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## *Journalism ethics amid structural change*

Journalism – as a practice, a product, and a profession – is undergoing rapid and dramatic structural change. There are four key aspects of this change, each with its own ethical implications.

- *Economic structure* is changing. For many practitioners, the collapse of previously reliable business models is the most pressing, and distressing, of the changes. Tactics to develop alternative revenue streams and to shore up old ones create new or newly intensified ethical pressure points.
- *Organizational structure* is changing. Newsrooms are being dramatically resized and reconfigured, and roles within them rethought. New responsibilities and working conditions generate ethical issues for journalists.
- *Narrative structure* is changing. As journalists have adapted to the Internet, their stories have taken on a more postmodern form. The construction of meaning is more fluid than in the past, and the process of that construction is more open and transparent. In addition, new formats have encouraged and facilitated a more personal

narrative style. Traditional ethical guidelines for “making news” are being reconsidered.

- *Relationship structure* is changing. Relationships between journalists and “the people formerly known as the audience”<sup>1</sup> are evolving to accommodate the increasingly open and fluid construction of meaning just described. Practitioners are revisiting ethical principles predicated on maintaining professional distance and difference.

These four aspects of occupational change are interconnected, and so are the ways in which they affect the ethical beliefs and behaviors of journalists. However, by first exploring each on its own, we can then attempt to weave the strands together and look to the future.

As the first decade of the twenty-first century ended, media organizations faced a double economic whammy. One aspect is cyclical. The widespread economic downturn has been very bad news for the industry. Among other effects, virtually none of them positive, stock prices have plummeted, advertising revenue has evaporated, and many readers have decided that the pennies spent on a newspa-

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per are among the easiest to pinch. The combination means less – much less – money available to do journalism.

But recessions come and go. Digital media seem here to stay, making their economic impact more significant. For a decade and more, news outlets gambled that an advertising model that had paid most of the bills for 150 years – a model in which the cost to an advertiser was based largely on how many people were likely to see the ad – would migrate more or less intact to the Internet. While they waited for that to happen, publishers concentrated on building the readership of their affiliated websites, mainly by offering most or all of their content online for free.

Particularly among the print media, these efforts have been successful. Most newspaper and magazine websites have far more visitors than their corresponding hard copies have readers. Nearly an entire generation of news consumers has grown up with readily available information at their fingertips – and the expectation that all of it is, and always will be, free.

Many publishers are now thinking they should have been more careful what they wished for. Although online advertising revenue has seen significant growth over the past fifteen years, it has not grown nearly enough to make up for the deep revenue losses of traditional media products. Internet advertising is ubiquitous, but it is also very, very cheap. Moreover, both classified and display advertisers have many more ways to reach audiences than before; they need not, and increasingly do not, rely on a media outlet to deliver their message to potential customers (or, if you prefer, to bring potential customers to their message). With something like horror, publishers have belatedly realized that they are giving

away what is extremely expensive to produce – call it journalism – and getting next to nothing in return. In the process, they also are building audience expectations that this is the way the world of information should work.

The ethical implications are of the sort that financial pressures typically create, many of them relating to issues of editorial independence. *The Washington Post's* aborted plan to sell seats at the table to sponsors of “salons” – bringing together journalists, lawmakers, administration officials, business leaders, and others for off-the-record discussion of public policy issues, at a cost of up to \$25,000 per sponsor – is only one of the more egregious examples.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it was one of the easier ones to deal with, and the *Post* abandoned the idea well before the first cocktail was poured.

The proper ethical response to other issues of journalistic independence that are emerging as revenues sink can be more open to debate:

- To what extent should user interest in a particular story or type of story (which, of course, can be precisely identified and tracked through website “hit logs”) affect journalists’ news decisions? Does more coverage or better play of high-interest items constitute serving the public, or is it merely what some in the newsroom deride as “traffic whoring”?
- One attractive and potentially lucrative alternative to traditional advertising is commercial sponsorship of parts of a website. Sponsors want to be associated with content targeted to the people likely to be interested in their goods or services. But what message do readers get when a travel agency sponsors a newspaper’s online travel section, a local medical center its health section, or an investment company its financial section?

- Niche blogs, such as the “mommy blogs” offered by Gannett newspaper websites, have become very popular – with local mothers *and* with people eager to sell them niche products. Site guidelines typically forbid posting commercial messages, but it can be tough to tell the difference between a blog post that is actually an unpaid ad and one that expresses the honest enthusiasm of a young mother for a new brand of baby formula.

Those are just examples of the sorts of problems stemming from difficulties with traditional economic approaches. In addition, news enterprises are taking tentative steps toward wholly different models, as Robert Giles explores elsewhere in this issue. New ventures include ongoing experiments with non-profit journalism such as the ProPublica investigative journalism enterprise, backed primarily by foundation funding, or the local Voice of San Diego, backed largely by individual donors. Traditional media organizations also are exploring new ownership models; an example is the partial Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) that accompanied the 2009 sale of a group of Maine newspapers to a new publisher.

But new models also raise ethical issues, including questions about where loyalties lie. For example, MinnPost.com, a nonprofit journalism enterprise covering issues in Minnesota, is funded largely by “member-donors” who contribute from \$10 to \$10,000 to the site. Some, as site reporter and blogger David Blauer admits, are people he covers. And what happens to his journalistic credibility if a public relations firm decides to steer dozens of sponsors his way?<sup>3</sup> Moreover, dependence on donors generally means there is not enough money for a large staff; that in turn means reliance on

freelancers for much of the website’s information, a riskier proposition. The viability of the whole enterprise could easily be destroyed by a single lawsuit.<sup>4</sup>

The growth of journalistic “work for hire,” with its accompanying risks, is one of a host of issues raised by ongoing changes to newsroom organizational structures. These changes stem in large part from the economic pressures described above; they are also an adaptation to the need to maintain a journalistic website along with a traditional news product.

Throughout the 1990s and well into the 2000s, most media organizations maintained separate and unequal Web operations. Typically staffed by relatively few, relatively inexperienced journalists, these staffs often were segregated from reporters and editors in the main newsroom, many of whom regarded their online colleagues with disdain, if they regarded them at all. Online journalists spent much of their time “repurposing” material created for the legacy product, for instance by adding links or visual enhancements.

Changes began in the mid-2000s. “Convergence” became an industry mantra, with managers pushing newsroom staffs to develop a version of their stories for the website or at least to work more closely with those who could. Some journalists did incorporate the Internet in their thinking, though mostly in the context of special projects rather than routine news-gathering and news-writing. Many others continued to ignore the Web as long and as thoroughly as possible.

That is less and less likely to be an option. By the late 2000s, growing numbers of newsrooms were moving toward true multiplatform news production. The trend has been driven

both by the burgeoning online audience and its expectation that the media website will offer timely (and free) news, and by the brutal reality that staff cut-backs mean fewer – perhaps far fewer, with some newspapers losing half their journalists – people available to handle all the tasks necessary to sustain multiple news products.

Stories are increasingly likely to appear online as soon as viable information is available, sometimes direct from a reporter's laptop, mobile phone, or other transmission device; many newspapers, for instance, are developing "early teams" of journalists who begin work at dawn and work through the early afternoon to prepare content for the website,<sup>5</sup> which gets most of its traffic during the business day. Because the Internet is a visual and auditory medium, the same reporters may be expected to upload sound bites from interviews and to capture still and/or video images; these rarely are formats with which they have much expertise. Back in the newsroom, editors prepare content for both the website and the legacy product – if they see it at all before a reporter publishes it directly online. Both reporters and editors also may double as bloggers or contribute to various social media offerings, as discussed below. The news organization may or may not maintain a distinct online staff, but if it does, those journalists are likely to work much more closely with the rest of the newsroom than was the case a decade, or even a few years, ago.

At the 2009 meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, newspaper copy editors discussed the ethical implications of these changes on the accuracy of what is published. Mike Richard of *The New York Times* said the "desire for

perfection" must be balanced with the reality of having to let things go, especially when editing for the Web. *The Boston Globe's* Jim Franklin said material may be published unedited online, then checked for problems later; in addition, he noted that "everyone does everything," editing content across a range of topics whether or not they know anything about them. The same is true at *The Dallas Morning News*, where staff reductions have left a single editor with just three hours at the end of the night dedicated to the Web, according to business desk editor Chris Weinandt.

In short, newsroom staff sizes have shrunk at precisely the same time as the website has become a more integral part of the news product, and the skills of remaining journalists have been stretched in unfamiliar directions to meet the expanding content requirements. The result is that online journalism is no longer separate, but it is, perhaps ironically, increasingly unequal. When the website contained primarily content repurposed from the traditional medium, whatever ethical standards went into the latter were replicated online. The shift to multiplatform production is leading to different standards for different media: With fewer people but more work, the care taken with the online product – which generally has the larger audience – is likely to be inferior to the care taken with the legacy one, still seen as the "news of record" as well as the larger revenue generator. One copy editor describes the newspaper as the broadsheet, while the website is the tabloid.

Organizational restructuring also may give the journalist a greater role in marketing and promotion. Jill Van Wyke of Drake University points out that with the advent of social media,

editors have become instrumental not just in disseminating the news itself but also in getting out news about the news. They are providing Twitter feeds, publicizing stories through sites such as Facebook, and serving as online pitchmen in other ways as well. In addition, newsroom blogs have made editors and reporters more visible commentators both on the news itself and on what goes into producing it, raising other ethical issues in relation to changing narrative structures.

Writing a news story is, traditionally, a somewhat formulaic process. Particularly in American journalism, the “inverted pyramid” structure, in which the facts a journalist deems most crucial are clustered at the top followed by details of decreasing importance the further down one reads, is the most common. Alternative narrative structures may be used, particularly in feature or other “soft news” stories, but they tend to be relatively underutilized and nearly as narrowly proscribed in form.

Moreover, with the exception of some columnists, most journalists are expected to write in a style that implicitly distances the writer from both subject and audience. Journalists are trained to make themselves as nearly invisible as possible to the reader. The reporter is idealized as an observer of events but not a participant in or a commentator on them. This detached professional stance is a core aspect of the journalistic ethic of objectivity, which combines ideas of independence, neutrality, and a rough sort of evenhandedness among the diverse views of those involved in or affected by something the journalist deems newsworthy.

There are other structural constraints on the traditional journalistic narrative as well. Some stem from the limitations of the medium in which the story is told.

A newspaper reporter can use only words on paper, maybe accompanied by a photograph or two; a television journalist relies on pictures and sounds. Other constraints are created by space limitations. A newspaper has so many pages and no more; a radio newscast is over when its minutes are up. Still others derive from the nature of publication or broadcast deadlines. A story is finished when the presses run or the cameras roll, whatever the ongoing reality that any story can only partially describe.

All these narrative strictures are jettisoned when journalism moves online, with ethical implications for journalists.

Along with the pressures created by a move to a multimedia environment, we already have seen how changes in organizational structure affect the process of checking the accuracy of information before it is published. Accuracy is a component of, or more properly a route to, the paramount journalistic norm of truth-telling. The Internet, a medium whose core narrative attributes involve interactivity and speed, accommodates an understanding of truth that is far more open and more fluid than the one enclosed by traditional journalistic structures.

It is more open because there is unlimited space to tell the story, because the story can be connected with any other bit of information through hyperlinks, and, most important, because an unlimited number of people are available to help with the telling. As stories are linked up to other websites, opened to comments, replicated on blogs, and passed along viral information chains, the journalist no longer controls either the content that is included or the sources of that content; anyone who sees the story can add to it, challenge it, comment on it. Not all of those comments are cogent, and not all of the challenges

stand up to scrutiny. But some are and do, and the end result likely will be a different, more multifaceted version of the “truth” of a story than the one the lone journalist started with. In short, the journalist no longer is alone in carrying out the process of determining what is true and meaningful – or in disseminating the results of that process. The construction of meaning is more widely shared in a network that encompasses many seekers of truth and incorporates many voices in reporting and relaying it.

In addition to being more open, the Internet is a more fluid news environment because there also is unlimited time for a story to be told. Especially for “breaking news,” or news of an event as it is happening, online audiences seem to understand that details will be revised as events unfold and more or different information becomes available. If journalism has always offered a snapshot of history, the camera now clicks off frames at near-instantaneous speeds. A newspaper story must wait a whole day to be updated or amended; an online one can change many times an hour. Although news organizations continue to fret about how to signal corrections, both journalists and audiences are increasingly seeing stories as works in progress, covering news as it unfolds rather than declaring it over because a deadline is approaching. “The web,” says *The New York Times*’ Mike Richard, “is a canvas that never dries.”

Which brings us back to objectivity. If news is being turned into stories online as it happens, and as people outside the newsroom are shaping those stories in myriad ways, what is left for the traditional media outlet to contribute? The answer seems to be: interpretation. Across the television landscape, commentary formats have filled many of the hours formerly devoted to formal

newscasts not only because they are so much less expensive to produce but also because any actual news has appeared online hours before the scheduled news show. Quality print newspapers are foregrounding “news analysis” and other narrative structures that offer context to help readers understand what they already know took place. Both of these narrative forms are giant steps away from a detached, neutral, facts-centered approach to reporting and writing.

But neither does the Internet necessarily encourage the detachment inherent in the ethic of objectivity. On the contrary, a network is about connections; it bridges distances and erases boundaries of all kinds, including those between journalists and readers. Before turning to the changes in relationship structures that result, there is one more important change in narrative structure to touch on: the rise of the “j-blog.”

As journalist blogs have gained popularity, journalists warned all their working lives to keep their personal view and voice out of their writing are now being urged to showcase both. Indeed, j-blogs are nearly the complete opposite in narrative structure from the traditional “objective” news story. In tone, the best are conversational, candid, even cheeky. They talk about “I” and “you,” not that other, more distant “third person” who fills the paragraphs of most newspaper stories. They convey what the journalist thinks – both reflection on the world and self-reflection on the process of turning parts of that world into a news product. They invite responses from outside the newsroom, and j-bloggers then respond to the responses.

While some journalists say they feel liberated, j-blogs make other reporters and editors ethically uncomfortable. The issue, as we’ll see below, comes down to an understanding of what constitutes

journalistic credibility and trustworthiness. For some, it rests on open communication with the public, for which a blog offers a splendid new vehicle. For others, credibility stems precisely from the preservation of a neutral stance, which can be jeopardized by posting to a blog.

The structural change in the relationships between practitioners and the public is having a profound effect on newsroom culture. In the past, virtually all of a journalist's working relationships were with sources and colleagues; the newsroom walls (and at larger papers, the security guard in the lobby) meant control over who entered the physical workspace, and ownership of the printing press or broadcast transmitter ensured even firmer control over who or what entered the news space. Aside from the occasional phone call to the news desk or letter to the editor, which might or might not be edited and then published, actual readers or viewers rarely touched the working lives of most journalists, particularly at larger news organizations.

In a networked environment, interaction with audience members has become integral to the journalistic process. Consider again that notion of objectivity. One of the most hotly debated issues in the industry today is whether objectivity remains valuable (or even plausible) or whether it is being superseded by an ethical zeitgeist better suited to the rise of a relativistic medium. An emerging consensus seems to suggest that journalistic credibility in an unfettered information environment remains crucial and rests to a significant extent on independence from partisan or factional interests.<sup>6</sup> The ethical value in both objectivity and independence lies in underscoring the need for journalists

to remain free from outside pressures to shape information toward ends that serve vested, rather than public, interests. That said, journalists are either naive or just plain wrong to think that protestations of independence and high-minded impartiality will suffice when every word they write (or fail to write) is open to scrutiny and speculation in the rowdiest, most rapid-fire, and least restricted marketplace of ideas ever created.

Instead, the ethical buzzword of the Internet is "transparency," and it addresses a wide range of real and imagined journalistic sins. It is most closely connected with the traditional journalistic norm of accountability. Aside from a few dictatorships, most nations around the world have at least one code of press ethics that delineates the nature of accountability to peers, sources, subjects, and audience members; the U.S. Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics, for example, urges journalists to "clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct."<sup>7</sup> The Internet, with its unlimited space and inherently interactive structure, offers the ideal platform for both explanation and conversation.

In a traditional environment, journalists tend simply to ask audiences to trust them: to trust that they are being truthful, that they have been diligent and open-minded in gathering information, that they have captured the most important details of a story in the ten inches or two minutes allocated to it. It is a lot to ask. Perhaps, as the declining reputation of the news media suggests, it is too much.<sup>8</sup> The online environment, though, offers the opportunity to actively foster trust, not just demand it.

Transparency can take various forms. Using links to back up story references,

for example, is essentially an aspect of the new narrative structure already described; a story is no longer self-contained but can be extended outward to connect to other material anywhere on the Internet. Although linking decisions require judgment about the appropriateness of what's at the other end of a click, most raise few ethical alarms for journalists, who see them as offering readers relatively straightforward options to obtain more information about a story topic.

Offering more information about oneself, another crucial aspect of transparency, is a thornier issue for journalists steeped in a culture that prizes the maintenance of professional distance. Many harbor a not-irrational fear that such information could provide ammunition for those looking for bias behind every byline. However, other members of the vast Internet community, including many bloggers, have given precisely this element of transparency a central place in their idea of how life in a network should function. As discussed above, journalists themselves are finding blogs an optimal format for this sort of disclosure.

More broadly, the Internet encourages the construction of closer relationships with news audiences than in the past. For journalists, serving the public becomes about more than telling people what information exists; it is also about sharing in its discovery, verification, and interpretation, as well as providing help with its synthesis into meaningful knowledge – the interpretive function described above. As journalists' control over the flow of information is significantly loosened, and as the process of "making news" becomes more openly iterative, the enterprise becomes necessarily collaborative.

Sometimes the closeness is uncomfortable. Sociologists have long recognized that one of the hallmarks of a pro-

fession – and most journalists either believe themselves to be professionals or aspire to be, depending on whom you ask – is the right to devise and enforce their own ethical standards.<sup>9</sup> But online, oversight of journalists' behavior has become a team sport, and here, too, the newsroom no longer controls who gets to play.

Many have been startled by the intensity of the scrutiny – and by the fact that so few seem to think journalists are as ethical as they believe (or hope) themselves to be. The criticism is valuable for a variety of reasons, not least because it provides an impetus for attention to ethical issues and efforts to make changes where they are needed. Perhaps less predictably, new relationship structures also are encouraging journalists to think about what, exactly, it is that they do and why (or if) it retains any value in a world in which anyone can be a publisher.

A couple of my recent studies in Britain suggest that new relationships with audiences are prompting journalists to see their own ethical standards as a more definitive distinguishing characteristic and a greater source of ongoing value than, say, the ability to write well (an ability many outside the newsroom share) or to gain access to sources (who can be found readily enough online). I asked journalists working for local newspapers in Britain what they thought about "user-generated content" – all the things that people outside the newsroom now contribute to a website, from comments on stories to their own news items and photos. One of the most striking findings was that journalists saw their own ethics as setting them apart from outside contributors, too many of whom they viewed as abusive, partisan, or ill-informed (or all three).<sup>10</sup> Their colleagues at a national



newspaper similarly tended to see user contributions as less credible, less civil, and just generally less cogent than their own. "With citizen journalists, it's all rights and no responsibilities," as one journalist put it.<sup>11</sup>

Media ethicists have been arguing for a long time that ethical journalism rests on finding the right balance between freedom and responsibility,<sup>12</sup> independence and accountability,<sup>13</sup> liberty and justice for all. The closer proximity between those who work in a newsroom and those who do not is throwing new light on why achieving that balance matters. They also demonstrate that each group has much to teach the other, and much to learn. Journalists are being told, in no uncertain terms, to curb their arrogance; to open up their practices to observation and, yes, critique; and to loosen their control over information in order to provide a fuller, fairer version of the truth. Audiences are, as an entity, more amorphous and heterogeneous, but they also are learning that relationships work best when they abide by some restraints, when they try to get things right, and when they treat each other civilly. As websites increasingly adapt and adopt recommendation systems enabling users to highlight useful contributions and downgrade the less so, we may begin to see a definable structure of "audience ethics" emerge. It will be interesting to see how closely it resembles the ethics of journalism.

Journalists are pulled in conflicting ethical directions by the new structures described here. They cannot continue to do their job without economic resources, yet some attractive options for bolstering those resources jeopardize their independence. They retain a fundamental ethical commitment to truth-telling, but

changes in organizational structure foster processes that make it difficult, if not impossible, to establish the accuracy or veracity of what is published online. The glut of digital information increases the value of information that is credible and trustworthy, but the Internet's narrative structures undermine the detached neutrality that journalists have relied on as both a badge and a safeguard of trustworthiness. And journalists who are tempted to use ethical guidelines to distance and differentiate themselves from readers are at the same time drawn into relationships that are more personal, more open, and more collaborative.

The future of journalism ethics may rest on finding optimal ways to retain the underlying principles – the professional commitments to truth-telling, to freedom from faction, to public service and accountability – while affording journalists and media organizations the flexibility to remain relevant in rapidly and radically changing circumstances. A focus on the increasingly prominent ethic of transparency would be a good place to start.

Many of the criticisms of journalism can be traced to a failure of those holding power over information to explain their decisions in wielding it – and to admit when they have failed to do so wisely. That power is now mitigated by the fact that journalists have much less control over the flow of information than in the past. The change creates an economic as well as an ethical opportunity to bolster the value of what journalists do and how they do it. Engaging with people outside the newsroom both reactively – that is, by responding substantively to criticism and concerns – and proactively – by taking advantage of the new narrative structures described above to open a window on what happens inside the newsroom – can go a

long way toward enhancing understanding, strengthening relationships, and fostering opportunities for greater trust in the news media. Without that public trust, and the loyalty it commands, it is hard to see a way to reverse the downward spiral of an enterprise that risks losing its social as well as its economic value.

I believe that journalism has enormous social value. You probably do, too. We

need not only the integrity of individual journalists but also the power of strong media institutions to hold in check those in society who would abandon their own integrity and abuse their own power. No democracy exists without a viable free press; it is hard to see how one could. But democracy is an inherently collaborative public undertaking. So, too, should be the journalism that serves it.<sup>14</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Jay Rosen, "The People Formerly Known as the Audience," PressThink, June 27, 2006, [http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl\\_frmr.html](http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html) (accessed August 23, 2009).
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- <sup>9</sup> Margali Sarfetti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).
- <sup>10</sup> Jane B. Singer, "Quality Control: Perceived Effects of User-Generated Content on Newsroom Norms, Values, and Routines," *Journalism Practice* 4 (2) (2010): 127–142.
- <sup>11</sup> Jane B. Singer and Ian Ashman, "'Comment Is Free, but Facts Are Sacred': User-Generated Content and Ethical Constructs at the *Guardian*," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 24 (1) (2009): 3–21.
- <sup>12</sup> John C. Merrill, *The Dialectic in Journalism: Toward a Responsible Use of Press Freedom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

- <sup>13</sup> Jay Black, Bob Steele, and Ralph Barney, *Doing Ethics in Journalism: A Handbook with Case Studies*, 3rd ed. (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1999).
- <sup>14</sup> Many people both inside and outside the profession of journalism are wrestling with how ethical guidelines translate in a digital environment. Excellent further reading on the topic can be found on the Poynter Institute website at [http://www.poynter.org/content/content\\_view.asp?id=117350](http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=117350).