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The case for wisdom journalism – and for journalists surrendering the pursuit of news

When journalists and those who value them compose their apocalyptic screeds, when they repair to conferences to rend their clothes, wail their wails, and curse the Fates, they are wont to declare news itself to be in crisis.[1] In this, however, they are wrong. News, for the most part, is in fine shape.

The recent arrival of the most powerful information technology in human history has been, on balance, a great blessing for news. The Web remains very young, but already it gathers accounts of an extraordinarily wide variety of events from an extraordinarily wide variety of sources. It disseminates these accounts in a wide variety of formats, fast and far. Never before have we seen a news medium like it.

This does not mean news on the Web is always edifying, constructive, or reliable. News in print or on TV, after all, has often enough failed to display those qualities. And the Web's manifold strengths as a news medium do not mean all news will be equally well served by it. We have to be alert, as we must be with any medium, for blind spots. Once, it should be remembered, journalism reviews devoted themselves to cataloging the many egregious blind spots of newspapers and newscasts – with their sometimes narrow-minded "gatekeepers." The Web's weak points, at first glance, appear to be in coverage of news that grew up together with newspaper beat systems: varieties of local news in particular.

However, the growing numbers of us fortunate enough to have an Internet connection now have access to a remarkably generous supply of news. The gates have flung open. And the flow of news on the Web seems, if anything, likely to continue to broaden, deepen, and accelerate. Entrepreneurs and nonprofits are even beginning to address some of those blind spots. The future of news, in other words, appears reasonably secure.

It is the future of journalism that is looking grim. Journalists have made their living for approximately the last century-and-a-half either by selling news or by selling ads next to news. However, the flood of information on current events that is sloshing around the Internet right now can be had, mostly, for free, and the supply of news-rich pages on the Internet is now so large that it is hard to charge much for ads on those pages. Understandably, this new reality has strained profit margins and flummoxed business models. There

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is not much of a living in hawking that which is given away free.

The end of the era when it was possible to make a good business out of the gathering and dissemination of news is causing large numbers of talented, hard-working journalists to lose their jobs. This is a tragedy. This is the crisis. It is a crisis not for news but for journalism.

But, without making light of this human tragedy and this professional crisis, an opportunity can be discerned here – for journalism. The Web allows our best journalists to surrender the prosaic task of telling everyone what just happened. It allows them to leave some coverage of speeches and press conferences to the cable networks and YouTube; to leave some interviews with investigators and survivors to diligent wire-service reporters; to fob off some surveillance of various backwaters on the gadflies and obsessives who replenish their blogs every couple of hours. The Web allows our best journalists – it requires them, I will argue – to return to an older and higher view of their calling: not as reporters of what's going on but as individuals capable of providing a wise take on what's going on.

Most Americans today think of journalists as most journalists think of themselves: as reporters of news. An understanding like this can become deeply entrenched over the course of a century-and-a-half. Indeed, it would be difficult to find many American journalists today who would disagree with the definition of quality in their field supplied (in an online discussion with readers) by Bill Keller, executive editor of *The New York Times*: "By quality journalism I mean the kind that involves experienced reporters going places, bearing witness, digging into records, developing sources, checking and double-checking."[2] But understandings of a field, as reasonable as they may sound, sometimes must change. Consider – to jump fields and centuries for a moment – the case of Ernest Meissonier.[3]

Meissonier, who died in 1891, was long the most respected painter in Paris and, therefore, the world. His painstakingly accurate re-creations of great events dominated the most important expositions and commanded the highest prices. But in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this notion that quality in art was dependent upon precision and verisimilitude faded. Meissonier's reputation tumbled after his death to the point where one major two-volume history of French art in the nineteenth century did not mention his name. The Louvre eventually exiled a marble statue of Meissonier from its halls.

This change in understandings of what painting should be can be attributed in part to a new technology: photography. It made producing painstakingly accurate re-creations of just about anything easy and, thus, cheap. Have technologies today, particularly technologies introduced in the past couple of decades, done the same with the painstaking gathering of information on current events? Have they outdated the view of quality in journalism championed by Bill Keller and most other traditional journalists: this veneration of witnessing, digging, finding sources, and checking? Keller moans that "there is a diminishing supply" of his version of "quality journalism." Given the ability the Web grants us all to witness, dig, find sources, and check – to search – is it possible the supply of this kind of journalism *should* diminish?

Journalists will, of course, still have to go places, interview, uncover, and check facts. But doing that will no longer be

enough. Exclusives and investigations will still have value. But my argument is that, for the most part, journalists must learn to conceive of quality in journalism as *wisdom* – expertise, judgment, insight – in interpreting the news. This may sound like a new idea. It is actually an old one.

Bill Keller insists that his version of "quality journalism" provides "the information you need to be an engaged citizen." The founders of this country certainly did agree that the citizenry requires a free press. Writing in the *National Gazette* a couple of years after he helped draft the First Amendment, James Madison stated how important "a circulation of newspapers through the entire body of the people" is "to liberty."[4] However, Keller's understanding of the function of newspapers would have been unintelligible to the founders. For not only were there no reporters witnessing or digging in America in 1791, there were no reporters.

Newspapers then were the products of individual printers, who culled out-of-town papers for interesting or important items; reprinted letters, speeches, and transcripts; and then added disquisitions of their own or of their acquaintances. They rarely undertook excursions beyond their print shops. Why did Madison consider "a circulation of newspapers" so crucial? Because, he wrote, it "facilitates a general intercourse of sentiments" – not news of politics, in other words, but opinions on politics.

This does not mean that people in Madison's time, or any other, lacked an interest in news. We humans were born, as I have argued elsewhere,[5] with a basic thirst for news, undoubtedly because knowledge of potential threats and opportunities improved the likelihood that our ancestors' genes might make it to the next generation. The news for which we most thirst has usually been news of what is going on near us. But local news still was monopolized in the first years of the United States by the oldest news medium: word of mouth. It was exchanged in taverns and coffee houses, on front porches and on the streets of towns like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia – for free. No printer and no weekly could scoop neighborhood busybodies on an intriguing local political development or crime.

Opinions – in newspapers and pamphlets – rallied the American colonies against the British. Opinions then helped shape the new democracy. It is hard to imagine anyone at the time having anything glorious to say about the mere dissemination of news.

The word *news*, in its current usage, is very old. However, in Madison's day, *journalism* referred only to the keeping of a private journal. Its meaning morphed somewhat earlier in French, but, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *journalism* was first applied in English to work on newspapers in 1833.[6] It was defined that year in the *Westminster Review* as "the intercommunication of opinion and intelligence."[7] *Intelligence* is an interesting term for news here, but a term for news nonetheless. So, by 1833, newspapers were beginning to be seen in part as organs for the dissemination of news.

In London at that time (more than in France or anywhere else), increased energy was being applied to the gathering of "intelligence." Many papers had begun employing *reporters*, a word that was itself making a transition: from teller or transcriber of an event (perhaps using shorthand[8]) to gatherer of news. London newspapers, which had long been

publishing daily, had become a place to look not just for clippings and opinion but for the information, the news, those reporters gathered. Newspapers on the outskirts of the English-speaking world, in North America, eventually followed suit.

And it was at about this time that two inventions arrived that would begin to tip the balance in "journalism" – this "intercommunication of opinion and intelligence" – further toward the latter. First came the steam press, which enabled "journalists" to distribute their newspapers quickly and widely. Then the telegraph was invented, giving "journalists" quick access to news from afar. Amateurs on the street began to have difficulty competing with these daily, steam-powered, wired, news behemoths. If you could obtain it quickly enough, if you could distribute it fast and far enough, you could make a business out of selling what humans had always exchanged for free.

It took the better part of the nineteenth century in the United States; it took the desperate hunger for "intelligence" occasioned by an unbelievably bloody war; it took the spread, in many endeavors, of a mindset that emphasized unvarnished facts, but journalism increasingly became synonymous with the gathering and dissemination of news.

It wasn't necessarily the most distinguished of undertakings. An 1869 magazine article on journalism by the American essayist Richard Grant White gives an idea of the status of the mere reporter of news: "Of the two branches of journalism, which are the gathering and the publication of news and the discussion and explanation of the events thus made public, the former is the more essential, the latter the more important." White ends up dismissing the former occupation, "essential" as it may be, as "almost purely mercantile and clerical."[9] In 1881, the English essayist Leslie Stephen (Virginia Woolf's father) characterized the "reporter of ordinary events and speeches" as "a bit of mechanism instead of a man."[10]

Only in the second half of the twentieth century did reporting news – not just "the discussion and explanation" of it – begin to gain real cachet.[11] Ivy leaguers (enamored with the excitement and Hemingway) replaced high school graduates (enamored with the excitement and the regular paycheck) on the White House beat, at city hall, and, soon, even on the police beat. By "bearing witness, digging into records, developing sources" they brought down a president, exposed a massacre in Vietnam, and shined a light on a wide variety of miseries and corruptions. Fact-obsessed reporters became heroes in a fact-obsessed age. (Indeed, "naive realism," as the postmodernists call it, preserved its hold on journalism long after art and literature had moved on.[12]) Journalism had *become* the painstaking gathering of information on current events.

Journalists in Europe often maintained a more pointed perspective on events – the *Telegraph* and *Le Figaro* from the right, for instance, the *Guardian* and *Le Monde* from the left. But in the United States, "intelligence" was generally revered to the point where it was considered sinful to sully it by any "intercommunication" with opinion. The standard of "quality journalism" before which Bill Keller and his cohort genuflect had been raised. All hailed the reporter.

But then that period during which it was possible to make a business out of selling news ended. It feels as if it has been sudden. It has not been that sudden.

Radio began disseminating news before the papers, even with their extras, could hit the streets. And radio arrived free. Per capita newspaper circulation began its descent in the United States. Television news, too, was fast and free and awfully pleasing to the eye. Cable made it available around the clock. That descent accelerated. Extras and afternoon papers disappeared. Newspapers achieved their greatest respectability in the last third of the twentieth century as – and isn't this the way it goes – they were beginning to lose their audiences.[13]

Then something rather sudden did happen: with the Web the whole world rapidly started becoming one big tavern, coffee house, front porch, or street through which news races – mostly for free. Soon it seemed anything newspapers could do with news, websites, some of them subsidized by newspapers, could do better – for free. Websites are currently beginning to demonstrate the ability to outdo radio and television newscasts, too.

Now when a major event happens – a well-known person dies, votes are cast, bullets fly, bombs explode – that event first happens for most of us on the Internet. Maybe some of us initially learn the news on washingtonpost .com or cnn.com, but we also might first encounter it on *The Huffington Post*, the *Drudge Report*, the remarkably comprehensive Google News, or any of ten thousand other news sites – professional or amateur, general or specialized. Or maybe we come upon the news under the count of how many unread messages we have in our Yahoo mailbox.

Therefore, by the time Brian Williams comes on at six thirty, most of us with any facility with a computer already *know*. As we lie in bed and fiddle with the remote, much of what Anderson Cooper has to tell us is familiar. As we spread cream cheese on a fresh bagel, much of what we are reading on the front page of *The New York Times* is stale. As we drive to work, even much of what some solemn-voiced reporter is recounting on NPR's *Morning Edition* is no longer news to us. In the news game the race *is* to the swiftest.

News habits are strong. Those currently over fifty may continue to peruse with pleasure yesterday's headlines with their morning coffee. But for their younger siblings and their children it is probably game over. Newspapers and even many newscasts cannot regularly compete with the Internet for news.

Ah, you say, but the front page of *The New York Times* can do a better job with a story than did an Associated Press account on Yahoo. Yes, but do those quotes from a couple of sagacious sources neglected by the AP, those three extra paragraphs putting the event in context, make up for the fact that you've already known this "news" for twenty hours? Hold on, you say, a version of this story was up on the *Times* website not long after *Drudge*, *Huffington*, and the others had it, and it was more measured and thorough. Yes, but is that all *The New York Times* is to be: *The Huffington Post* or the Associated Press but a little slower and somewhat better?

Our best journalists need to find a new game to play. Instead of remaining also-rans in the race for increasingly hard-to-peddle news, they have to find something else with which to compete. They have to begin selling something less common, less cheap than news.

Exclusives are one possibility. Upon occasion a reporter manages to secure a vantage point webcams and other reporters have not achieved – at the scene of some atrocity somewhere, perhaps. In such circumstances "going places,

bearing witness" certainly has journalistic value, even moral value. Upon occasion a source passes on something eye-opening to just one trusted reporter. Or an exclusive may, in fact, be the result of "digging into records, developing sources" and exposing some wrong or injustice. Such investigative reporting, too, has nobility. This is news that truly qualifies as "intelligence." It certainly offers our journalists a way to compete.

News organizations cannot, however, depend solely on such exclusives. There aren't enough of them. Even with their battalions of veteran reporters, even with their reputations as destinations of choice for leaks, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* can't come close to filling their front pages each day with major scoops. But interpretative articles, if they're smart and interesting enough, are also exclusive; wire-service reporters are unlikely to be peddling the same perspective all over the Web. Our best journalists should be contributing something of significant civic and commercial value: new understandings.

Writing before American journalists had entirely given themselves over to the pursuit of news,[14] Richard Grant White insisted that a journalist who "has any other purpose in life than to make money" should aspire to the role of "teacher and guide."[15] It is in this role, White stated, that the journalist "deserves respect." White assumed that this judgment was shared. It is not widely shared by mainstream American journalists today. Teachers and guides marshal accumulated learning and good sense in order to help us better comprehend something. We have come to expect less than that today from our most respected journalists.

Contemporary American journalists instead are disposed, by instinct and training, to leave the teaching and guiding to expert sources. So we get a Harvard professor here, someone from the Brookings Institution there, Norman Ornstein everywhere. Smart commentators, no doubt, but they are presumably being asked – as is usually the case in interviews for newspapers – to expatiate on complex subjects extemporaneously. And their unpolished comments, often part of extended arguments, are then sliced by the reporter into short quotations. These standard and accepted journalistic practices hardly encourage coherent and thorough interpretations. Why shouldn't the journalists writing the stories themselves be smart commentators?

"When my young friends consult me as to the conditions of successful journalism," Leslie Stephen wrote in 1881, "my first bit of advice comes to this: know something really; at any rate, try to know something; be the slaves of some genuine idea, or you will be the slaves of a newspaper."[16] Is there not need for journalists who themselves "really" know a lot? Might readers searching for some extra value not appreciate the more frequent flickering of a "genuine idea"? Aren't journalists who fail to pursue ideas enslaving themselves to an increasingly unremunerative, unrewarding view of what journalism might be?

One reason mainstream reporters hide behind sources is to protect themselves against the accusations of bias that pepper American news organizations. As long as journalists are seen primarily as collectors of news, as mere witnesses, they will be judged by the evenhandedness with which they collect, by the faithfulness and dispassion of their witness. Opinion will have to be suppressed, and journalists will end up putting considerable energy into dis-

guising whatever point of view they may have achieved. However, if the goal of journalism is seen, instead, as imparting understanding of events, then accuracy and fairness still, of course, are crucial, but they are not all. Doesn't insightfulness often benefit from a point of view – from a fair, well founded but pointed perspective?

An opinion, if it is held without reflection, can interfere with learning. But an opinion can also provide an impetus and a framework for learning. If we use opinions to sort out to whom we will deign to listen, they can narrow our perspectives. But turning to someone with a like mind can be useful in adapting old principles to new situations.[17] Why must most mainstream journalists work so hard to disguise the fact that they have weighed the arguments and reached a conclusion?

And it is not just a question of opinion. Ideas about current events, insights into current events, interpretations of current events don't have to array themselves on the political spectrum to be stimulating. Indeed, the less they fit traditional notions of partisanship the more thought provoking they often are. All that is required is that they be important and interesting.

Provocative, insightful interpretations are beginning to sprout here and there in our new, vaster, wilder journalistic ecology. But they remain rare on what are still the most valuable parcels of journalistic real estate: tradition continues to dictate that newspaper front pages or network evening newscasts be devoted primarily not to teaching or guiding but to retelling by-now old news.

What happened one day when there was an exception to this rule is instructive. On March 6, 2009, *The Washington Post* displayed a front page upon which none of the six stories opened with a traditional just-the-facts, "five Ws" lead paragraph. All were important stories: about a then sinking economy and plans to improve it (four of them), about Rush Limbaugh and Republican politics, about hunger in North Korea. But instead of just reporting what happened yesterday – though there was a fair amount of that, too – they considered; they characterized; they investigated; they measured effects and looked behind scenes. They were doing quite a bit, that day, of what this essay argues they should do a whole lot, every day.

The first lesson of this front page is that the route out of journalism's crisis being promoted here is not as radical (or, alas, as revelatory) as it may sound. More and more interpretation is already appearing in newspapers and on newscasts: not just in editorials – remnants of the pre-reporting era; not just in columns and op-ed pieces – carefully walled off from the news stories that contemporary journalists consider their main business; interpretation is appearing on the news pages themselves.

Analysis is the journalist's preferred word for such efforts to go beyond mere reportage – probably because it sounds clinical and, therefore, objective. Some stories in some papers are given a special designation: "news analysis." One, by Sheryl Gay Stolberg, even turned up in the lead position on the front page of *The New York Times* during the health care debate.[18] But the "news analysis" slug is not required. For reporters have been granted increased leeway to characterize, not just transcribe, in standard-issue stories themselves.

One quick, limited historical survey may help demonstrate that shift: an analysis of the main *New York Times* story reporting on the first speech given before a joint session of Congress by each of our last twelve presidents.

For Presidents Truman through Carter, at least 18 percent, and sometimes more than twice that, of the words in the story were quoted directly from the speech.[19] In those same stories on Presidents Reagan through Obama, fewer than 18 percent, and sometimes less than half that, of the words were taken by the *Times* reporter directly from the speech. This rough measure confirms what careful newspaper readers may already have noticed: news stories are somewhat less stenographic than they used to be. Wordings that imply some sort of reportorial judgment, such as "thinly veiled swipe," are now used more; direct verbs of attribution – *declared*, for example – used less.

What is called "analysis" has also burgeoned on television news. On the evening newscasts of the three traditional networks, presumably nonpartisan commentators are regularly asked to step back for larger meanings or step up with inside dope; the late Tim Russert established the type. But the big change has come on cable. After a major news story has been introduced on CNN, it does not take long before an anchor turns to "our panel" for some perspective upon it – often partisan perspective. And on FOX, now MSNBC, and a CNN show or two, as on talk radio, the anchors themselves are often quite prepared to supply the partisan perspective.

Analysis may not, in fact, be the best term for this phenomenon, since the word's primary meaning is to break down into component parts in search of understanding. Our "analysts" may have a weakness for tearing things apart, but they hardly limit themselves to that. Sometimes they synthesize. Sometimes they offer context, background, or a peek behind scenes. Sometimes, unembarrassed by the ad hominem, they connect policy to style. Sometimes they explain, predict, or conclude. The most partisan celebrate or, more commonly, bemoan.

Interpretation – coming up with a "meaning," an "explanation," or a "significance" – seems better able to encompass the broad repertoire of tunes such commentators sing. But *interpretation* apparently sounds more subjective. It makes some traditional journalists uncomfortable. Indeed, this whole business of moving beyond the mere telling of news makes traditional journalists uncomfortable – even if they are indubitably, if half-heartedly, doing more of it.

And that is the second lesson of *The Washington Post*'s front page on March 6, 2009. A blog sponsored by *Washingtonian* magazine quickly attacked the paper for carrying "no news."[20] "Welcome to the new age of daily newspapering," writer Harry Jaffe protested on that blog, "where the actual news of the day has migrated to the Internet or TV or radio or the inside pages of the paper. Bye-bye to the old 'who-what-when-where-why.'"

The *Post*'s relatively new executive editor, Marcus Brauchli, felt called upon to respond to the charge that he lacked proper devotion to news. Brauchli did profess a commitment to "tell our readers . . . why it's happening, how it might affect them and what's likely to happen next." He acknowledged – in other words, mine not his – that interpretation should be part of the paper's mission, its front-page mission. But before he said that, Brauchli had to establish his bona fides as a "newsman." He had to pay obeisance to the mission that had dominated the old, and romanticized, "age of daily newspapering." "We tell our readers what's happening," Brauchli insisted – just as his predecessors would have insisted. No matter, apparently, that

most of those readers often already know what is happening.

The discomfort traditional journalists continue to feel with providing interpretations also helps explain why they don't always do such a good job of it. "Analyses" in newspapers and on network newscasts can seem a little hesitant, predictable, or flat. That "news analysis" by Sheryl Gay Stolberg, which led *The New York Times*, had a real point to make: that a health care plan along the lines President Obama favored had a better likelihood of passage than "conventional wisdom," as reported in recent news accounts, made it seem. Often, however, these news analyses don't seem all that much more analytic than the news stories that run next to them.[21]

In part that's because such pieces are limited by the traditional journalist's almost inescapable reluctance to express a strong point of view. Stolberg, well versed on health care politics, was willing to make an assertion on her own authority: "The conventional wisdom might be wrong," she wrote. Even muted by the "might," that statement qualifies as an unusually powerful assertion for a *New York Times* reporter. A source was not quoted in her story until the eighth paragraph. Frequently, however, "news analysis" pieces lean, like most mainstream journalism, on the quotes of experts, with the point of view of those questioning conventional wisdom dutifully offset by the point of view of those supporting it. Too often these articles emit, consequently, the squishy, methodical sound of toothless rumination.

The "analysis" on cable TV has its own problems. The talking heads[22] can seem, shall we say, a bit shrill. The word *wisdom* does not always come to mind when considering current efforts to chew over the news – with or without fangs.

And the appearance in newspapers of these more interpretive articles remains sporadic and unpredictable – even, so far, at Brauchli's *Washington Post*. Sometimes a more "analytic" piece illuminates the major news event of the day (actually, in print, the major news event of yesterday), sometimes readers must make do with only the traditional account. There's no guarantee in a newspaper that a columnist, an op-ed contributor, or an editorial will bother to take up the subject on that day; these personages and pages operate by their own more leisurely schedules, their own whims.

The efforts of mainstream American journalism to explore the territory beyond plain reporting of news have, in other words, been tentative, spotty, and unreliable. So bloggers have stepped into the gap. Indeed, that is surely among the explanations for the sudden success of bloggers – opinionated, snarky, smart – like Andrew Sullivan, Markos Moulitsas, Josh Marshall, Mickey Kaus, Ana Marie Cox, and others. They are not restricted by "walls" between news and opinion, and other vestigial remnants of an earlier journalism. They have a relatively clear view of where quality in journalism now lies: in exclusives, when available; but more often in intelligent, well-reasoned interpretation – in attempts at wisdom.

Many American journalists, it should be noted, believe that a move from "shoeleather" reporting to what they dismiss as "thumb sucking" would be a disaster. They have a point. We don't want "intelligence" overwhelmed by "opinion" – as it can be on some of our more impassioned radio talk shows, cable news programs, and websites. We do not gain from unsupported interpretations or distortions in service of a cause. Much con-

tinues to depend, therefore, on the marshaling of what might (naively) be called cold, hard facts, the raw materials out of which persuasive interpretations might be constructed.

In many ways the raw materials on current events are more easily obtained now than ever before, thanks to the expansive, information-rich Web. Still, for unpublicized facts on uncomfortable subjects; for an outsider's perspective and an outsider's follow-up questions; for accounts that extract the newsworthy from the run-of-the-mill, a certain amount of shoe-leather reporting remains, as Richard Grant White put it, "essential." Journalism's teachers and guides will continue to rely upon it. Who will supply this reporting?

Some newspaper journalists and their cheerleaders have been chanting, "If we don't do it, nobody can."[23] I suspect they are wrong. Various wire services, or their online equivalents, can continue to provide accounts of the day's events. And the fact that Web journalism, in the initial decades of its existence, may not yet have come up with a way to uncover much of what is now uncovered by the accomplished fact chasers of the *Times* and the *Post* doesn't mean that it won't. It took the purveyors of newspapers a couple of centuries to develop reporting systems. Bloggers are already pretty skilled at noting, kibitzing, questioning, dissecting, deconstructing, and kvetching. They work the Web. We can allow them a few more years before we conclude that it will never occur to them to put on a pair of pants and also work the hallways.

Until Internet journalism matures, or if it remains in part in the hands of amateurs, we will have to remain alert for lapses in accuracy, accountability, fairness, or ethical standards. (Although, to be fair, its hair-trigger feedback mechanisms have made this medium extraordinarily responsive to criticism and correction.) And if reporting of events ends up in part in the hands of the sponsors of those events, then we will have to work hard to correct for lacunae, tilts, and excesses of cheeriness.

But many aspects of society are already being *better* reported today. And not all forms of reporting seem likely to retain their value tomorrow. With the volume of available information ever increasing, digesting, indexing, ordering, and highlighting newsworthiness are gaining importance; transcribing, collecting, and witnessing – the painstaking gathering of information on current events – are losing importance. The greatest value, as I have been arguing, will lie in bringing wisdom to that huge pile of information – which brings us back to the role of our best journalists and to a consideration of who might qualify as our best journalists.

At most American news organizations the career ladder is as encrusted with tradition as are the stories. You work your way up through a series of beats – from covering a suburban town, say, to city politics to Washington. Such a résumé, or a stint at a wire service, might still be appropriate for the portion of wisdom journalists who specialize in exclusives or investigations. However, it is not clear that the talents nurtured allotting the "allegedly"s on the police beat or developing sources at city hall necessarily translate into an ability to pen front-page news analyses or a column. Indeed, it is a demonstration of sorts of the "Peter Principle" that a position in which a point of view is of use should be the reward for a career of suppressing evidence of such a point of view.

If you were to construct from scratch an organization capable of discussing the major events of the day, wouldn't you want to hire individuals who, to use Leslie Stephen's wording, "know something really" – who have earned the right to interpret? Yes, of course, they would have to be able to write – to write fast, to write well. (The value of engaging prose, or engaging video, has not been well enough exploited by newsrooms consumed by a fever for facts.) And, of course, they would have to be attuned to the contemporary world – ready to go out and observe, ask, listen, and test their ideas; ready to talk to sources (though not to depend entirely on sources). Nothing said here is meant to imply that these new wisdom journalists have leave to retreat to ivory towers while producing their deeper understandings. News is still best understood in the places where it is made and where its impact is felt.

But wouldn't it be useful if, instead of a background sparring with mayors and police chiefs, four or five of these hires brought an expertise on macroeconomics, for instance, and another four or five were well versed on the Middle East?

I don't pretend such individuals would be easy to find. I do believe they could be found. Academics who can write – some of whom are already maintaining respected blogs – certainly might be recruited for these distinguished and influential positions. If journalism programs insist, as some are now doing,[24] that their students master a subject matter and not just techniques, they could supply candidates. But the requisite expertise would not have to be certified by a degree. It might come instead from private study or life experiences. Some years having reported on business or in the Mideast certainly wouldn't hurt. However, instead of fact-oriented generalists who are dependent upon expert sources, the idea would be to hire idea-oriented specialists who know as much as the expert sources.

Then you would make sure one of these commentators was assigned each day to shed some light on each of the major stories of the day. Editors and producers now go to great trouble to include accounts of those stories – although much of their audience no longer depends on them for such accounts. The argument here is that our top journalistic organizations should instead be working, with similar diligence, to make sure they include an interesting interpretation of each of those stories – perhaps with a brief recap of the news a few paragraphs down in the article, for those who haven't been keeping up.

It is almost impossible to speak of journalism today without using the word *news*. Our journalists work in "newsrooms," for "newspapers," "newscasts," or other "news organizations." We lack alternative terms for these locales or enterprises. A "journalism room"? A "journalism-cast"? A "journalism organization"? Maybe we need some new terms. The day when journalists could support themselves by reporting the news is ending. They must aim higher. They must be wiser.

ENDNOTES

1 This article is based on work completed at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University.

2 "Talk to the Newsroom: Executive Editor," nytimes.com, January 30, 2009.

3 This account is based on that in Ross King, *The Judgment of Paris: The Revolutionary Decade that Gave the World Impressionism* (New York: Holtzbrinck, 2006).

4 James Madison, "Public Opinion," *National Gazette*, December 19, 1791, in *The Writings of James Madison*, vol. VI, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906).

5 See Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

6 The word *journalist*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, made the transition earlier. Voltaire, for example, used *journalist* in 1737 to mean "contemporary historian." Voltaire, "On History: Advice to a Journalist," in *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (New York: Meridian, 1956).

7 This article itself was translated from the French; *Westminster Review* XVIII (January – April 1833). "Du Journalism," *Revue Encyclopédique* (September 1832).

8 Isaac Pitman's book is entitled *The Reporter: Or, Phonography Adapted to Verbatim Reporting* (Bath, U.K.: n.p., 1846).

9 Thanks to Brooke Kroeger for bringing this article to my attention. Richard Grant White, "The Morals and Manners of Journalism," *The Galaxy* VIII (December 1869): 6; American Periodicals Series, 840.

10 Leslie Stephen, "The Duties of Authors," in Leslie Stephen, *Social Rights and Duties*, vol. II (London: n.p., 1896), 154 – 156.

11 War reporting gained cachet earlier, with dashing reporters like William Howard Russell, Richard Harding Davis, and Stephen Crane. However, they were known for their literary and interpretive abilities, and their courage, more than for their adeptness with facts.

12 See Mitchell Stephens, "Deconstruction and the Get-Real Press," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October 1991.

13 Newspapers' increased respectability came, in part, because the audiences they were left to serve – after television – tended to be better educated audiences.

14 See David Mindich, *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

15 White, "The Morals and Manners of Journalism."

16 Stephen, "The Duties of Authors."

17 I owe this point to Thomas Patterson.

18 Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "After Recess, Health Talk Steps Lively," *The New York Times*, September 9, 2009. The jaunty headline on this piece is not reflective of its content.

19 For a different reading of historical coverage of presidential messages to Congress, see Michael Schudson, "The Politics of Narrative Form: The Emergence of News Conventions in Print and Television," *Dædalus* 111 (4) (Fall 1982): 97 – 112.

20 Thanks to Maralee Schwartz for directing me to this story. Harry Jaffe, "Flash: Front Page of Washington Newspaper Contains No News," Capital Comment Blog, Washingtonian .com, March 6, 2009. Jaffe, to be fair, has interesting, nuanced views of the *Post*'s situation.

21 For an example, see Helene Cooper, "On the World Stage, Obama Issues an Overture," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2009.

[22] It is also unfortunate that edited video and the other visual tools that can elevate television over radio tend to disappear when the "analysts" come on. We are left, instead, with shots of the moving mouth of a Bill O'Reilly, Rachel Maddow, or George Stephanopoulos.

[23] Here's John S. Carroll, a former editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, from a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors on April 26, 2006: "Newspapers dig up the news. Others repackage it."

[24] To pick my own program as an example, New York University's Carter Institute of Journalism now offers specialized master's programs in, among other subjects, science, health, and environmental journalism; cultural reporting; and business and economic journalism. All undergraduate journalism majors are also required to complete another major in the liberal arts.