unfamiliar with being questioned themselves, many reporters are uncomfortable discussing their personal values or their strategies for getting stories. Nevertheless, a stock of rituals, derived from basic American values, underlie the practice of reporting. These include focusing on the present, relying on experts, balancing story conflict, and acting as adversaries toward leaders and institutions.

Focusing on the Present

In the 1840s, when the telegraph first enabled news to crisscross America instantly, modern journalism was born. To complement the new technical advances, editors called for a focus on the immediacy of the present. Modern front-page print journalism began to de-emphasize political analysis and historical context, accenting instead the new and the now.

As a result, the profession began drawing criticism for failing to offer historical, political, and social analyses. This criticism continues today. For example, urban drug stories heavily dominated print and network news during the 1986 and 1988 election years. Such stories, however, virtually disappeared from the news by 1992, although the nation's serious drug and addiction problems had not diminished.²⁵ For many editors and reporters at the time, drug stories became “yesterday's news.”

Modern journalism tends to reject “old news” for whatever new event or idea that disrupts today's routines. During the 1996 elections, when statistics revealed that drug use among middle-class high school students was rising, reporters latched on to new versions of the drug story, but their reports made only limited references to the 1980s. And although drug problems and addiction rates did not diminish in subsequent years, these topics were virtually ignored by journalists during national elections from 2000 to 2012. Indeed, given the space and time constraints of current news practices, reporters seldom link stories to the past or to the ebb and flow of history. (To analyze current news stories, see “Media Literacy and the Critical Process: Telling Stories and Covering Disaster” on page 499.)

Getting a Good Story

Early in the 1980s, the Janet Cooke hoax demonstrated the difference between the mere telling of a good story and the social responsibility to tell the truth.²⁶ Cooke, a former *Washington Post* reporter, was fired for fabricating an investigative report for which she initially won a Pulitzer Prize. (It was later revoked.) She had created a cast of characters, featuring a mother who contributed to the heroin addiction of her eight-year-old son.

At the time the hoax was exposed, Chicago columnist Mike Royko criticized conventional journalism for allowing narrative conventions—getting a good story—to trump journalism's responsibility to the daily lives it documents: “There's something more important than a story here. This eight-year-old kid is being murdered. The editors should have said forget the story, find the kid. . . . People in any other profession would have gone right to the police.”²⁷ Had editors at the *Post* demanded such help, Cooke's hoax would not have gone as far as it did.

According to Don Hewitt, the creator and longtime executive producer of *60 Minutes*, “There's a very simple formula if you're in Hollywood, Broadway, opera, publishing, broadcasting, newspapering. It's four very simple words—tell me a story.”²⁸ For most journalists, the bottom line is “Get the story”—an edict that overrides most other concerns. It is the standard against which many reporters measure themselves and their profession.

Media Literacy and the Critical Process

1 DESCRIPTION. Find print and broadcast news versions of the *same* disaster story (use LexisNexis if available). Make copies of each story, and note the pictures chosen to tell the story.

2 ANALYSIS. Find patterns in the coverage. How are the stories treated differently in print and on television? Are there similarities in the words chosen or images used? What kinds of experience are depicted? Who are the sources the reporters use to verify their information?

3 INTERPRETATION. What do these patterns suggest? Can you make any interpretations or arguments based on the kinds of disaster covered, sources used, areas covered, or words/images chosen? How are the stories told in relation to their importance to the entire community or nation? How complex are the stories?

Telling Stories and Covering Disaster

Covering difficult stories—such as natural disasters like Hurricane Sandy in 2012—may present challenges to journalists about how to frame their coverage. The opening sections, or leads, of news stories can vary depending on the source—whether it is print, broadcast, or online news—or even the editorial style of the news organization (e.g., some story leads are straightforward; some are very dramatic). And, although modern journalists claim objectivity as a goal, it is unlikely that a profession in the storytelling business can approximate any sort of scientific objectivity. The best journalists can do is be fair, reporting and telling stories to their communities and nation by explaining the complicated and tragic experiences they convert into words or pictures. To explore this type of coverage, try this exercise with examples from recent disaster coverage of a regional or national event.

4 EVALUATION. Which stories are the strongest? Why? Which are the weakest? Why? Make a judgment on how well these disaster stories serve your interests as a citizen and the interests of the larger community or nation.

5 ENGAGEMENT. In an e-mail or letter to the editor, report your findings to relevant editors and TV news directors. Make suggestions for improved coverage and cite strong stories that you admired. How did they respond?

Getting a Story First

In a discussion on public television about the press coverage of a fatal airline crash in Milwaukee in the 1980s, a news photographer was asked to discuss his role in covering the tragedy. Rather than take up the poignant, heartbreaking aspects of witnessing the aftermath of such an event, the excited photographer launched into a dramatic recounting of how he had slipped behind police barricades to snap the first grim photos, which later appeared in the *Milwaukee Journal*. As part of their socialization into the profession, reporters often learn to evade authority figures to secure a story ahead of the competition.

The photographer's recollection points to the important role journalism plays in calling public attention to serious events and issues. Yet he also talked about the news-gathering process as a game that journalists play. It's now routine for local television stations, 24/7 cable news, and newspapers to run self-promotions about how they beat competitors to a story. In addition, during political elections, local television stations and networks project winners in particular races and often hype their projections when they are able to forecast results before the competition does. This practice led to the fiasco in November 2000 when the major networks and cable news services badly flubbed their predictions regarding the outcome of voting in Florida during the presidential election.



JONAH LEHRER had built an impressive career as a best-selling author and staff writer for the *New Yorker* and *Wired* magazine when in 2012 it was discovered he had recycled his own work, an act of “self-plagiarism,” on multiple different occasions. It was also discovered that his 2012 book *Imagine: How Creativity Works* contained several fabricated quotes, many of which were incorrectly attributed to Bob Dylan.

Journalistic *scoops* and exclusive stories attempt to portray reporters in a heroic light: They have won a race for facts, which they have gathered and presented ahead of their rivals. It is not always clear, though, how the public is better served by a journalist’s claim to have gotten a story first. In some ways, the 24/7 cable news, the Internet, and bloggers have intensified the race for getting a story first. With a fragmented audience and more media competing for news, the mainstream news often feels more pressure to lure an audience with exclusive, and sometimes sensational, stories. Although readers and viewers might value the aggressiveness of reporters, the earliest reports are not necessarily better, more accurate, or as complete as stories written later with more context and perspective.

For example, in summer 2010 a firestorm erupted around the abrupt dismissal of Shirley Sherrod, a Georgia-based African American official with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, over a short clip of a speech posted by the late right-wing blogger Andrew Breitbart on his Web site BigGovernment.com. His clip implied that Sherrod had once discriminated against a white farm family who had sought her help when their farm was about to be foreclosed. FoxNews.com picked up the clip, and soon it was all over cable TV, where Sherrod and the Obama administration were denounced as “reverse racists.” The secretary of agriculture, Tom Vilsack, demanded and got Sherrod’s resignation. However, once reporters started digging deeper into the story and CNN ran an interview with the white farmers that Sherrod had actually helped, it was revealed that the 2½-minute clip

had been re-edited and taken out of context from a 43-minute speech Sherrod had given at an NAACP event. In the speech, Sherrod talked about the discrimination that both poor white and black farmers had faced, and about rising above her own past. (Her father had been murdered forty-five years earlier, and an all-white Georgia grand jury did not indict the accused white farmer despite testimony from three witnesses.) Conservative pundits apologized, Glenn Beck demanded that Sherrod be rehired, and Tom Vilsack offered her a new job (which she ultimately declined).²⁹

This kind of scoop behavior, which becomes viral in the digital age, demonstrates pack or **herd journalism**, which occurs when reporters stake out a house, chase celebrities in packs, or follow a story in such herds that the entire profession comes under attack for invading people’s privacy, exploiting their personal problems, or just plain getting the story wrong.

Relying on Experts

Another ritual of modern print journalism—relying on outside sources—has made reporters heavily dependent on experts. Reporters, though often experts themselves in certain areas by virtue of having covered them over time, are not typically allowed to display their expertise overtly. Instead, they must seek outside authorities to give credibility to seemingly neutral reports. *What* daily reporters know is generally subordinate to *who* they know.

During the early 1900s, progressive politicians and leaders of opinion such as President Woodrow Wilson and columnist Walter Lippmann believed in the cultivation of strong ties among national reporters, government officials, scientists, business managers, and researchers. They wanted journalists supplied with expertise across a variety of areas. Today, the widening gap between those with expertise and those without it has created a need for public mediators. Reporters have assumed this role as surrogates who represent both leaders’ and readers’ interests. With their access to experts, reporters transform specialized and insider knowledge into the everyday commonsense language of news stories.

Reporters also frequently use experts to create narrative conflict by pitting a series of quotes against one another, or on occasion use experts to support a particular position. In addition, the use of experts enables journalists to distance themselves from daily experience; they are able to attribute the responsibility for the events or issues reported in a story to those who are quoted.

To use experts, journalists must make direct contact with a source—by phone or e-mail or in person. Journalists do not, however, heavily cite the work of other writers; that would violate reporters' desire not only to get a story first but to get it on their own. Telephone calls and face-to-face interviews, rather than extensively researched interpretations, are the stuff of daily journalism.

Newsweek's Jonathan Alter once called expert sources the "usual suspects." Alter contended that "the impression conveyed is of a world that contains only a handful of knowledgeable people. . . . Their public exposure is a result not only of their own abilities, but of deadlines and a failure of imagination on the part of the press."³⁰

In addition, expert sources have historically been predominantly white and male. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) conducted a major study of the 14,632 sources used during 2001 on evening news programs on ABC, CBS, and NBC. FAIR found that only 15 percent of sources were women—and 52 percent of these women represented "average citizens" or "non-experts." By contrast, of the male sources, 86 percent were cast in "authoritative" or "expert" roles. Among "U.S. sources" where race could be determined, the study found that white sources "made up 92 percent of the total, blacks 7 percent, Latinos and Arab-Americans 0.6 percent each, and Asian Americans 0.2 percent."³¹ (At that time, the 2000 census reported the U.S. population stood at 69 percent white, 13 percent Hispanic, 12 percent black, and 4 percent Asian.) So as mainstream journalists increased their reliance on a small pool of experts, they probably alienated many viewers, who may have felt excluded from participation in day-to-day social and political life.

A 2005 study by the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism found similar results. The study looked at forty-five different news outlets over a twenty-day period, including newspapers, nightly network newscasts and morning shows, cable news programs, and Web news sites. Newspapers, the study found, "were the most likely of the media studied to cite at least one female source . . . (41% of stories)," while cable news "was the least likely medium to cite a female source (19% of stories)." The study also found that in "every [news] topic category, the majority of stories cited at least one male source," but "the only topic category where women crossed the 50% threshold was lifestyle stories." The study found that women were least likely to be cited in stories on foreign affairs, while sports sections of newspapers also "stood out in particular as a male bastion," with only 14 percent citing a female source.³²

By 2012, the evidence again suggested little improvement. In fact, a study from the Fourth Estate showed that over a six-month period during the 2012 election, men were "much more likely to be quoted on their subjective insight in newspapers and on television." This held true even on stories specifically dealing with women's issues. The Fourth Estate study showed that "in front page articles about the 2012 election that mention[ed] abortion or birth control, men [were] 4 to 7 times more likely to be cited than women." The study concluded by noting that such a "gender gap undermines the media's credibility."³³

By the late 1990s, many journalists were criticized for blurring the line between remaining neutral and being an expert. The boom in twenty-four-hour cable news programs at this time led to a news vacuum that eventually was filled with talk shows and interviews with journalists willing to give their views. During events with intense media coverage, such as the 2000 through 2012 presidential elections, 9/11, and the Iraq war, many print journalists appeared several times a day on cable programs acting as experts on the story, sometimes providing factual information but mostly offering opinion and speculation.

Some editors even encourage their reporters to go on these shows for marketing reasons. Today, many big city newspapers have office space set aside for reporters to use for cable, TV,

"I made a special effort to come on the show today because I have . . . mentioned this show as being bad . . . as it's hurting America."

JON STEWART, ON
CNN'S *CROSSFIRE*,
2004

“Cable news is full of spin doctors shouting at each other. . . . Jerry Springer without the hair pulling.”

TOM RAWLINS, EDITOR,
ST. PETERSBURG
TIMES, 1998

and Internet interviews. Critics contend that these practices erode the credibility of the profession by blending journalism with celebrity culture and commercialism. Daniel Schorr, who worked as a journalist for seventy years (he died in 2010), resigned from CNN when the cable network asked him to be a commentator during the 1984 Republican National Convention along with former Texas governor John Connally. Schorr believed that it was improper to mix a journalist and a politician in this way, but the idea seems innocent by today’s blurred standards. As columnist David Carr pointed out in the *New York Times* in 2010, “Where there was once a pretty bright line between journalist and political operative, there is now a kind of continuum, with politicians becoming media providers in their own right, and pundits, entertainers and journalists often driving political discussions.”³⁴

Balancing Story Conflict

For most journalists, *balance* means presenting all sides of an issue without appearing to favor any one position. The quest for balance presents problems for journalists. On the one hand, time and space constraints do not always permit representing *all* sides; in practice this value has often been reduced to “telling *both* sides of a story.” In recounting news stories as two-sided dramas, reporters often misrepresent the complexity of social issues. The abortion controversy, for example, is often treated as a story that pits two extreme positions (staunchly pro-life vs. resolutely pro-choice) against each other. Yet people whose views fall somewhere between these positions are seldom represented (studies show this group actually represents the majority of Americans). In this manner, “balance” becomes a narrative device to generate story conflict.

On the other hand, although many journalists claim to be detached, they often stake out a moderate or middle-of-the-road position between the two sides represented in a story. In claiming neutrality and inviting readers to share their detached point of view, journalists offer a distant, third-person, all-knowing point of view (a narrative device that many novelists use as well), enhancing the impression of neutrality by making the reporter appear value-free (or valueless).

The claim for balanced stories, like the claim for neutrality, disguises journalism’s narrative functions. After all, when reporters choose quotes for a story, these are usually the most dramatic or conflict-oriented words that emerge from an interview, press conference, or public meeting. Choosing quotes sometimes has more to do with enhancing drama than with being fair, documenting an event, or establishing neutrality.

The balance claim has also served the financial interests of modern news organizations that stake out the middle ground. William Greider, a former *Washington Post* editor, makes the tie between good business and balanced news: “If you’re going to be a mass circulation journal, that means you’re going to be talking simultaneously to lots of groups that have opposing views. So you’ve got to modulate your voice and pretend to be talking to all of them.”³⁵

Acting as Adversaries

The value that many journalists take the most pride in is their adversarial relationship with the prominent leaders and major institutions they cover. The prime narrative frame for portraying this relationship is sometimes called a *gotcha story*, which refers to the moment when, through questioning, the reporter nabs “the bad guy” or wrongdoer.

This narrative strategy—part of the *tough questioning style* of some reporters—is frequently used in political reporting. Many journalists assume that leaders are hiding something and that the reporter’s main job is to ferret out the truth through tenacious fact-gathering and “gotcha” questions. An extension of the search for balance, this stance locates the reporter in the middle, between “them” and “us,” between political leaders and the people they represent.

Critics of the tough question style of reporting argue that, while it can reveal significant information, when overused it fosters a cynicism among journalists that actually harms the

“Opinion journalism can be more honest than objective-style journalism, because it doesn’t have to hide its point of view.”

MICHAEL KINSLEY,
WASHINGTONPOST.COM,
2006

democratic process. Although journalists need to guard against becoming too cozy with their political sources, they sometimes go to the other extreme. By constantly searching for what politicians may be hiding, some reporters may miss other issues or other key stories.

When journalists employ the gotcha model to cover news, being tough often becomes an end in itself. Thus reporters believe they have done their job just by roughing up an interview subject or by answering the limited “What is going on here?” question. Yet the Pulitzer Prize, the highest award honoring journalism, often goes to the reporter who asks ethically charged and open-ended questions, such as “Why is this going on?” and “What ought to be done about it?”

Journalism in the Age of TV and the Internet

The rules and rituals governing American journalism began shifting in the 1950s. At the time, former radio reporter John Daly hosted the CBS network game show *What’s My Line?* When he began moonlighting as the evening TV news anchor on ABC, the network blurred the entertainment and information border, foreshadowing what was to come.

In the early days, the most influential and respected television news program was CBS’s *See It Now*. Coproduced by Fred Friendly and Edward R. Murrow, *See It Now* practiced a kind of TV journalism lodged somewhere between the neutral and narrative traditions. Generally regarded as “the first and definitive” news documentary on American television, *See It Now* sought “to report in depth—to tell and show the American audience what was happening in the world using film as a narrative tool.”³⁶ Murrow worked as both the program’s anchor and its main reporter, introducing the investigative model of journalism to television—a model that programs like *60 Minutes*, *20/20*, and *Dateline* would imitate. Later, of course, Internet news-gathering and reporting would further alter journalism.

Differences between Print, TV, and Internet News

Although TV news reporters share many values, beliefs, and conventions with their print counterparts, television transformed journalism in a number of ways. First, broadcast news is driven by its technology. If a camera crew and news van are dispatched to a remote location for a live broadcast, reporters are expected to justify the expense by developing a story, even if nothing significant is occurring. For instance, when a national political candidate does not arrive at the local airport in time for an interview on the evening news, the reporter may cover a flight delay instead. Print reporters, in contrast, slide their notebooks or laptops back into their bags and report on a story when it occurs. However, with print reporters now posting regular online updates to their stories, they offer the same immediacy that live television news does. In fact, in most newsrooms today, the online version of a story is often posted before the newspaper or TV version appears.

Second, while print editors cut stories to fit the physical space around ads, TV news directors have to time stories to fit between commercials. Despite the fact that a much higher percentage of space is devoted to print ads (about 60 percent at most dailies), TV ads (which take up less than 25 percent of a typical thirty-minute news program) generally seem more intrusive to viewers, perhaps because TV ads take up time rather than space. The Internet has “solved” these old space and time problems by freeing stories from those constraints online.

Third, while modern print journalists are expected to be detached, TV news derives its credibility from live, on-the-spot reporting; believable imagery; and viewers’ trust in the reporters

“It’s the job of journalists to make complicated things interesting. The shame of American journalism is that [PBS’s] *Frontline*, with its limited resources, has been doing infinitely better, more thoughtful, more creative reporting on places like Afghanistan or Rwanda than the richest networks in the world. If it is a glory for *Frontline*, it is a shame for those big networks and the [people] at the top of the corporate structure who run them.”

DAVID HALBERSTAM,
JOURNALIST, OCTOBER
2001



ANN CURRY announced her resignation as coanchor of the *Today* show in June 2012 after just one year on the job. Rumors swirled that network executives at NBC had been planning her departure for months, potentially pinning the show's low ratings on Curry's on-air personality. Meanwhile gossip columnists buzzed that Curry was forced out due to the way she dressed and her refusal to cover her gray hair. Now an NBC News national and international correspondent and *Today* anchor at large, Curry has a strong fan base that rallied behind her in the wake of what some maintain was an unfair dismissal from *Today*.

and anchors. In fact, since the early 1970s most annual polls have indicated that the majority of viewers find television news a more credible resource than print news. Viewers tend to feel a personal regard for the local and national anchors who appear each evening on TV sets in their living rooms. In fact, in Pew Research Center's 2012 news credibility and believability study (which still does not rate online news sources like *Politico* or *Huffington Post*), the three top news outlets with the highest "positive" rating from those polled were "local TV news" (65 percent), *60 Minutes* (64 percent), and ABC News (59 percent). By comparison, Fox News was tied with the *New York Times* and *USA Today* as the only organizations in the study to have higher negative than positive ratings—all at just 49 percent positive. The highest rated newspaper in the study was the *Wall Street Journal* with a 58 percent positive rating, while the "daily newspaper you know best" scored a 57 percent positive rating.³⁷

By the mid-1970s, the public's fascination with the Watergate scandal, combined with the improved quality of TV journalism, helped local news departments realize profits. In an effort to retain high ratings, stations began hiring consultants, who advised news directors to invest in national prepackaged formats, such as Action News or Eyewitness News. Traveling the country, viewers noticed similar theme music and opening graphic visuals from market to market. Consultants also suggested that stations lead their newscasts with *crime blocks*: a group of TV stories that recount the worst local criminal transgressions of the day. A cynical slogan soon developed in the industry: "If it bleeds, it leads." This crime-block practice continues today at most local TV news stations.

Few stations around the country have responded to viewers and critics who complain about the overemphasis on crime. (In reality, FBI statistics reveal that crime and murder rates have fallen or leveled off in most major urban areas since the 1990s.) In 1996, the news director at KVUE-TV in Austin, Texas, created a new set of criteria that had to be met for news reports to qualify as responsible crime stories. She asked that her reporters answer the following questions: Do citizens or officials need to take action? Is there an immediate threat to safety? Is there a threat to children? Does the crime have significant community impact? Does the story lend itself to a crime prevention effort? With KVUE's new standards, the station eliminated many routine crime stories. Instead, the station provided a context for understanding crime rather than a mindless running tally of the crimes committed each day.³⁸

Pretty-Face and Happy-Talk Culture

In the early 1970s at a Milwaukee TV station, consultants advised the station's news director that the evening anchor looked too old. The anchor, who showed a bit of gray, was replaced and went on to serve as the station's editorial director. He was thirty-two years old at the time. In the late 1970s, a reporter at the same station was fired because of a "weight problem," although that was not given as the official reason. Earlier that year, she had given birth to her first child. In 1983, Christine Craft, a former Kansas City television news anchor, was awarded \$500,000 in damages in a sex discrimination suit against station KMBC (she eventually lost the monetary award when the station appealed). She had been fired because consultants believed she was too old, too unattractive, and not deferential enough to men.

Such stories are rampant in the annals of TV news. They have helped create a stereotype of the half-witted but physically attractive news anchor, reinforced by popular culture images

(from Ted Baxter on TV's *Mary Tyler Moore Show* to Ron Burgundy in the *Anchorman* films). Although the situation has improved slightly, national news consultants set the agenda for what local reporters should cover (lots of crime) as well as how they should look and sound (young, attractive, pleasant, and with no regional accent). Essentially, news consultants—also known as *news doctors*—have advised stations to replicate the predominant male and female advertising images of the 1960s and 1970s in modern local TV news.

Another strategy favored by news consultants is *happy talk*: the ad-libbed or scripted banter that goes on among local news anchors, reporters, meteorologists, and sports reporters before and after news reports. During the 1970s, consultants often recommended such chatter to create a more relaxed feeling on the news set and to foster the illusion of conversational intimacy with viewers. Some also believed that happy talk would counter much of that era's "bad news," which included coverage of urban riots and the Vietnam War. A strategy still used today, happy talk often appears forced and may create awkward transitions, especially when anchors transition to reports on events that are sad or tragic.

Sound Bitten

Beginning in the 1980s, the term **sound bite** became part of the public lexicon. The TV equivalent of a quote in print news, a sound bite is the part of a broadcast news report in which an expert, a celebrity, a victim, or a person-in-the-street responds to some aspect of an event or issue. With increasing demands for more commercial time, there is less time for interview subjects to explain their views, and sound bites have become the focus of intense criticism. Studies revealed that during political campaigns the typical sound bite from candidates had shrunk from an average duration of forty to fifty seconds in the 1950s and 1960s to fewer than eight seconds by the late 1990s. With shorter comments from interview subjects, TV news sometimes seems like dueling sound bites, with reporters creating dramatic tension by editing competing viewpoints together as if interviewees had actually been in the same location speaking to one another. Of course, print news also pits one quote against another in a story, even though the actual interview subjects may never have met. Once again, these reporting techniques, also at work in online journalism, are evidence of the profession's reliance on storytelling devices to replicate or create conflict.

Pundits, "Talking Heads," and Politics

The transformation of TV news by cable—with the arrival of CNN in 1980—led to dramatic changes in TV news delivery at the national level. Prior to cable news (and the Internet), most people tuned to their local and national news late in the afternoon or evening on a typical weekday, with each program lasting just thirty minutes. But today, the 24/7 news cycle means that we can get TV news anytime, day or night, and constant new content has led to major changes in what is considered news. Because it is expensive to dispatch reporters to document stories or maintain foreign news bureaus to cover international issues, the much less expensive "talking head" pundit has become a standard for cable news channels. Such a programming strategy requires few resources beyond the studio and a few guests.

Today's main cable channels have built their evening programs along partisan lines and follow the model of journalism as opinion and assertion: Fox News goes right with pundit stars like Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity; MSNBC leans left with

ANDERSON COOPER has been the primary anchor of *Anderson Cooper 360°* since 2003. Although the program is mainly taped and broadcast from his New York City studio, and typically features reports of the day's main news stories with added analyses from experts, Cooper is one of the few "talking heads" who still reports live fairly often from the field for major news stories. More recently and notably, he has done extensive coverage of the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (below), the February 2011 uprisings in Egypt, and the devastating earthquake in Japan in 2011.



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The Contemporary Journalist: Pundit or Reporter?

Journalists discuss whether the 24/7 news cycle encourages reporters to offer opinions more than facts.

Discussion: What might be the reasons reporters should give opinions, and what might be the reasons why they shouldn't?

Rachel Maddow and Lawrence O'Donnell; and CNN stakes out the middle with hosts that try to strike a more neutral pose like Anderson Cooper. CNN, the originator of cable news, does much more original reporting than Fox News and MSNBC and does better in nonpresidential election years. After dropping to a twenty-year audience low in 2012, CNN bounced back in May 2013, averaging 665,000 total viewers in prime time (compared to just 470,000 a year earlier). The highly political MSNBC, on other hand, went from averaging 817,000 total viewers in May 2012 to only 539,000 in May 2013. Fox News continued to lead cable prime-time news by a wide margin, averaging 1.9 million viewers per night in May 2013.³⁹

Today's cable and Internet audiences seem to prefer partisan "talking heads" over traditional reporting. This suggests that in today's fragmented media marketplace, going after niche audiences along political lines is smart business—although not necessarily good journalism. What should concern us today is the jettisoning of good journalism—anchored in reporting and verification—that uses reporters to document stories and interview key sources. In its place, on cable and online, are highly partisan pundits who may have strong opinions and charisma but who may not have all their facts straight.

Convergence Enhances and Changes Journalism

For mainstream print and TV reporters and editors, online news has added new dimensions to journalism. Both print and TV news can continually update breaking stories online, and many reporters now post their online stories first and then work on traditional versions. This means that readers and viewers no longer have to wait until the next day for the morning paper or for the local evening newscast for important stories. To enhance the online reports, which do not have the time or space constraints of television or print, newspaper reporters increasingly are required to provide video or audio for their stories. This might allow readers and viewers to see full interviews rather than just selected print quotes in the paper or short sound bites on the TV report.

However, online news comes with a special set of problems. Print reporters, for example, can do e-mail interviews rather than leaving the office to question a subject in person. Many editors discourage this practice because they think relying on e-mail gives interviewees the chance to control and shape their answers. While some might argue that this provides more thoughtful answers, journalists say it takes the elements of surprise and spontaneity out of the traditional news interview, during which a subject might accidentally reveal information—something less likely to occur in an online setting.

Another problem for journalists, ironically, is the wide-ranging resources of the Internet. This includes access to versions of stories from other papers or broadcast stations. The mountain of information available on the Internet has made it all too easy for journalists to—unwittingly or intentionally—copy other journalists' work. In addition, access to databases and other informational sites can keep reporters at their computers rather than out tracking down new kinds of information, cultivating sources, and staying in touch with their communities.

Most notable, however, for journalists in the digital age are the demands that convergence has made on their reporting and writing. Print journalists at newspapers (and magazines) are expected to carry digital cameras so they can post video along with the print versions of their stories. TV reporters are expected to write print-style news reports for their station's Web site to supplement the streaming video of their original TV stories. And both print and TV reporters are often expected to post the Internet versions of their stories first, before the versions they do for the morning paper or the six o'clock news. Increasingly, journalists today are also expected to tweet and blog.

The Power of Visual Language

The shift from a print-dominated culture to an electronic-digital culture requires that we look carefully at differences among various approaches to journalism. For example, the visual

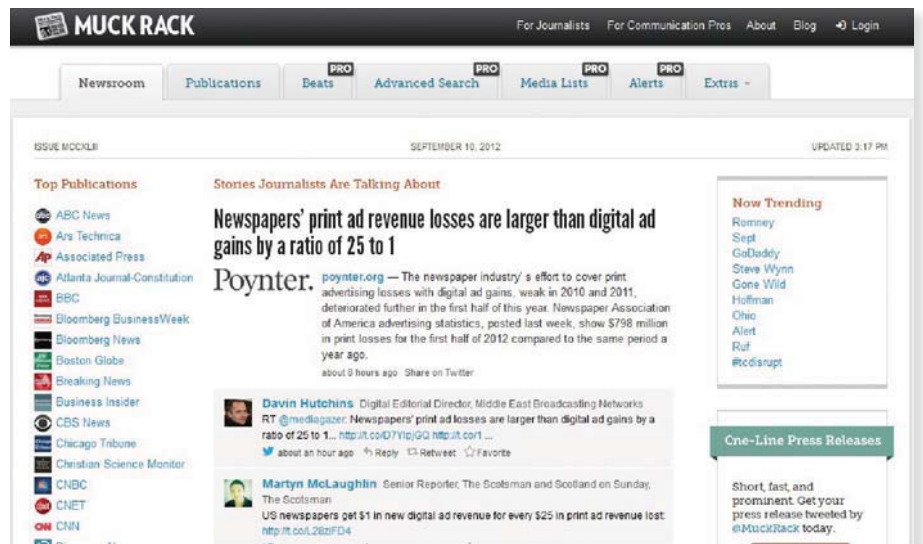
language of TV news and the Internet often captures events more powerfully than words. Over the past fifty years, television news has dramatized America's key events. Civil Rights activists, for instance, acknowledge that the movement benefited enormously from televised news that documented the plight of southern blacks in the 1960s. The news footage of southern police officers turning powerful water hoses on peaceful Civil Rights demonstrators or the news images of "white only" and "colored only" signs in hotels and restaurants created a context for understanding the disparity between black and white in the 1950s and 1960s.

Other enduring TV images are also embedded in the collective memory of many Americans: the Kennedy and King assassinations in the 1960s; the turmoil of Watergate in the 1970s; the first space shuttle disaster and the Chinese student uprisings in the 1980s; the Oklahoma City federal building bombing in the 1990s; the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in 2001; Hurricane Katrina in 2005; the historic 2008 election of President Obama; the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011; and in 2012 the brutal murders of twenty schoolchildren and six adults in Newtown, Connecticut. During these critical events, TV news has been a cultural reference point marking the strengths and weaknesses of our world. (See "Global Village: Al Jazeera Buys a U.S. Cable Channel" on page 509 for more on global news access in the digital age.)

Today, the Internet, for good or bad, functions as a repository for news images and video, alerting us to stories that the mainstream media missed or to videos captured by amateurs. Remember the leaked video to *Mother Jones* magazine of candidate Mitt Romney at a fund-raiser during the 2012 election: "There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what . . . who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims. . . ." That footage, played over and over on YouTube and cable news, hurt Romney's campaign. Then in summer 2013, CIA employee Edward Snowden chose a civil liberties advocate and columnist for the London-based *Guardian* to leak material on systematic surveillance of ordinary Americans by the National Security Agency. The video interview with the *Guardian* scored 1.5 million YouTube hits shortly after its release. As *New York Times* columnist David Carr noted at the time: "News no longer needs the permission of traditional gatekeepers to break through. Scoops can now come from all corners of the media map and find an audience just by virtue of what they reveal."⁴⁰

Alternative Models: Public Journalism and "Fake" News

In 1990, Poland was experiencing growing pains as it shifted from a state-controlled economic system to a more open market economy. The country's leading newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the first noncommunist newspaper to appear in Eastern Europe since the 1940s, was also undergoing challenges. Based in Warsaw with a circulation of about 350,000 at the time, *Gazeta Wyborcza* had to



NEWS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Today, more and more journalists use Twitter in addition to performing their regular reporting duties. Muck Rack collects journalists' tweets in one place, making it easier than ever to access breaking news and real-time, one-line reporting.

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Fake News/Real News: A Fine Line

The editor of the *Onion* describes how the publication critiques "real" news media. **Discussion:** How many of your news sources might be considered "fake" news versus traditional news, and how do you decide which sources to consult?

“We need to see people not as readers, non-readers, endangered readers, not as customers to be wooed or an audience to be entertained, but as a public, citizens capable of action.”

DAVIS “BUZZ” MERRITT,
WICHITA EAGLE, 1995

report on and explain the new economy and the new crime wave that accompanied it. Especially troubling to the news staff and Polish citizens were gangs that robbed American and Western European tourists at railway stations, sometimes assaulting them in the process. The stolen goods would then pass to an outer circle, whose members transferred the goods to still another exterior ring of thieves. Even if the police caught the inner circle members, the loot usually disappeared.

These developments triggered heated discussions in the newsroom. A small group of young reporters, some of whom had recently worked in the United States, argued that the best way to cover the story was to describe the new crime wave and relay the facts to readers in a neutral manner. Another group, many of whom were older and more experienced, felt that the paper should take an advocacy stance and condemn the criminals through interpretive columns on the front page. The older guard won this particular debate, and more interpretive pieces appeared.⁴¹

This story illustrates the two competing models that have influenced American and European journalism since the early 1900s. The first—the *informational* or *modern model*—emphasizes describing events and issues from a seemingly neutral point of view. The second—a more *partisan* or *European model*—stresses analyzing occurrences and advocating remedies from an acknowledged point of view.

In most American newspapers today, the informational model dominates the front page, while the partisan model remains confined to the editorial pages and an occasional front-page piece. However, alternative models of news—from the serious to the satirical—have emerged to challenge modern journalistic ideals.

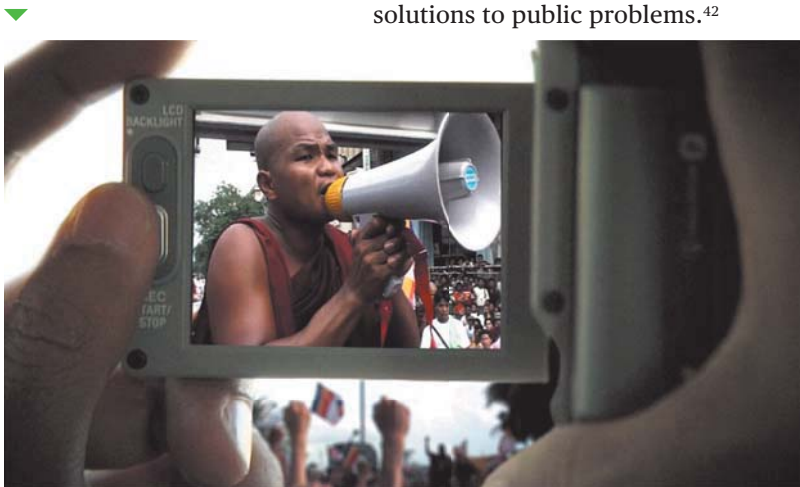
The Public Journalism Movement

From the late 1980s through the 1990s, a number of papers experimented with ways to involve readers more actively in the news process. These experiments surfaced primarily at midsize daily papers, including the *Charlotte Observer*, the *Wichita Eagle*, the *Virginian-Pilot*, and the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. Davis “Buzz” Merritt, editor and vice president of the *Wichita Eagle* at the time, defined key aspects of **public journalism**:

- It moves beyond the limited mission of “telling the news” to a broader mission of helping public life go well, and acts out that imperative. . . .
- It moves from detachment to being a fair-minded participant in public life. . . .
- It moves beyond only describing what is “going wrong” to imagining what “going right” would be like. . . .
- It moves from seeing people as consumers—as readers or nonreaders, as bystanders to be informed—to seeing them as a public, as potential actors in arriving at democratic solutions to public problems.⁴²

CITIZEN JOURNALISM

One way technology has allowed citizens to become involved in the reporting of news is through cell phone photos and videos uploaded online. Witnesses can now pass on what they have captured to major mainstream news sources, like CNN’s iReports or onto their own blogs and Web sites.



Public journalism is best imagined as a conversational model for news practice. Modern journalism had drawn a distinct line between reporter detachment and community involvement; public journalism—driven by citizen forums, community conversations, and even talk shows—obscured this line.

In the 1990s—before the full impact of the Internet—public journalism served as a response to the many citizens who felt alienated from participating in public life in a meaningful way. This alienation arose, in part, from viewers who watched passively as the political process seemed to play out in the news and on TV between the

Al Jazeera Buys a U.S. Cable Channel

Struggling to gain a foothold in U.S. cable TV markets, the sometimes controversial Arabic Al Jazeera network in January 2013 paid \$500 million for a struggling cable channel, Current TV, founded by former Vice President Al Gore. Earning \$70 million in the deal, Gore was criticized at the time for selling out to a news service largely funded by Arab oil money. Gore, of course, had made his reputation taking on climate change issues and lecturing about the overdependence of the United States on foreign oil.

Even after all the U.S. interest in the 2011 Arab Spring movement (uprisings by Arab peoples against dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen among other Middle Eastern countries), Al Jazeera English aired on cable or satellite systems in the United States in only Burlington, VT; Toledo, OH; and Washington, DC, reaching about 100,000 homes in 2012. This lack of audience access to Arab and Middle East news led Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report* to question Al Jazeera's Cairo correspondent on why the network couldn't get on U.S. TV systems when there was clearly room for "17 Showtimes and a channel for pets."¹

Al Jazeera's battle to get on U.S. cable systems stemmed from early condemnations "by the American government for broadcasting videotapes from Osama bin Laden and other material deemed terrorist propaganda."² With the purchase of Current TV, the Arabic news network still faced concerns from some cable operators saying they wouldn't carry

a remade Current TV channel if it was not providing some kind of news service that audiences wanted. The original plan in launching Al Jazeera America (AJA) was to offer about 60 percent of its programming from the United States with the remaining news coming from the existing news service, Al Jazeera English, based in Doha, Qatar.³ AJA, however, responding to U.S. concerns and worried about access to cable and DBS systems, revised that plan so they would look more like Fox News or CNN. They also decided to add some eight hundred employees at a time when many U.S. news outlets were still downsizing—providing a "giant stimulus project for American journalism." According to business reporter Ali Velshi, who left CNN to work for AJA: "This is the first big journalism hiring binge that anyone's been on for a long time."⁴ Today the main Al Jazeera Arabic network, which began in 1996 and is heavily subsidized by the emir of Qatar, reaches 220 million TV households in more than a hundred countries and runs news bureaus in nearly seventy countries (compared to CNN's thirty-three).

Still, some critics remain suspicious of Al Jazeera, although its English reporting staff draws on journalists from fifty different nations, including many Americans. Even in the midst of some Arab regimes trying to ban Al Jazeera's news coverage and with the network receiving worldwide praise for its comprehensive



coverage of Arab Spring, Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly labeled the network "anti-American."⁵ Still, during the early days of Egypt's protest against their once-entrenched dictator, four million people logged on to Al Jazeera's Web site to see 24/7 video coverage of the uprising, including 1.6 million hits in the United States.⁶

In a world increasingly interconnected and centered on the Middle East, before AJA's arrival most U.S. citizens had no cable or satellite access to the world's main Arab news services. While TV executives have claimed that there is lots of competition for too few channels, a more likely scenario is that cable/satellite chiefs have feared backlash if they supported an Arab news service on their systems. First Amendment scholar and Columbia University president Lee Bollinger, however, has called on the FCC to "use its authority to expand access to foreign news bureaus." Failing to do so, Bollinger argues, "threatens to put America's understanding of the world at a significant disadvantage relative to other countries."⁷ ▲

party operatives and media pundits. Public journalism was a way to involve both the public and journalists more centrally in civic and political life. Editors and reporters interested in addressing citizen alienation—and reporter cynicism—began devising ways to engage people as conversational partners in determining the news. In an effort to draw the public into discussions about community priorities, these journalists began sponsoring citizen forums, where readers would have a voice in shaping aspects of the news that directly affected them.

An Early Public Journalism Project

Although isolated citizen projects and reader forums are sprinkled throughout the history of journalism, the public journalism movement began in earnest in 1987 in Columbus, Georgia. The city was suffering from a depressed economy, an alienated citizenry, and an entrenched leadership. In response, a team of reporters from the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* surveyed and talked with community leaders and other citizens about the future of the city. The paper then published an eight-part series based on the findings.

When the provocative series evoked little public response, the paper's leadership realized there was no mechanism or forum for continuing the public discussions about the issues raised in the series. Consequently, the paper created such a forum by organizing a town meeting and helped create a new civic organization to tackle issues such as racial tension and teenage antisocial behavior.

The Columbus project generated public discussion, involved more people in the news process, and eased race and class tensions by bringing various groups together in public conversations. In the newsroom, the *Ledger-Enquirer* tried to reposition the place of journalists in politics: "Instead of standing outside the political community and reporting on its pathologies, they took up residence within its borders."⁴³

Criticizing Public Journalism

By 2000, more than a hundred newspapers, many teamed with local television and public radio stations, had practiced some form of public journalism. Yet many critics remained skeptical of the experiment, raising a number of concerns including the weakening of four journalistic hallmarks: editorial control, credibility, balance, and diverse views.⁴⁴

First, some editors and reporters argued that public journalism was co-opted by the marketing department, merely pandering to what readers wanted and taking editorial control away from newsrooms. They believed that focus group samples and consumer research—tools of marketing, not journalism—blurred the boundary between the editorial and business functions of a paper. Some journalists also feared that as they became more active in the community, they may have been perceived as community boosters rather than as community watchdogs.

Second, critics worried that public journalism compromised the profession's credibility, which many believe derives from detachment. They argued that public journalism turned reporters into participants rather than observers. However, as the *Wichita Eagle's* editor Davis Merritt pointed out, professionals who have credibility "share some basic values about life, some common ground about common good." Yet many journalists have insisted they "don't share values with anyone; that [they] are value-neutral."⁴⁵ Merritt argued that, as a result, modern journalism actually has little credibility with the public, which the Pew Research Center's annual credibility surveys bear out.

Third, critics also contended that public journalism undermined "balance" and the both-sides-of-a-story convention by constantly seeking common ground and community consensus; therefore, it ran the risk of dulling the rough edges of democratic speech. Public journalists countered that they were trying to set aside more room for centrist positions. Such positions were often representative of many in the community but were missing in the mainstream news, which has been more interested in the extremist views that make for a more dramatic story.

Fourth, many traditional reporters asserted that public journalism, which they considered merely a marketing tool, had not addressed the changing economic structure of the news business.

"The idea is to frame stories from the citizen's view, rather than inserting man-in-the-street quotes into a frame dominated by professionals."

JAY ROSEN, NYU, 1995

With more news outlets in the hands of fewer owners, both public journalists and traditional reporters needed to raise tough questions about the disappearance of competing daily papers and newsroom staff cutbacks at local monopoly newspapers. Facing little competition, in 2010 and 2011 newspapers continued to cut reporting staffs and expensive investigative projects, reduced the space for news, or converted to online-only operations. While such trends temporarily helped profits and satisfied stockholders, they limited the range of stories told and views represented in a community.

“Fake” News and Satiric Journalism

For many young people, it is especially disturbing that two wealthy, established political parties—beholden to special interests and their lobbyists—control the nation’s government. After all, 98 percent of congressional incumbents get reelected each year—not always because they’ve done a good job but often because they’ve made promises and done favors for the lobbyists and interests that helped get them elected in the first place.

Why shouldn’t people, then, be cynical about politics? It is this cynicism that has drawn increasingly larger audiences to “fake” news shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* on cable’s Comedy Central. Following in the tradition of *Saturday Night Live* (SNL), which began in 1975, news satires tell their audiences something that seems truthful about politicians and how they try to manipulate media and public opinion. But most important, these shows use humor to critique the news media and our political system. SNL’s sketches on GOP vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin in 2008 drew large audiences and shaped the way younger viewers thought about the election.

The Colbert Report satirizes cable “star” news hosts, particularly Fox’s Bill O’Reilly and MSNBC’s Chris Matthews, and the bombastic opinion-assertion culture promoted by their programs. In critiquing the limits of news stories and politics, *The Daily Show*, “anchored” by Stewart, parodies the narrative conventions of evening news programs: the clipped eight-second “sound bite” that limits meaning and the formulaic shot of the TV news “stand up,” which depicts reporters “on location,” attempting to establish credibility by revealing that they were really there.

On *The Daily Show*, a cast of fake reporters are digitally superimposed in front of exotic foreign locales, Washington, D.C., or other U.S. locations. In a 2004 exchange with “political correspondent” Rob Corddry, Stewart asked him for his opinion about presidential campaign tactics. “My opinion? I don’t have opinions,” Corddry answered. “I’m a reporter, Jon. My job is to spend half the time repeating what one side says, and half the time repeating the other. Little thing called objectivity; might want to look it up.”

NEWS AS SATIRE

Political satirists Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert have welcomed a variety of political leaders and celebrity guests to their respective news shows, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*, throughout their time on-air. In 2012, Stewart interviewed President Obama for the sixth time, while Colbert welcomed First Lady Michelle Obama to his show a few months before the election. Here Stewart is shown interviewing Navy Admiral Mike Mullen, while Colbert is pictured with John Grunsfeld, Associate Administrator for NASA’s Science Mission Directorate.



As news court jester, Stewart exposes the melodrama of TV news that nightly depicts the world in various stages of disorder while offering the stalwart, comforting presence of celebrity anchors overseeing it all from their high-tech command centers. Even before CBS's usually neutral and aloof Walter Cronkite signed off the evening news with "And that's the way it is," network news anchors tried to offer a sense of order through the reassurance of their individual personalities.

Yet even as a fake anchor, Stewart displays a much greater range of emotion—a range that may match our own—than we get from our detached "hard news" anchors: more amazement, irony, outrage, laughter, and skepticism. For example, during his program's coverage of the 2012 presidential election, he would frequently show genuine irritation or even outrage—coupled with irony and humor—whenever a politician or political ad presented information that was untrue or misleading.

While Stewart often mocks the formulas that real TV news programs have long used, he also presents an informative and insightful look at current events and the way "traditional" media cover them. For example, he exposes hypocrisy by juxtaposing what a politician said recently in the news with the opposite position articulated by the same politician months or years earlier. Indeed, many Americans have admitted that they watch satires such as *The Daily Show* not only to be entertained but also to stay current with what's going on in the world. In fact, a prominent Pew Research Center study in 2007 found that people who watched these satiric shows were more often "better informed" than most other news consumers, usually because these viewers tended to get their news from multiple sources and a cross-section of news media.⁴⁶

Although the world has changed, local TV news story formulas (except for splashy opening graphics and Doppler weather radar) have gone virtually unaltered since the 1970s, when *SNL*'s "Weekend Update" first started making fun of TV news. Newscasts still limit reporters' stories to two minutes or less and promote stylish anchors, a "sports guy," and a certified meteorologist as familiar personalities whom we invite into our homes each evening. Now that a generation of viewers has been raised on the TV satire and political cynicism of "Weekend Update," David Letterman, Jimmy Fallon, Conan O'Brien, *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report*, the slick, formulaic packaging of political ads and the canned, cautious sound bites offered in news packages are simply not so persuasive.

Journalism needs to break free from tired formulas—especially in TV news—and reimagine better ways to tell stories. In fictional television, storytelling has evolved over time, becoming increasingly complex. Although the Internet and 24/7 cable have introduced new models of journalism and commentary, why has TV news remained virtually unchanged over the past forty years? Are there no new ways to report the news? Maybe audiences would value news that matches the complicated storytelling that surrounds them in everything from TV dramas to interactive video games to their own conversations. We should demand news story forms that better represent the complexity of our world.

"There's no journalist today, real or fake, who is more significant for people 18 to 25."

SETH SIEGEL,
ADVERTISING AND
BRANDING
CONSULTANT, TALKING
ABOUT JON STEWART

Democracy and Reimagining Journalism's Role

Journalism is central to democracy: Both citizens and the media must have access to the information that we need to make important decisions. As this chapter illustrates, however, this is a complicated idea. For example, in the aftermath of 9/11, some government officials claimed that reporters or columnists who raised questions about fighting terrorism, invading Iraq, or

developing secret government programs were being unpatriotic. Yet the basic principles of democracy require citizens and the media to question our leaders and government. Isn't this, after all, what the American Revolution was all about? (See "Examining Ethics: WikiLeaks, Secret Documents, and Good Journalism?" on page 514.)

Conventional journalists will fight ferociously for the principles that underpin journalism's basic tenets—questioning government, freedom of the press, the public's right to know, and two sides to every story. These are mostly worthy ideals, but they do have limitations. These tenets, for example, generally do not acknowledge any moral or ethical duty for journalists to improve the quality of daily life. Rather, conventional journalism values its news-gathering capabilities and the well-constructed news narrative, leaving the improvement of civic life to political groups, nonprofit organizations, business philanthropists, individual citizens, and practitioners of Internet activism.

Social Responsibility

Although reporters have traditionally thought of themselves first and foremost as observers and recorders, some journalists have acknowledged a social responsibility. Among them was James Agee in the 1930s. In his book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which was accompanied by the Depression-era photography of Walker Evans, Agee regarded conventional journalism as dishonest, partly because the act of observing intruded on people and turned them into story characters that newspapers and magazines exploited for profit.

Agee also worried that readers would retreat into the comfort of his writing—his narrative—instead of confronting what for many families was the horror of the Great Depression. For Agee, the question of responsibility extended not only to journalism and to himself but to the readers of his stories as well: "The reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell."⁴⁷ Agee's self-conscious analysis provides insights into journalism's hidden agendas and the responsibility of all citizens to make public life better.

Deliberative Democracy

According to advocates of public journalism, when reporters are chiefly concerned with maintaining their antagonistic relationship to politics and are less willing to improve political discourse, news and democracy suffer. *Washington Post* columnist David Broder thinks that national journalists like him—through rising salaries, prestige, and formal education—have distanced themselves "from the people that we are writing for and have become much, much closer to people we are writing about."⁴⁸ Broder believes that journalists need to become activists, not for a particular party but for the political process and in the interest of re-energizing public life. For those who advocate for public journalism, this might also involve mainstream media spearheading voter registration drives or setting up pressrooms or news bureaus in public libraries or shopping malls, where people converge in large numbers.

Public journalism offers people models for how to deliberate in forums, and then it covers those deliberations. This kind of community journalism aims to reinvigorate a *deliberative democracy* in which citizen groups, local government, and the news media together work more actively to shape social, economic, and political agendas. In a more deliberative democracy, a large segment of the community discusses public life and social policy before advising or electing officials who represent the community's interests.

In 1989, the historian Christopher Lasch argued that "the job of the press is to encourage debate, not to supply the public with information."⁴⁹ Although he overstated his case—journalism does both and more—Lasch made a cogent point about how conventional journalism had lost its bearings. Adrift in data, mainstream journalism had lost touch with its partisan roots. The early

"If I can convince you of anything, it is to buck the current system. Remember anew that you are a public servant and your business is protecting the public from harm. Even if those doing harm also pay your salary."

DAN RATHER, IN HIS ACCEPTANCE SPEECH AT A COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS EVENT, NOVEMBER 2011

"Neither journalism nor public life will move forward until we actually rethink, redescribe, and re-interpret what journalism is; not the science of information of our culture but its poetry and conversation."

JAMES CAREY, KETTERING REVIEW, 1992

EXAMINING ETHICS

WikiLeaks, Secret Documents, and Good Journalism?

Since its inception in 2006, the controversial Web site WikiLeaks has released millions of documents—from revelations of toxic dumps in Africa to its 2013 release of 1.5 million U.S. diplomatic records, many involving President Nixon’s secretary of state, Henry Kissinger. WikiLeaks’s main spokesperson and self-identified “editor-in-chief,” Julian Assange, an Australian online activist, has been called everything from a staunch free-speech advocate to a “hi-tech terrorist” (by U.S. Vice President Joe Biden). Certainly, government leaders around the world have faced embarrassment from the site’s many document dumps and secrecy breaches.

In its most controversial move, in 2010 WikiLeaks offered 500,000-plus documents, called the “War Logs,” to three mainstream print outlets—the *Guardian* in the United Kingdom, the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, and the *New York Times*. These documents were mainly U.S. military and state department dispatches and internal memos related to the Afghan and Iraq wars—what Bill Keller, then executive editor of the *New York Times*, called a “huge breach of secrecy” for those running the wars. Keller described working with WikiLeaks as an adventure that “combined the cloak-and-dagger intrigue of handling a vast secret archive with the more mundane

feat of sorting, searching and understanding a mountain of data.”¹ Indeed, one of the first major stories the *Times* wrote, based on the War Logs project, reported on “Pakistan’s ambiguous role as an American ally.”² Then just a few months later, Osama bin Laden was found hiding in the middle of a Pakistani suburb.

WikiLeaks presents a number of ethical dilemmas and concerns for journalists and citizens. News critic and journalism professor Jay Rosen has called WikiLeaks “the world’s first stateless news organization.”³ But is WikiLeaks actually doing journalism—and therefore entitled to First Amendment protections? Or is it merely an important “news source, news provider, content host, [or] whistleblower,” exposing things that governments would rather keep secret?⁴ And should any document or material obtained by WikiLeaks be released for public scrutiny, or should some kinds of documents and materials be withheld?

Examining Ethics Activity

As a class or in smaller groups, consider the ethical concerns laid out above. Following the ethical template outlined

on page 19 in Chapter 1, begin by researching the topic, finding as much information and analysis as possible. Read Bill Keller’s *New York Times Magazine* piece or his longer 2011 *Times* report, “Open Secrets: WikiLeaks, War and American Diplomacy” (www.nytimes.com/opensecrets). See also

Nikki Usher’s work for Harvard’s

Nieman Journalism Lab

and Jay Rosen’s blog,

PressThink. Consider

also journalism

criticism and news

study sites such

as the *Colum-*

bia Journalism

Review, the

Pew Research

Center, and the

First Amendment

Center. Watch Julian

Assange’s interview

on CBS’s *60 Minutes* from

January 2011.

Next, based on your research and informed analysis, decide whether WikiLeaks is a legitimate form of journalism and whether there should be newsroom policies that restrict the release of some kinds of documents for a news organization in partnership with a resource like WikiLeaks (such as the “War Logs” project described above). Create an outline for such policies. ▲



“In media history up to now, the press is free to report on what the powerful wish to keep secret because the laws of a given nation protect it. But Wikileaks is able to report on what the powerful wish to keep secret because the logic of the Internet permits it. . . . Just as the Internet has no terrestrial address or central office, neither does Wikileaks.”

—Jay Rosen, *PressThink*, 2010

mission of journalism—to advocate opinions and encourage public debate—has been relegated to alternative magazines, the editorial pages, news blogs, and cable news channels starring allegedly elite reporters. Tellingly, Lasch connected the gradual decline in voter participation, which began in the 1920s, to more professionalized conduct on the part of journalists. With a modern, supposedly “objective” press, he contended, the public increasingly began to defer to the “more professional” news media to watch over civic life on its behalf.

As the advocates of public journalism acknowledged, people had grown used to letting their representatives think and act for them. More community-oriented journalism and other civic projects offer citizens an opportunity to deliberate and to influence their leaders. This may include broadening the story models and frames they use to recount experiences; paying more attention to the historical and economic contexts of these stories; doing more investigative reports that analyze both news conventions and social issues; taking more responsibility for their news narratives; participating more fully in the public life of their communities; admitting to their cultural biases and occasional mistakes; and ensuring that the verification model of reporting is not overwhelmed by the new journalism of assertion.

Arguing that for too long journalism has defined its role only in negative terms, news scholar Jay Rosen notes: “To be adversarial, critical, to ask tough questions, to expose scandal and wrongdoing . . . these are necessary tasks, even noble tasks, but they are negative tasks.” In addition, he suggests, journalism should assert itself as a positive force, not merely as a watchdog or as a neutral information conduit to readers but as “a support system for public life.”⁵⁰ ▶

CHAPTER REVIEW

COMMON THREADS

One of the Common Threads discussed in Chapter 1 is about the role that media play in a democracy. Today, one of the major concerns is the proliferation of news sources. How well is our society being served by this trend—especially on cable and the Internet—compared with the time when just a few major news media sources dominated journalism?

Historians, media critics, citizens, and even many politicians argue that a strong democracy is only possible with a strong, healthy, skeptical press. In the “old days,” a few legacy or traditional media—key national newspapers, three major networks, and three newsmagazines—provided most of the journalistic common ground for discussing major issues confronting U.S. society.

In today’s online and 24/7 cable world, though, the legacy or mainstream media have ceded some of their power and many of their fact-checking duties to new media forms, especially in the blogosphere. As discussed in this chapter and in Chapter 8, this loss is partly economic, driven by severe cutbacks in newsroom staffs due to substantial losses in advertising (which has gone to the Internet), and partly because bloggers, 24/7 cable news media, and news satire shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are fact-checking the media as well as reporting stories that used to be the domain of professional news organizations.

The case before us then goes something like this: In the “old days,” the major news media provided us with reports and narratives to share, discuss, and argue about. But in today’s explosion of news and information, that common ground has eroded or is shifting. Instead, today we often rely only on those media sources that match our comfort level, cultural values, or political affiliations; increasingly these are blog sites, radio talk shows, or cable channels. Sometimes these opinion channels and sites are not supported with the careful fact-gathering and verification that has long been a pillar of the best kinds of journalism.

So in today’s media environment, how severely have technological and cultural transformations undermined the “common ground” function of mainstream media? And, are these changes ultimately good or bad for democracy?

KEY TERMS

The definitions for the terms listed below can be found in the glossary at the end of the book.

The page numbers listed with the terms indicate where the term is highlighted in the chapter.

news, 488

newsworthiness, 488

ethnocentrism, 490

responsible capitalism, 490

small-town pastoralism, 491

individualism, 491

conflict of interest, 494

herd journalism, 500

sound bite, 505

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