

Reluctant Stewards: Journalism in a Democratic Society

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Abstract: Journalists are reluctant stewards for democracy because they believe that democracy makes citizens their own stewards. They resist donning the mantle of moral guides on behalf of those who are authorized to guide themselves. Yet sometimes journalists do exercise responsibility for the public good in ways that are not subsumed under their professional duty to be nonpartisan, accurate, and fair-minded. Examining some of these exceptions, this essay argues that journalistic stewardship should be loosely defined, decentralized, multiform, and open to invention. In fact, today's economic crisis in journalism (and the identity crisis it stimulated) has launched a new set of initiatives – from fact-checking to organized crowd-sourcing – that have each sought to address a specific problem of democracy, truth-seeking, or the public good. Pluralism, pragmatism, and decentralized invention may do better at stewarding democracy than a coherent philosophy of moral guardianship ever could.

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Journalism, for all its occasional lofty pretensions, sits awkwardly in a discussion about stewards of democracy. Journalism is not even supposed to be about stewardship – that is, a kind of trusteeship or moral management suggesting that stewards, like fathers, “know best” (with all the paternalism that this message implies). The premise of “objective journalism” is otherwise: namely, that the citizen knows best and that the journalist is only providing the parts – pre-cut but unfinished – for citizens to assemble themselves. Journalists are reluctant stewards for democracy because they believe democracy makes citizens their own stewards.

However, this philosophy of journalistic professionalism is riddled with self-deception, as the daily practice of journalism regularly demonstrates. There is a long list of exceptions to “just the facts” journalism, including not only disapproved exceptions – advocacy under the guise of objectivity, say – but highly respected ones, too. These range from avowed advocacy on the editorial page to analysis that, without endorsing specific policy

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conclusions, is more substantially interpretive and context-providing than a straightforward news story. There is also a widely shared view among mainstream journalists that their coverage should be inclusive of women as well as men, young as well as old, racial minorities as well as whites, and non-heterosexuals as well as heterosexuals. Today, news organizations seek diversity in the newsroom as well as in news coverage not to reach a larger market in quest of profit, but to realize ideals of social justice, even though they fought the employment and advancement of women in the 1960s and 1970s.¹

Patriotism is also part of the package of exceptions. In Europe, it is commonplace in the charters of public service broadcasting organizations to acknowledge and affirm an obligation to serve the needs of national identity and national affiliation even while also meeting statutory requirements to provide programming for recognized minority populations. The BBC, at its beginning, was dedicated to promoting a sense of “Britishness” that included celebrating a distinctively British heritage and even an allegiance to the practices of the Church of England. Stewardship indeed! For many Americans and for most American journalists, such an openly tutelary mission is not only not part of their creed – it would turn their stomachs.

Still, American journalists also act in ways that express obligation to and affiliation with the nation-state.² When American journalists have a story they think may reveal secrets that bear on national security, they customarily notify the government ahead of time and even negotiate the content of the story with the White House or relevant executive agencies. This was the case in 1961 when *The New York Times* got wind of the impending Bay of Pigs invasion and voluntarily modified its story on the strenuous urgings of the White House.³

It was again the case in 1986 when *The Washington Post* learned of a secret U.S. underwater mechanism code-named “Ivy Bells” that had successfully tapped Soviet cable communications. The *Post* also knew that the operation had been compromised by the efforts of Jack Pelton, a low-level technician for the National Security Agency (NSA) and spy who sold information to the Russians. Newsroom executives at the *Post* met with NSA Director Lieutenant General William Odom, who urged them not to publish anything. Odom contended that any story about Ivy Bells would be dangerous to the country, revealing to the Soviets something they did not know. But they already know, editor Ben Bradlee countered. Nevertheless, Odom said, it was unclear precisely which Soviets knew about Ivy Bells. There might have been internal Soviet secrecy or a cover-up. A story in the *Post* would set off a general alarm in the Soviet Union, increasing Soviet anti-espionage measures – a bad outcome for the United States. Odom’s protest was enough to make the *Post* cautious. Successive drafts were written, each with less detail than the one before. Bradlee repeatedly asked his colleagues, “What is this story’s social purpose?” In the end, the *Post* published the story – over the objections of the administration – after a back and forth that lasted months.⁴

The *Post* has made similar decisions much more recently. In 2009, as editor Marcus Brauchli recounts it, longtime investigative reporter Bob Woodward received a copy of a confidential report produced by General Stanley McChrystal about the war in Afghanistan. The *Post* informed both the Pentagon and the White House that it planned to write about the report and to publish the complete document on its website. The secretary of defense, national security advisor, and vice chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

each asked the *Post* to reconsider. Brauchli, in telling this story, has said: “We should pause on that word, ‘ask.’ ... [I]t is a curiously American phenomenon that the most powerful officials in the world’s most powerful country have virtually no power to do anything but ask an editor to weigh the national interests against the impulse to publish and then leave the editor to make his decision.”⁵ But note that by conceding to the government the opportunity to do the asking, the *Post*, as an institution, recognized obligations beyond journalism in deciding what to publish.

These practices express a sense of stewardship with regard to the public interest—in this case, a public good jointly guarded by the press and the government. This coguardianship is most notable in times of war or other moments when national security appears to be at risk. In the United States, but also in France and Britain, the news media and the state share in what media scholars Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini term a “national security culture” in which government officials and journalists “both in some sense represent a common public interest” and therefore institutionalize “relations of trust and mutual dependence.”⁶ During the war in Iraq, there was great controversy among journalists about the advantages and disadvantages to fair-minded reporting brought about by the system of embedding journalists in U.S. military combat units; but no one raised the question of whether reporters should also be embedded with Saddam Hussein’s forces. Leading news organizations have accepted an awkward, but notable, affiliation with their own country’s interests.

American journalism professionals understand their job to consist of publishing news. Their professionalism resides in knowing what “news” is, or more assertively, what “*the news*” is, how to locate it, how to verify it, and how to present it.

Any decisions that introduce other matters, even if they are considerations that journalists are committed to—social justice or community pride or national security—are uncomfortable. They complicate or pollute the purity of the journalistic task. In 2003, Dean Baquet, who is today managing editor of *The New York Times* but was then managing editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, was involved in a decision about whether to publish a damaging story about Arnold Schwarzenegger, then a leading gubernatorial candidate in California. The paper had gathered a half-dozen credible allegations by women in the movie industry that Schwarzenegger had sexually harassed them. With the story ready to print just days before the election, the editors wondered if they should delay running it until after the election. Would the article not seem to be a “hit piece” sprung on Schwarzenegger? Would the timing not make it difficult for him to respond? Baquet later told a reporter (after the *Times* went ahead and published the story): “Sometimes people don’t understand that to not publish is a big decision for a newspaper and almost a political act. That’s not an act of journalism. You’re letting your decision-making get clouded by things that have nothing to do with what a newspaper is supposed to do.”⁷

Baquet’s is a revealing and representative statement: journalism is journalism, not politics, and it should stick to that role. Journalism is making information public; choosing not to publish for any reason—except, in Baquet’s view, insufficient journalistic quality or the possibility that publishing could endanger a life—abrogates one’s professional responsibility. How did such a view of journalism arise out of what had been the standard assumption in nineteenth-century America (and most of Europe) that journalism is and obviously should be a political vocation?

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In 1889, Woodrow Wilson, then a political scientist at Princeton, gave an address on the “Nature of Democracy in the United States.” He observed that popular education for democracy did not rely only on schools. “Not much of the world, after all, goes to school in the schoolhouse,” Wilson noted. “But through the mighty influences of commerce and the press *the world itself has become a school.*” He did not say that we live in a “globalized” society, but the implication was clear. The newspaper press, Wilson argued,

makes men conscious of the existence and interest of affairs lying outside of the dull round of their own daily lives. It gives them nations, instead of neighborhoods, to look upon and think about. They catch glimpses of the international connexions of their trades, of the universal application of law, of the endless variety of life, of diversities of race, of a world teeming with men like themselves and yet full of strange customs, puzzled by dim omens, stained by crime, ringing with voices familiar and unfamiliar.

Nor did he say that we lived in an age of information abundance, but this, too, was his belief: “And all this a man can get nowadays without stirring from home, by merely spelling out the print that covers every piece of paper about him.”⁸

In 1889, the typical newspaper was closely affiliated with a political party; its news pages, as well as its editorial page, reflected this allegiance. At the same time, newspapers were only beginning to speak in what we would recognize today as a distinctively journalistic voice. In a study of British journalism, media scholar Donald Matheson finds that modern news discourse, certainly absent in 1880, was not widespread until the 1920s. But it was not, in Matheson’s view, that putting news in newspapers was unheard of at that time. There were not only newspapers but also reporters. (Newspapers, or

“journals,” as they were called, predate the hiring of people to gather news; hired reporters were rare before the nineteenth century.) Rather, it was that a newspaper in 1880 served primarily as “a collection of raw information.” By 1930, however, it had become “a form of knowledge in itself, not dependent on other discourses to be able to make statements about the world.”⁹

The Victorian newspaper was “a medley of various public styles, voices and types of text.” Not until around 1920 did the emergence of “a journalistic discourse” allow “the news to subsume these various voices under a universal, standard voice.”¹⁰ Journalism scholar Marcel Broersma, in a study of change in Dutch newspapers, describes the period of the nineteenth century and up to the 1940s as an era in journalism in which reporters had not yet accepted that their job was to “extract news from events.” But by the mid-1940s, Broersma observes, “[r]eaders were no longer left to draw their own conclusions; the journalist now told them what the most important information was.”¹¹ Modern news discourse in Holland – borrowed from British and American models – was a mid-twentieth-century development.

The American newspaper adopted a “modern news discourse” well before the Dutch and roughly a generation before the British, in the period from 1890 to 1910. Before that time, the front page had a jumbled, random quality to it. Stories were composed in a variety of voices, and news was arranged on the page (to the extent that it was arranged at all) according to the conveyance by which items reached the paper (“Latest by Telegraph”). Only at the turn of the twentieth century did newspapers begin to utilize front page design – including headline size, number of columns, and placement of stories on the page – to signal to the read-

er that one item merited attention more than another. Thus, as judgment about the significance of news items became central to journalism, a more uniform journalistic stance and voice emerged. At about the same time, newspapers adopted the *summary lead*, an opening paragraph in each story that quickly presented the most newsworthy “who, what, when, where, and – sometimes or by implication – why” of the story to follow.¹² In the layout of the page, the structure of the news story, and the delegation of an overwhelming amount of the news space to the work of full-time journalists, modern news discourse emerged.

All of this is to say that the journalism we often take to be “traditional” is only about a century old. The notion of journalistic professionalism that has accompanied this twentieth-century phenomenon is a strong, self-conscious commitment to a news-gathering mission that transcends parochial allegiances and even, to some degree, national borders. Journalistic professionalism erects partial shields against the demands of state or source control, audience preferences, and commercial pressures. It does not share all the major attributes of “classic” professions such as law, medicine, and the clergy. Journalists’ professional independence is tempered by reporters’ (sometimes abject) dependence on political insiders for content. The information that insiders provide to journalists is then relayed to the general public through news stories about electoral contests and the operation and performance of government. Ever present in this process is the danger that journalists will become the unpaid public relations agents of public officials and political candidates who have the power to turn on and off the spigots of political information. (Of course, political news is not the only news, but it is the news most closely

identified with journalism’s democratic rationale.)

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The other danger is that journalists are vulnerable not only to their sources but to their audiences or to the drive to attract an audience. This is scarcely unknown in other professional pursuits. Even members of the clergy want to draw a crowd at occasions other than the christenings, marriages, funerals, and high holidays that ensure a captive audience. To this extent, the clergy, too, are market oriented; they strive to invent weekly services that appeal to their congregation and create a buzz. Still, they are not answerable to boards of directors who must award shareholders a return on their financial investments.

Further, journalists have little control over who may enter their field. They cannot prescribe a course of study or a degree, as in law or medicine, nor do they have mechanisms for removing members of the profession who fail to live up to professional ethics, the way bar associations and medical societies do. So journalists are vulnerable to the seductions of the marketplace. Their task as professionals is not to find an audience but to find an audience without prostrating themselves before its tastes and prejudices.

The power that sources and audiences exercise over news makes stewardship problematic because journalists do not control their own vocational agenda. Another difficulty is that journalists are resistant to the idea of stewardship itself. Journalists frequently enter the field with high moral purpose along with a love of writing, photography, or digital expression; perhaps a sense of adventure; and often an ambient curiosity rather than a focused intensity. They also have, or develop, a pride in their familiarity with practical life. They resist assuming too much in the way of moral responsibility; they object to choosing a topic or adopt-

ing a tone as if they were drafting Sunday's sermon. Journalists are determined to face facts: *New York Times* reporter Harrison Salisbury recalls in his memoir that he had little use for ideas and a "fierce antagonism to ideologues." He liked to see himself as "a hard-hitting, two-fisted, call-them-as-they-come reporter." Salisbury was guided by his "Minnesota turn of mind" and his "commonsense approach." For him, as for so many reporters, the rule of journalism is to leave codes, doctrines, and textbooks behind and be led by reality itself.¹³

This has usually meant placing a higher value on reporting than on opining. But even opinion-spouting journalists often refuse to issue their views from Mount Olympus. Political commentator Andrew Sullivan rejects "[t]he notion that journalists have reputations, that we should be up on a pedestal." "[M]aybe it's because I am British," he suggests, but "I think we're the lowest of the low. I think our job is to say things that no one else will say and to find out things that make people very uncomfortable, the powerful and the powerless. I think our job is not to worry about the impact of what we find out and say but to say what we think and to report what we see."¹⁴ Sullivan, of course, is no ordinary journalist. Equipped with a Harvard Ph.D., he has successfully reached the public since 2000 primarily as a blogger.

Is Andrew Sullivan's position less responsible than Marcus Brauchli's, as discussed above? Brauchli's argument sounds more grown-up; he speaks as someone aware that he is in a position to do great, even irreparable, harm to the world not only by reporting poorly but by reporting without recognition of overarching loyalties – including fidelity to the well-being of a polity and a political system that enables the press to be formally and legally autonomous. Sullivan,

by contrast, identifies himself with the "lowest of the low" and revels in making trouble. Is Brauchli the parent, Sullivan the rebellious child? Is one position better for journalism than the other? Brauchli is the old steward of moral responsibility, even though he invokes that obligation only at the margins – that is, only at the uncomfortable extremes where everyday acts of reporting prove insufficient to the weight of the world on journalists' shoulders. Sullivan speaks for everyday journalism as a truth-regarding, heat-seeking missile for attacking ignorance and thoughtlessness.

The absence of a self-conscious and consistent philosophy of stewardship should not be mistaken for a lack of instruction and influence. The news media describe, define, and, to a degree, direct public life and the discourse surrounding it, whether or not they intend to be its stewards. When golf fanatic Dwight D. Eisenhower became president, the press routinely covered his passion for the sport. This contributed to the sharp upturn in people's taking up golf for the first time.¹⁵ President Jimmy Carter was a fly fisherman. Fly-fishing grew vastly more popular after he came into office.¹⁶ When the president sneezes, everyone thinks they have caught a cold. In 1985, when Ronald Reagan underwent surgery for colorectal cancer, the national Cancer Information Service received an unprecedented increase in phone calls, most of them from people seeking advice on colon cancer checkups. According to a *Newsweek* poll, 25 percent of adults gave thought to being tested in the days after Reagan's cancer became public knowledge. Five percent actually arranged to be tested – for a total of some five to ten million doctor's appointments!¹⁷

Culture critic Robert Hughes suggested that Ronald Reagan "left his country a little

stupider in 1988 than it had been in 1980, and a lot more tolerant of lies.”¹⁸ (Possibly, he also left the country a little better protected from colorectal cancer.) And political commentator David Bromwich wrote that Reagan’s great work was “the education of a whole society down to his level,” not just by his precept but “by example, simply by being who he was; day after day without blame, a president who had at his command not a fact of history more than two weeks old.”¹⁹ Neither Hughes nor Bromwich adduce any evidence for their assessments. But their critical remarks have a clear plausibility. If media coverage of presidents can stimulate the sale of golf clubs or fishing rods, if it can draw millions to accept the unpleasantness of a colonoscopy – all simply by reporting everyday facts about presidents – then it is easy to believe that Reagan, repeatedly willing, without qualms, to pass off movie-based anecdotes for actual historical events, taught dubious civics lessons about truthfulness simply by having his behaviors transcribed by the press for public transmission.

But these are cases of influence rather than stewardship – specifically, influences that derive from the subjects journalists cover and the sources they rely on. Here, the journalists serve as messengers, not stewards. But do journalists – and should they – seek to inflect this influence in one way or another? Should they choose their sources and subjects with some self-conscious ends in view? And can this be done without taking on the arrogant presumption that they are in a position to “elevate” their audiences? Or is that presumption arrogant? Might it be the appropriate stewardly office of a profession in the teaching, coaching, or counseling business of public information?

The question is not whether the press stewards or fails to, but what sort of stewardship and philosophy of stewardship best serve a democratic society – particu-

larly *this* democratic society, with its resistance to government “intrusion” inherited from the nation’s founders but exacerbated and exaggerated in the post-Reagan era. Let me propose three general principles for stewardship in the media: First, stewardship should be exercised in moderation; it should be a stewardship of loose reins. Second, stewardship should be decentralized and multiform, more a set of practices seeking to enhance a usefully vague sense of democracy than a set of guiding ideals based on a clearly articulated philosophy of the functional location of news in a democratic culture. Third, at rare but critical junctures, journalism cannot and should not give up what has been called “social trustee professionalism” for “expert professionalism,” but it must acknowledge that it is suspended awkwardly between them.²⁰ That is, as necessary as a focused professionalism is most of the time, it is not sufficient all of the time. Vital as professionalism is in guiding news practice ordinarily, it is not an adequate refuge in those moments when journalists face threats to transcendent values of democracy, human rights, public safety, and an accountability to future generations.

For the news media, there is a rationale for a tempered, practice-centered approach to institutional responsibility. This includes that journalists are, and should be, messengers of the views of others as much as or more than they are conveyers of their own views. In other words, the temptation to report uncritically the statements of public officials or political candidates is difficult to distinguish cleanly from the responsibility to report appropriately, and with some deference, what these democratically elected persons or aspirants to election have to say.

Certainly, various fields oblige the professional to convey the message of some

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higher authority; thus, one may criticize “activist judges” for substituting their personal or political positions for the letter of the law or the weight of a line of precedents. But in most cases that reach an appellate court, neither “the letter of the law” nor precedent communicates a message that has only one plausible reading. Judges must interpret the law. In a sense, then, every appellate judge is an activist judge. Otherwise, they could all be replaced with a good algorithm. Still, some judicial interventions are more inbounds than others; some show more integrity than others in making a good-faith effort to read the law in keeping with the highest (vague) ideals of justice and the (less vague but still disputable) weight and direction of past decisions. For journalists, a similar issue arises when a straightforward, fair-minded account of, say, a speech by a public official or candidate for office holds democratic value in itself. In this respect, it is not that journalists are bending to politicians – but that they are bowing to the idea and practice of democratic politics. Other things equal, this is itself a vital service that news provides democracy.

Journalists have long worked on the knife edge between accepted professionalism on one side and pure amateurism on the other. But the delicacy of this position has grown in the past decade with remarkable advances in what amateur or “citizen” journalists can contribute. As professionals, journalists have the obligations of trusteeship to an accumulated set of traditions and values. As practitioners in a field where amateurs, with little or no training or experience, make notable contributions, it is clear that they are artisans of the public discourse, not magicians operating with recondite knowledge. They may merit public respect and gratitude for their experience, talent, craft, and sometimes astonishing courage,

but not for having mastered an arcane language as scientists have, or for having gained knowledge of the secret and sacred interior of the human body as doctors have, or for having been entrusted with the design of bridges or canals or skyscrapers as engineers and architects have, or having acquired a command of relatively esoteric lore of case law as judges and attorneys have. They have attained only a sense, often hard won, of what ingredients belong in that casserole of public significance, popular interest, immediate currency, and departure from the commonplace called *news*.

In practice, journalists frequently go beyond this craft knowledge to feel obligations to some ideal or authority higher than outdoing a rival, winning a more desirable audience, or pleasing their journalistic peers. But just what is that elusive higher authority? An allegiance to the public good? What do journalists know of that? That is, on what grounds do they presume to know more than others do? Or is the higher authority democracy? But what do journalists know of democracy that is unknown to ordinary mortals? Or is truth their ultimate objective? What do they know of truth that the rest of us do not?

Simply asking such questions has often been sufficient to resettle the conversation around the premise that journalism is just a trade, not a profession, and should not promise more than it can deliver. But skepticism about journalism’s pretensions to professionalism has to some extent been put aside in the past decade as journalism organizations have been forced to cut newsroom jobs – by about a third – by the advent of the Internet, new possibilities for citizen journalism, the surplus of available information, the turning away of younger audiences from print newspapers and conventional TV news, and the

huge loss of print advertising to Craigslist, eBay, Monster.com, and other independent websites. In many news organizations, there has been a powerful sense that, if they are not quite at death's door, they should nonetheless start shopping for long-term care insurance.²¹

These troubles for the news industry have fostered serious consideration of just what journalism's core mission is, precisely what it contributes to democratic society, and exactly what, if anything, full-time professional journalists contribute that unpaid amateurs cannot. This reflection – there being no Supreme Court of journalism – has not produced any definitive statements. Given not only the nature of journalism but the extraordinary new opportunities to create on a shoestring budget news-gathering and news-disseminating organizations of consequence, the best response to journalism's crisis has not come primarily from guiding essays or books, although they have had their place; rather, it has been found in the practical creation of entirely new news organizations by professional journalists young and old and by a radical reshaping of some leading old news organizations. These initiatives are a serious, if decentralized and not yet well recognized, response to the “stewardship” problem, as I will try to show here.

What is the core mission of journalism to which its ethics should be oriented and whose endangerment should raise public concern? Answers to this question have taken several forms in recent years. One formulation is *watchdog journalism*, a term that appeared in books in the early 1960s, was not seen again until the late 1970s, and rose into much wider use only in the 1990s. A similar term, *accountability journalism* (or *accountability reporting*), first surfaced around 1970, rose sharply by 1980, declined, and then shot up again in the 1990s.²²

I first noticed this second term in Leonard Downie, Jr., and Robert G. Kaiser's *The News About the News* (2002), in which the authors, both of *The Washington Post*, link journalism to America's “culture of accountability.”²³ Downie and Kaiser use *accountability reporting* to refer to the kind of journalism American communities deserve – but do not get enough of.²⁴ In *Losing the News* (2009), Alex S. Jones, former *New York Times* reporter and now director of the Shorenstein Center at the Harvard Kennedy School, argues that there is an “iron core” of news reporting that all else in journalism – editorials, opinion columns, and news analysis – depends on. And that core is “what is sometimes called ‘accountability news,’ because it is the form of news whose purpose is to hold government and those with power accountable.” Sometimes called the “news of verification,” this “fact-based accountability news is the essential food supply of democracy.”²⁵ And we may be starved for it, particularly at the local level, as Paul Starr and others have forcefully suggested.²⁶

Journalism, as these authors acknowledge, has never been single-mindedly devoted to its watchdog role, and I do not think that it should be. Journalism serves democracy in a variety of ways: providing citizens information-centered political news, offering political analysis, undertaking investigative reporting, presenting “social empathy” stories that – often in a human-interest vein – inform citizens about neighbors and groups they may not know or understand, providing a location for public conversation, attending to how representative democracies work, and mobilizing citizens for political life by advocating candidates, policies, and viewpoints.²⁷

Some of these functions – notably, analysis, investigative reporting, and social-empathy coverage – have been

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better served by the news media since about 1970 than at any prior time in our history. Leading news organizations have come to accept that transmitting “just the facts” of the day’s events should not be the exclusive task that journalism takes on. In a study in progress, Katherine Fink and I have found that in 1955, conventional “who, what, when, where” stories made up 91 percent of front page stories in a sample from *The New York Times*, but they made up only 49 percent by 2003. Figures for *The Washington Post* and *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* are similar. Over this time period, we also observed a large increase in analytical, or contextual, reporting.

It is also of note that one of the traditional functions of journalism in democracies – mobilization – speaks in praise of partisanship, whose reemergence, particularly on cable television, has caused considerable consternation – more than I think is merited. It would be devastating if advocacy journalism replaced accountability reporting, but that is not what has happened. I cannot say that the conservative drumbeat of some of the most popular shows on Fox News – much like the tone of conservative radio talk shows that frightened many people in the 1980s – leaves me untroubled. But I see no principled objection to it. Partisanship deserves a place at the table in print, television, radio, and online media. Opinion journalism is not only growing but, at its best – like contextual reporting at its best – deserves praise. In the first serious sociological study of what the authors call “the space of opinion” in journalism, Ronald Jacobs and Eleanor Townsley argue that even explicitly – and often obnoxiously – opinionated commentary stimulates public attention to political affairs and political participation when people have reliably opinionated figures – Bill O’Reilly or Rachel Maddow, George Will

or Paul Krugman – to love or hate. According to Jacobs and Townsley, positing that public opinion is and should be formed on a “rational information model” oversimplifies a complex process; if we instead accepted a “cultural model of complex democracy,” then we could acknowledge that various media formats may serve the public good. We could then see that “drama, disagreement, and strategic communication do not necessarily undermine democratic deliberation.”²⁸ In fact, Jacobs and Townsley suggest, these often denigrated features of opinion journalism sometimes have proven superior to more conventional news shows, particularly on television. Specifically, in their content analysis of programs from the early 1990s and the early 2000s, *Hannity & Colmes* (Fox News) did a better job than *The NewsHour* (PBS) or *Face the Nation* (CBS) in challenging the high-level political officials that were interviewed.²⁹

But isn’t opinion dangerous, especially when so many people are easily confused about what separates opinion from fact? Even if we agree that individuals are entitled to their own opinions, isn’t it crucial to assert that they are not entitled to their own facts? While I can agree with this, I also wonder what we can do about it except to hope that sunlight is indeed a good disinfectant. True, people have easy access to misinformation, whether about global warming or President Obama’s religion or birthplace, but this is hardly without precedent in less technologically remarkable times. It was in 1965, not yesterday, that historian Richard Hofstadter wrote his account of “the paranoid style” in American politics, which he characterized as “overheated, oversuspicious, over-aggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic.”³⁰

In practical terms, efforts to make journalism serve the public good in the age of

databases, digital media, and cable television have been taken up in different, often imaginative, ways. First, an emphasis on truth-telling – that is, the policing of publicly relevant lies, spins, and misdirections issued by political figures themselves – has led in recent years to the creation of “fact-checking” news organizations or fact-checking departments within existing news organizations. These influential efforts have defined new venues and systematic procedures for holding accountable both governmental leaders and those who aspire to elective political office.

Second, others in journalism have been less interested in pruning misinformation from politicians’ remarks than in getting behind the discourse of the day through the tough-slogging, often month-long (or longer) investigations of powerful public or private entities – work that is generally termed *investigative reporting*.

Third, news organizations have been established with the primary, or even the exclusive, intention of making up for specific shortfalls in political news coverage, particularly at the local level.

Fourth, experiments are under way to provide more and better interpretation and in-depth news analysis, to present it in more compelling ways, and to find means to help audiences visualize complex materials.

Fifth, there is increasing acceptance of the idea that stewardship can be practiced in concert with, not merely for the benefit of, media audiences. The shepherd’s flock may be co-shepherds; the management’s charges may be enlisted as co-managers; and for journalists, the “people formerly known as the audience,” in media critic Jay Rosen’s memorable phrase, can produce news content themselves. Stewardship in a self-consciously egalitarian culture is inherently unstable. There are ways, now power-

fully reinforced by digital technologies, to approach this reality not as an impediment but as a workable new tool for professional journalism. Michael Schudson

Sixth, journalistic functions are less confined than ever before to organizations that are identified primarily as news organizations. Human rights organizations report news, too. Polling organizations work with – or independently of – news organizations to produce newsworthy results on a regular basis.

Let me discuss each of these points a bit further, because in the past decade these efforts to hold journalism to a higher standard than simple (in principle, not necessarily in implementation) nonpartisanship or objectivity have given rise to significant journalistic innovations. The innovators are, if you will, practical philosophers, inventing notable responses to a crisis of journalistic legitimacy that is shaking the profession they thought they were a part of or hoped to enter. The result, although it has not yet stood the test of time, may be a pluralistic set of stewardships that are healthier, as a team, than “traditional” journalism proved to be in its single-minded – and stale – style of reluctant stewardship.

Policing Truthfulness in Political Discourse. Consider the rise and spread of so-called fact-checking organizations, usually traced to efforts beginning in the 1990s to police campaign rhetoric in TV advertising, speech-making, and candidate debates. The roots of organized fact-checking have something to do with a major shift in presidential political campaigning – while campaigning previously involved events and addresses that candidates hoped would generate “free media” (that is, news coverage), together with door-to-door work by volunteers, there is now a preponderant emphasis and substantial financial investment in television advertising.

Some fact-checking organizations are avowedly partisan – liberal groups seeking to fact-check conservatives, conservative groups fact-checking liberals. These groups are significant, but they do not claim to salute the flag of professional journalism. Others do. These include Factcheck.org, the earliest (2003) enduring nonpartisan fact-checking operation, which is largely supported by the Annenberg Foundation and sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. The website PolitiFact.com began in 2007 as a project of *The St. Petersburg Times* and its Washington bureau chief Bill Adair. It has since spun off eleven state-level PolitiFact operations. Also in 2007, *The Washington Post* launched The Fact Checker, a blog (and a column in the print edition) that focused on the 2008 presidential campaign. The project ended in 2008 and was reorganized with a much more general focus in early 2011.

These and other organizations take “truth” very seriously. PolitiFact scores politicians’ statements on its “Truth-O-Meter” as “true,” “mostly true,” “half true,” “mostly false,” “false,” or “pants on fire.” *The Washington Post*’s Fact Checker scores politicians’ statements on a scale from zero to four “Pinocchios.” These initiatives recognize that they do not have direct access to truth; the self-mocking humor of their scoring systems emphasizes this. They also publish not only their conclusions but what sources they consulted and how they arrived at their judgments. In this respect, they are more forthcoming about their journalistic process than conventional news organizations. They are thereby implicitly offering a somewhat refined and revised model of what journalism can and should be. Far from abandoning a professional commitment to objectivity, fact-checking organizations are embracing that obliga-

tion and taking it further than news organizations generally do. In “showing their work,” as math teachers say, professional fact-checkers not only advertise how thorough they are but “acknowledge their own imperfection as arbiters of truth, without relinquishing their faith in and commitment to objectivity.”³¹

Constructing New Communities of Investigative Journalism. In 2009, a group of organizations focused on investigative reporting joined together to form the Investigative News Network (INN). The group initially included about a dozen organizations. It now counts over sixty organizations among its membership. To become a member, organizations must be nonprofits. They must be transparent about their donors and disclose names of anyone who donates \$1,000 or more. They must be nonpartisan, as defined by their commitment to producing investigative or public interest reporting “that is not based upon, influenced by or supportive of the interests or policies of (i) any single political party or political viewpoint or (ii) any single religion or religious viewpoint.” In short, these organizations, a majority of which were founded in the past five years, take their identity as professional journalism organizations very seriously, devoting the lion’s share of their attention (if not their exclusive attention) to investigative reporting.

Not all nonprofit news organizations are INN members. Nor are all new news organizations that focus on investigative reporting nonprofits. The celebrated for-profit TalkingPointsMemo has won national awards for its investigations; it also operates from an avowedly left-liberal perspective. But there are at least seventy-five nonprofit news publishers today, most of them focusing on investigative journalism, and most of them begun in the past half-dozen years. The majority are small; at least a dozen have annual

budgets under \$100,000, which means that they operate on “‘sweat equity,’ heart and hope,” as Charles Lewis and colleagues put it. Together, they employ seven hundred people and have a total annual budget of \$92 million.³²

The INN member organizations are committed to journalism in the public interest, not to liberalism or conservatism or any other political creed. Most of them are small and therefore potentially vulnerable to, say, a libel suit or the threat of one. This is one reason that INN arranges group libel insurance for members.

Reinventing Local News Coverage. The *Voice of San Diego*, an online news organization focused exclusively on issues of government and economy in San Diego and staffed by a dozen young journalists, was launched in 2005. Since then, local or regional start-ups (including the *Texas Tribune*, for example), all with slim budgets and low-cost, online operations, have been making up for the loss of “core” reporting capacity at hundreds of news organizations around the country. Can they do the job? Time will tell. No one knows if philanthropic organizations will be able or willing to sustain them indefinitely, and many are seeking to broaden their funding base. But their laser focus on core journalism means that they do not need to hire a movie reviewer or a sports staff, a lifestyle reporter or a local-color columnist. They are not all-purpose, general publications; they are special-purpose-politics and economy oriented. They have even found ways to write stories that require no writing: *Texas Tribune* routinely publishes the list of the highest salaries on the state payroll in Texas. No commentary is required when you can quickly show just how many millions of state taxpayer dollars go straight to the bank accounts of football coaches and assistant football coaches at the state’s public universities.

Looking for Comparative Advantage in Analysis. Not all efforts to rethink the core functions of journalism take place at online start-ups. At the end of 2011, the Associated Press (AP) announced a new strategy in a memo that senior managing editor Michael Oreskes sent to the organization’s three thousand journalists around the world. A 150-year-old cooperative owned by its many member newspapers, the AP is celebrated for its massive reach, its comprehensive coverage, and its capacity to be on top of more breaking news more quickly than any other news organization anywhere. But this news, even when the AP has broken a story exclusively or hours or minutes ahead of the next news organization, is quickly taken up by scores of other news outlets. What the AP needs, Oreskes argues, is to transform its reporting into “work with a longer shelf life.” He has given this approach a slogan-like title: “The New Distinctiveness.” He suggests a variety of approaches under this rubric, but one in particular gives the flavor of the policy: that is, the AP will launch a “running ‘container’ that can be used anywhere.” Called “Why It Matters,” this feature is meant to “focus our daily journalism on relevance without sacrificing depth.” Nothing in the proposal, Oreskes insists, is “a product” so much as “an ever-growing toolbox of approaches.”³³

Incorporating Crowds into Serving Journalism’s Core Mission. London’s *Guardian* newspaper; ProPublica, the New York-based online investigative reporting organization established in 2009; and National Public Radio, by way of the Public Insight Network that Minnesota Public Radio launched in 2008: all have found distinctive ways to incorporate the insights and information of hundreds of thousands of nonprofessionals into their own labors. One could call these unpaid volunteers “ordinary citizens,” but that is

not necessarily accurate. Sometimes they are engaged because they have time to examine bits of publicly available data and contribute their insight to masses of material that would overwhelm any news organization if their own staffers had to take it all upon themselves. In other situations, it is not untutored eyes that are being enlisted but specific and distinctive backgrounds and skills; that is the novelty of the Public Insight Network. Citizen journalism, or “user-generated content,” in some respects competes with professional journalism, but at the same time it serves as an enormously productive new resource that can be part of a collaboration with full-time, paid professional journalists. For some journalists, the surveillance of their work by audiences who voice their opinions is stunning and important. “I have 1.4 million fact checkers,” writes blogger Andrew Sullivan. “Within seconds if I get the spelling wrong of some Latin word I will get three emails . . . That relationship, I think, is why I believe that online journalism blogging contains within it a revival of citizen journalism in a way that can bring truth back to a discourse.”³⁴

Accepting the Legitimacy of Non-Journalism Accountability Organizations. The present moment seems to call on journalism and its affiliated organizations – including journalism schools and journalism prizes – to accept into the circle of news-reporting organizations other information-gathering methods and opinion statements about public life directed to broad publics. By acknowledging the work of other accountability organizations, journalists can help make democracy work as part of their professional world. It is a very good thing that Pulitzer Prizes have been awarded to online news organizations. It might be good if the expert reporting of an advocacy organization like Human Rights Watch were also recog-

nized. The inside-the-Beltway and beyond-the-Beltway advocacy groups that have outdone the federal government itself in making federal databases more searchable and accessible also belong in the ongoing reformation of a journalistic self-image. Journalism has never been able to draw sharp boundaries around itself to keep insiders and outsiders neatly delineated, nor should it. But it is one thing not to put up fences and another to invite the new neighbors over for coffee.

Could the media do better in serving democratic ends? Yes, of course. But this is only in part because they fall short of their ideals or fail to accept the responsibilities of stewardship; it is also because journalism’s common understandings of democratic ideals fall short themselves. A better journalism might be possible if journalists had a more sophisticated sense of what it means to serve democratic ends. It is more than providing citizens with the information they need to make sound decisions in the voting booth. That is one key feature of what journalism should provide, but it is only one part; and this information-centered model foreshortens the obligations of journalism with respect to citizenship. Journalism can serve democracy by providing political information to help inform voters before they head to the polls, but journalism’s role in serving democracy extends beyond this. It can also offer an understanding of the democratic process that might help educate people about what democracy entails and what reasonably can be expected of it (for instance, an appreciation of the value of compromise or an understanding of the gaps between rhetoric, legislation, and implementation); it can display compelling portraits of persons, groups, and problems in society that are not on the current political agenda at all; it can make avail-

able forums for public discussion; it can provide analysis, context, and interpretation for understanding events of the day; and, yes, it can offer partisan frameworks for interpreting news in a way designed to stimulate and mobilize people for specific political objectives.³⁵

Widely shared views of good journalism typically tell us that the press should cover issues in campaigns and not devote so much attention to the “horse race” aspects of elections – but that may be the wrong approach. The horse race is part of what excites people about politics and therefore has the potential to intrigue them, later, in the “issues.” Prevailing views further suggest that good journalism seeks in-depth analysis rather than quick coverage of every last accident, scandal, and mishap. This may be wrong, too; maybe “pretty good” analysis “quickly,” as Dean of the Columbia Journalism School Nicholas Lemann puts it, is as important, if not more. A corollary is that long-form journalism is better than short-form, but even this may be an error: part of the progress of journalism over the past century is the greater skill of journalists in simplification – “data visualization,” if you will – and taking on the burden of interpretation and analysis in a quick, rather than studied, way. It may also be that the shift we have witnessed in recent decades away from covering government itself does more to foster features of good citizenship than a preoccupation with government. And it provides an opening for social-empathy reporting that informs us about some neighbor or group of neighbors, often suffering visibly or silently from some personal or social or political ill fortune, that we would not know about otherwise.³⁶ Finally, it may even be that efforts to cater to the marketplace sometimes serve the public good better than efforts to fashion news as a type of pedagogy in which

elites who “know best” work to educate the untutored masses. Without idealizing either the general public or the logic of the marketplace, sometimes the aggregated desires and interests of millions prove a better guide to what matters than the views of the professionals.

I do not mean to argue that the press that stewards least stewards best. However, I think that the news media have grown as institutional stewards of democratic citizenship by adapting: they were once organizations of elites speaking to elites, and then became for a long time political parties speaking through the newspapers to their own troops, and then emerged in an original blend of commercial organization and professional pride. And now, when the leading institutions of professional news-gathering are buffeted by gale-force winds in every direction, and when “professionalism” itself is under scrutiny, journalism is nowhere close to a clearly articulated understanding of its plan and purpose in democracy. And that, we need to understand, may be exactly right for us. It gives play to journalism. It offers running room for new ideas and projects – woefully undercapitalized as many of them are – to find audiences, to impassion young (and older) journalists, and to teach the grand thinkers of public life that there just might be a few new things under the sun.

*Michael
Schudson*

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Lynn Povich, *The Good Girls Revolt: How the Women of Newsweek Sued Their Bosses and Changed the Workplace* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).
- ² A survey comparing German, Swedish, Italian, British, and American journalists found that Americans affirm norms of objectivity, fairness, and neutrality more than any of their European counterparts. At the time the study was conducted in the early 1990s, only a sixth of American journalists whose primary task was reporting or editing also wrote commentary, but half of Italian and British reporters and editors, and more than 60 percent of German, did both. See Wolfgang Donsbach, "Lapdogs, Watchdogs and Junkyard Dogs," *Media Studies Journal* 9 (Fall 1995): 17–30; and Wolfgang Donsbach and Bettina Klett, "Subjective Objectivity: How Journalists in Four Countries Define a Key Term of Their Profession," *Gazette* 51 (1993): 53–83.
- ³ Susan E. Tifft and Alex S. Jones, *The Trust* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1999), 311–315. There are different versions of this story. Max Frankel recalls that the news story was "toned down" and "moved down the page" by order of publisher Orvil Dryfoos; that the headline was reduced to a single column; and that reference to the CIA and the anticipated time of the attack was omitted. John Stacks, in his biography of James Reston, writes that Dryfoos and Turner Catledge called Reston, then the Washington, D.C., bureau chief, who went to see CIA director Allen Dulles. Dulles told him not to publish—but if they did go ahead, to omit mention of the CIA. See Max Frankel, *The Times of My Life and My Life at the Times* (New York: Random House, 1999), 209; and John F. Stacks, *Scotty: James B. Reston and the Rise and Fall of American Journalism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2003), 192.
- ⁴ See Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981–1987* (New York: Pocket Books, 1988), 516–535.
- ⁵ Marcus Brauchli, Third Annual Richard S. Salant Lecture, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Kennedy School, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2010, 12.
- ⁶ Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 234.
- ⁷ Rachel Smolkin, "The Women," *American Journalism Review* (December–January 2004), <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=3507> (accessed December 22, 2011).
- ⁸ Woodrow Wilson, "An Address: Nature of Democracy in the United States," delivered before the Owl Club, Hartford, Connecticut, May 17, 1889, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 6, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 226.
- ⁹ Donald Matheson, "The Birth of News Discourse: Changes in News Language in British Newspapers, 1880–1930," *Media, Culture and Society* 22 (2000): 559.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 564.
- ¹¹ Marcel Broersma, "Visual Strategies: Dutch Newspaper Design Between Text and Image, 1900–2000," in *Form and Style in Journalism*, ed. Marcel Broersma (Leuven, The Netherlands: Peeters, 2007), 187.
- ¹² The professionalization of journalism in this era is discussed in Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, 1978) and in several subsequent essays in Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995) concerning the changing patterns of reporting the president's annual State of the Union message and the development of interviewing as the key tool of journalistic work. The international spread of these practices is documented in Svernik Hoyer and Horst Pottker, *Diffusion of the News Paradigm, 1850–2000* (Gothenburg, Sweden: NORDICOM, 2005). A recent review of the literature on journalism and professionalism is Michael Schudson and Chris Anderson, "Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism," in *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, ed. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch (New York: Routledge, 2009), 88–101.

- ¹³ See Harrison E. Salisbury, *A Journey for Our Times* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 249, 348. Michael Schudson
- ¹⁴ Andrew Sullivan, Twenty-Second Annual Theodore H. White Lecture, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Kennedy School, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, November 17, 2011, 26.
- ¹⁵ Reportedly, there were just over three million golfers when Eisenhower became president in 1953; that number had doubled by the time he left office in 1961. It would be difficult to attribute all of this growth to Eisenhower, but his many hours on the golf course – visible, much discussed, and much lampooned – are considered influential. The World Golf Hall of Fame elected Eisenhower to its membership in 2009. See http://www.pgatour.com/2009/r/06/26/wghof_eisenhower/index.html (accessed December 19, 2011).
- ¹⁶ Barry Meier, “Fly-Fishing Companies are Hip-Deep in Profits,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 1993, 17.
- ¹⁷ *Newsweek*, July 29, 1985, 17, 20. All of this applies to the president’s spouse, too. In the week after Betty Ford had a mastectomy in 1974 (soon after Gerald Ford succeeded Richard Nixon as president), breast cancer detection centers around the country were swamped with requests for screenings. Jane E. Brody, “Inquiries Soaring on Breast Cancer; Progress Made,” *The New York Times*, October 6, 1974.
- ¹⁸ Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 46.
- ¹⁹ David Bromwich, *Politics By Other Means: Higher Education and Group Thinking* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 225.
- ²⁰ These terms come from Steven Brint, *In an Age of Experts: The Changing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 8–9.
- ²¹ There is now a seemingly endless array of discussions of the future of news, from journalists, media reformers, and academics. A useful compendium of thirty-two such pieces is Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, eds., *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It* (New York: New Press, 2011).
- ²² My history of the usage of the terms *watchdog journalism* and *accountability journalism* is based on a quick glance at the Google Ngram Viewer. The Viewer is a tool that tracks the number of times a word or phrase appears in books in Google’s digital collection that were published in a given year.
- ²³ Leonard Downie, Jr., and Robert G. Kaiser, *The News About the News: American Journalism in Peril* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 7.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ²⁵ Alex S. Jones, *Losing the News: The Future of the News that Feeds Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2–3.
- ²⁶ Paul Starr, “Goodbye to the Age of Newspapers (Hello to a New Era of Corruption): Why American Politics and Society Are About to Be Changed for the Worse,” *The New Republic*, March 4, 2009, reprinted in McChesney and Pickard, *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights*, 18–37.
- ²⁷ Michael Schudson, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 11–26. Of course, there are other sensible ways to categorize the various democratic functions of the press. Journalist Jonathan Stray, taking off from my list, has arrived at his own list of three functions: information, empathy, and collective action. See his thoughtful blog entry “What Should the Digital Public Sphere Do?” November 29, 2011, <http://jonathanstray.com/what-should-the-digital-public-sphere-do>.
- ²⁸ Ronald N. Jacobs and Eleanor Townsley, *The Space of Opinion: Media Intellectuals and the Public Sphere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 69, 71.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 173, 234.

³⁰ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 4.

³¹ D. Lucas Graves, "Deciding What's True: Fact-Checking Journalism and the New Ecology of News," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University (2012), 213. While studying fact-checking organizations for his dissertation, Graves (now teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison) helped organize, with Tom Glaisyer, a conference about fact-checking at the New America Foundation that I attended on December 14, 2011.

³² Charles Lewis, Brittney Butts, and Kate Musselwhite, "A Second Look: The New Journalism Ecosystem," Investigative Reporting Workshop, American University School of Communication, November 30, 2011, <http://investigativereportingworkshop.org/ilab/story/second-look/> (accessed December 12, 2011). If we include *Consumer Reports*, its annual budget of \$43 million and six hundred employees dwarfs all others. *Consumer Reports* is a no-frills investigative news organization with a strong focus, but it takes up such a distinctive and slim slice of accountability reporting that including it would distort the overall figures and trends.

³³ Michael Oreskes, memo to Associated Press staff, December 13, 2011, reprinted in full in Michael Calderone, "AP Launches Strategy to Go Beyond Breaking News, Become More 'Distinct,'" The Backstory blog, *The Huffington Post*, December 13, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/13/associated-press-ap-breaking-news-new-distinctiveness_n_1144911.html?ref=email_share (accessed December 15, 2011). This is not to accept that "The New Distinctiveness" is in fact new – even at the AP. See a similar discussion about the AP in Kevin Barnhurst and Diana Mutz, "American Journalism and the Decline of Event-Centered Reporting," *Journal of Communication* 47 (4) (Autumn 1997).

³⁴ Sullivan, Twenty-Second Annual Theodore H. White Lecture, 27.

³⁵ I have developed this set of multiple goals for news in a democracy in "Six or Seven Things News Can Do for Democracy," in Schudson, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*, 11 – 26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 – 20.