REVISED AND UPDATED

BILL KOVACH
& TOM ROSENSTIEL

THE ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM

What Newspeople Should Know
and the Public Should Expect

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REVISED AND UPDATED THIRD EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

When anthropologists began to compare notes on the nature of communication in the world's few remaining primitive cultures, they discovered something unexpected. From the most isolated tribal societies in Africa to the most distant islands in the Pacific, people shared an essentially similar definition of news. They shared gossip. They talked about their leaders. They even looked for the same qualities in the messengers they picked to gather and deliver their news: people who could run swiftly, gather accurate information, and retell it in an engaging way. While tastes have ebbed and flowed and news has been at times more and less serious, historians have discovered that the basic news values have remained relatively constant throughout time. "Humans have exchanged a similar mix of news … throughout history and across cultures," historian Mitchell Stephens has written.[1]

How do we explain this rough continuity and consistency? The answer, historians and sociologists have concluded, is that news satisfies a basic human impulse. People have an intrinsic need—an instinct—to know what is occurring beyond

their own experience, the events over the next hill.[2] Being aware of events we cannot see for ourselves engenders a sense of security, control, and confidence. One writer has called it "a hunger for awareness."[3]

One of the first things people do when meeting a friend or acquaintance is to share information. "Have you heard about ...?" We want to know if they've heard what we have, and if they heard it the same way. There is a thrill in a shared sense of discovery. We form relationships, choose friends, and make character judgments based partly on whether someone reacts to information the same way as we do.

When the flow of news is obstructed, "a darkness falls" and anxiety grows.[4] The world, in effect, becomes too quiet. We feel alone. John McCain, the U.S. senator from Arizona and former presidential candidate, wrote that in his five and a half years as a prisoner of war in Hanoi, what he missed most was not comfort, food, freedom, or even his family and friends. "The thing I missed most was information—free uncensored, undistorted, abundant information."[5] In classes on news at SUNY Stony Brook, students are put through news blackouts in which they are cut off from all media. During these blackouts they begin to wear clothes not suited to the weather, carry umbrellas unnecessarily, and become anxious.[6]

Call it the Awareness Instinct.

We need news to live our lives, protect ourselves, bond with each other, and identify friends and enemies. What we came to call journalism is simply the system societies generate to supply this information about what is and what's to come.

That is why we care about the character of the news and journalism we get: News influences the quality of our lives, our thoughts, and our culture. News from its beginning created what technologists today call the "social flow" of information. Writer Thomas Cahill, the author of several popular books on the history of religion, has put it this way: You can tell "the worldview of a people … the invisible fears and desires … in a culture's stories."[7]

At a moment of revolution in communications, what do the stories we tell say about our worldview—our fears, desires, and values?

On the eve of the digital revolution, on a rainy Saturday in June 1997, twenty-five journalists gathered at the Harvard Faculty Club. Around the long table sat editors of several of the nation's top newspapers, as well as some of the most influential names in television and radio, several of the top journalism educators, and some of the country's most prominent authors. We were among those gathered. The digital age was only beginning, but the journalists gathered that day already thought something was seriously wrong with their profession. They barely recognized what they considered journalism in much of their colleagues' work. Instead of serving a larger public interest, they feared, their profession was damaging it.

The public, in turn, had already started to distrust journalists, even hate them. And it would only get worse. In 1999, less than half of Americans (45 percent) believed the press protected democracy, nearly ten points lower than in 1985.[8] By 2011, as many people would feel the press hurt democracy

as helped it, 42 percent. And just 15 percent would think the press was independent, less than half the number (37 percent) in 1985.[9]

The problem is not just public perception. By the late 1990s, many journalists were beginning to share the public's growing skepticism about the press. "In the newsroom we no longer talk about journalism," said Maxwell King, the editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, that day in Cambridge. Another editor agreed: "We are consumed with business pressure and the bottom line." The concern wasn't that the values of news had deteriorated. It was that news companies had begun to operate in a way that suggested they no longer believed in those values.

News was becoming entertainment, and entertainment news. Journalists' bonuses were increasingly tied to profit margins, not to the quality of their work. As the discussion drew to a close, Columbia University professor James Carey offered what many recalled as a summation: "The problem is that you see journalism disappearing inside the larger world of communications. What you yearn to do is recover journalism from that larger world."

Digital technology had not yet eroded the advertising revenue model that financed journalism, or diminished journalists' ability to verify the news before the public saw it. Newspaper revenue, for instance, would continue to grow for seven more years, peaking in 2005. What worried some of the leaders of America's journalistic and educational institutions was commercialization—the sense that the leaders of their

companies had become more concerned with growing profits to please investors and had lost confidence that investing in better, more innovative journalism could help them engage new audiences.

Already, largely because of the corporate structure of the news industry, newsroom leaders were worried about an important existential question. If journalism—the system by which citizens get news—was being subsumed by commercialization, what would replace it? Advertising? Entertainment? E-commerce? Propaganda? Ideological news? Fragmentation? And what would the consequence be? The idea of user-generated content, news in which everyone participated, was not yet a topic of serious discussion beyond a few digital pioneers.

Most of the people in that room had seen the industry undergo enormous changes throughout their careers. For a century prior to the Internet, disruptive technologies and new formats emerged roughly every fifteen to twenty years. Radio had come in the 1920s, followed by television in the 1950s (delayed by World War II), cable television, and then the deregulation of electronic media in the 1980s that helped give way to the new era of partisanship on radio and TV. With each new technology, new forms of entertainment emerged to compete for people's attention. The incumbent media would change, shove over, lose some hold on the audience, and then adapt as a smaller entity.

At its best, journalism survived because it provided something unique to a culture: independent, reliable, accurate, and

comprehensive information that citizens require in order to make sense of the world around them. A journalism that provides something other than that subverts democratic culture. This is what happens when governments control the news, as it did in Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. We see this today in places like Singapore, where news is controlled to encourage capitalism but discourage participation in public life.

The public's growing discontent with journalism that began in the 1980s is not a rejection of journalism's values. It is a result of journalists' failure to live up to those values. Look closely at the data on trust, for instance, and you will see that even today the public has not given up its expectation that the news will be independent and reliable, or that news be produced by people who are operating in the public interest. Data from the Pew Research Center shows that a clear majority—64 percent—of the public prefers getting news from sources that have no political point of view—and those numbers have barely budged over the course of two decades.[10] The number is even more pronounced (74 percent) when people are asked about online news content.[11] The public largely still expects the news to be produced by skilled professionals; what disappoints them is that the news has not lived up to those promises.

On one level, the credibility crisis is ironic. Many news companies had tried to adapt to a changing marketplace by delivering what they thought the public wanted, trying to make the news more like entertainment. Television news in particular had leaned toward celebrity scandal and true crime to lure

viewers back—and had done so unsuccessfully. The number one topic on nightly news in the 1990s was crime, during a decade when crime was dropping. While stories such as the O. J. Simpson trial and the murder of a child named Jon-Benet Ramsey would buoy ratings briefly, audiences began to sense they were being exploited. The credibility research found the public decried media sensationalism—a fact some in the news business dismissed as public hypocrisy.

Distracted by the myopia of trying to keep audiences interested in old platforms and managing costs to protect profits, news companies missed something essential: People were not abandoning news. They simply were abandoning traditional formats in favor of new ones that were more convenient. First, twenty-four-hour cable news was an easier way to check out headlines than waiting for the evening newscast at 6:30, even if the later evening newscast might be a better product. Soon enough, the Web would prove to be profoundly more convenient, deeper, and eventually, more portable.

Journalists were culpable in their own way for the growing discontent and migration of the public. They staked too much faith in traditional definitions of quality news and failed to study the changing news audience. They saw the Internet as a threat to what they knew and failed to recognize it as an opportunity to reach new audiences in new ways with new forms of content. The gathering in Cambridge in 1997 was a signal that, even before the digital disruption, many journalists sensed their industry had lost focus on the public and in a journalism that served its needs.

In short, the collective failure of the news industry to adapt to the digital revolution was rooted in a crisis of confidence about news that had been sounding alarms a decade earlier.

In the years since then, one group of oligarchies has been replaced by another. Media companies that produced news and subsidized its creation largely by selling advertising have been replaced by an even smaller group of technology firms that control access to the Internet by making devices, producing operating systems, selling apps, organizing content, and selling products online. Brands such as *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* are gone. Google and Facebook have a share of the public's attention that those old media empires could never have imagined.

In both scenarios, the same question pertains: As citizens, do we have access to independent, accurate information that makes it possible for us to govern ourselves?

The group of journalists in Cambridge that day in 1997 decided on a plan: engage journalists and the public in a careful examination of what journalism was supposed to be. As a group, we set out to answer two questions: If newspeople thought journalism was somehow different from other forms of communication, how was it different? And if they thought journalism needed to change but that some core principles couldn't be sacrificed, what were those principles?

Over the next two years, the group, calling itself the Committee of Concerned Journalists, organized the most comprehensive and systematic examination ever conducted by journalists of news-gathering and its responsibilities. We held

twenty-one public forums, which were attended by three thousand people and involved testimony from more than three hundred journalists. We partnered with a team of university researchers who conducted more than one hundred three-and-a-half-hour interviews with journalists about their values. We produced two surveys of journalists about their principles. We held a summit of First Amendment and journalism scholars. With the Project for Excellence in Journalism, we produced nearly a dozen content studies of news reporting. We studied the history of the journalists who came before us, and we conducted training in newsrooms nationwide.

The ideas in this book began as the fruit of that examination, and they have grown with years of study since. What you read here is not an argument about what journalism should be. Rather, it is a distillation of how those engaged in creating journalism interpret what citizens think journalism is for and how, in turn, journalists should deliver it. It is predicated on the belief that the history and values by which journalism evolved should inform the journalism of our new century. There is no reason for the new journalism to be a repudiation of the best of the old, for journalism has always been a living thing. Every generation, building on what came before, has created it anew.

As such, we offer here a set of principles for anyone who might produce news in the twenty-first century, whether they be a professional in a newsroom, a citizen eyewitness posting pictures on a photo-sharing platform, or someone trying to distill the reports and conversation from social media and

turn them into news. It also offers a guide to what values consumers should look for in the news they encounter.

The first edition, published in 2001, was a description of the theory and culture of journalism at the end of the twentieth century. The second edition, in 2007, began to account for the arrival of the digital age in a more sustained way. This new edition explores the relevance of journalism's core values in the face of the collapsed economic model that has shrunk most organized newsrooms, and the rise of social media that has transformed news into a broader and more pluralistic process.

Some of the language we use has taken on a different connotation in the time since the last edition of this book. While once, as we said in the preface, the word *journalist* described a group of organized professionals—working in what C. W. Anderson, Clay Shirky, and Emily Bell have called Industrial Journalism—now it describes anyone who might find him or herself producing news and who aspires to do it ethically and responsibly.[12]

This is an important change, but in many ways a less fundamental one than some imagine. We have always argued here that the question has never been who is or isn't a journalist. It is whether the work produced lives up to the character of what we would call journalism. That is still true.

Even before the epochal changes brought by the digital age, the roots of what has occurred were firmly planted. While most journalists could not easily articulate a theory of journalism (or even agree if they were engaged in a profession with

shared principles), most people in society expected journalists to operate according to professional theory.

To add to the confusion, our educational system expects students to graduate high school and college with literacy in concepts of algebra, geometry, foreign language, and literature. Yet there is little serious demand or coherent effort to teach young citizens to comprehend what we think should be considered, as we said in the preface, the literature of civic life —the news.

This lack of clarity, for both citizens and newspeople, has weakened our journalism. If one accepts the tenet that democracy and journalism rise and fall together, it also likely has contributed to the polarization of American politics and the failure of the country to address the economic crisis that has beset the United States and the world since 2008. A lack of clarity about what journalism should be, and how to intelligently consume the news, has left both journalists and citizens less equipped to cope with the effects of the digital transformation, which demand more clarity of purpose from those who produce the news and greater awareness from those who consume it.

Unless we can grasp and reclaim the theory and practice of a free press, we risk allowing our first constitutional right to disappear. The quality of the journalism we consume now is far more a matter of what the public demands than simply what publishers want or can afford to provide. And a free press is distinct from free speech. The acts of reporting and commenting on the day's events relate to each other, but they

are not synonymous. The quality of our democratic life depends, in short, on the public having the facts and being able to make sense of them. And that, even in a networked age, requires journalists. Whether we have them increasingly will depend on whether citizens can recognize the difference between propaganda and news—and whether they care.

For all the changes, there remain clear principles we require of our journalism, principles that citizens have a right to expect. The principles have ebbed and flowed over time, but they have survived because they provide things that citizens need from the news in order to adjust to the demands of life in an increasingly complex world. These are the principles, in other words, that have helped both journalists and the people even as journalism has changed with technology and new social demands. They are the elements of journalism: The first among them is that the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.

To fulfill this task:

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
5. It must serve as a monitor of power.
6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.

8. It must present the news in a way that is comprehensive and proportional.
9. Its practitioners have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience.
10. Citizens have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news as well—even more so as they become producers and editors themselves.

Why these ten? Some readers may think items are missing here. Where is fairness? Where is balance? As we researched journalism's past and looked toward its future, it became clear that a number of familiar and even useful ideas associated with news were too vague to rise to the level of essential principles of journalism. Fairness, for instance, is so subjective a concept that it offered little guidance on how to operate. Balance, on the other hand, was an operational method that was so limited it often distorted the truth.

Another myth was that independence required journalists to be neutral. This confusion arose when the concept of objectivity became so mangled it began to be used to describe the very problem it was conceived to correct. If our work here does nothing else, we want to recapture the original meaning of objectivity intended when the concept migrated from social science to journalism early in the twentieth century. Objectivity was not meant to suggest that journalists were without bias. To the contrary, precisely because journalists could never be objective, their methods had to be. In the recognition that everyone is biased, in other words, the news, like science,

should flow from a process for reporting that is defensible, rigorous, and transparent—and this process is even more critical in a networked age. Today, when content comes from so many sources, this concept of objectivity of method transparently conveyed—rather than personal objectivity—is more vital than ever.

In the new open ecosystem of news and information, the role of professional journalists is also smaller, and the role of citizens is larger—but not all voices are equal. Those with the means to prevail in an open marketplace—money, organized strategies for dissemination, and carefully designed networks to magnify a message's reach—have an advantage. If the "industrial" or professional press of the twentieth century constituted a fourth estate, and the new open system of citizens as producers and witnesses now constitutes a fifth estate, it is important to recognize that this new group also includes the institutions and actors journalists once covered—newsmakers who want to influence the public for commercial and political purpose. Yet it is an oversimplification to imagine that more sources simply means more truth. For all of the utopian enthusiasm, if we lose sight of the principles that make news trustworthy, the contributions of a smaller fourth estate and the new contributions of a fifth together will add up to something less than what society needs. We will lose the press as an independent institution, free to systematically monitor the other powerful forces and institutions in society.

In the new century, one of the most profound questions for a democratic society is whether news can survive as a source of

independent and trustworthy information, or whether it will give way to a system of self-interested propaganda, of citizens consuming information in narrow channels or "filter bubbles," in which all claims are un-refereed and the loudest win. The answer will depend not just on the availability of reliable news but also on whether citizens learn to recognize which news is reliable; on what we demand of the news and those who produce it; whether we have the clarity and conviction to articulate what an independent press means and whether, as citizens, we care.

Some may ask whether there is a specific program laid out here to do that, to "fix" journalism's problems. Our answer to that comes in two parts.

The first part of the answer is that the yearning for a formulaic solution, a single defining moment, or a bold action does not reflect how change occurs.

The second part of the answer—the reason one will not find here a five- or ten-point program to solve the problems of journalism's role in society—is that our collective experience of more than seventy years in this business suggests a clearer lesson on how to find that solution.

The answer will be found when those who produce the news master the principles of journalism and rigorously apply them to the way they work and think every day. And it will be found in citizens recognizing good work, creating their own, and thereby generating more demand for it. The solution will be found the same way that athletes perfect performance: in the repetition of doing, until these elements become second

nature. This is what will breed clarity of purpose, confidence of execution, and public respect.

The key to this, first, is to distinguish between the principles that guide journalism's purpose and not confuse them with the more ephemeral techniques that one generation develops in a specific medium to fulfill those principles. Only by recognizing the primacy of principles, and not confusing them with practices, can journalism evolve in a new century, with new technology, in a way that it can ethically fulfill the same democratic purpose it has in the past and create a new journalism that produces reliable information for the wired citizen.

1

What Is Journalism For?

On a gray December morning in 1981, Anna Semborska woke up and flipped on the radio to hear her favorite program, *Sixty Minutes Per Hour (60MPH)*. Semborska, who was seventeen, loved the way the comedy revue pushed the boundaries of what people in Poland could say out loud under Communist rule. Although it had been on the air for some years, *60MPH* had become much bolder with the rise of the labor union Solidarity. Sketches like one about a dim-witted Communist doctor looking vainly to find a cure for extremism were an inspiration to Anna and her teenage friends in Warsaw. The program showed her that other people felt about the world the way she did but had never dared express. “We felt that if things like these can be said on the radio then we are free,” she would remember nearly twenty years later.[1]

But when Anna ran to the radio to tune in the show on December 13, 1981, she heard only static. She tried another station, then another. Nothing. She tried to call a friend and

found no dial tone. Her mother called her to the window. Tanks were rolling by. The Polish military government had declared martial law, outlawed Solidarity, and put the clamps back on the media and on speech. The Polish experiment with liberalization was over.

Within hours, Anna and her friends began to hear stories that suggested something about this crackdown was different. One story involved the dogwalkers in a little town called Swidnik, near the Czech border. Every night at seven-thirty, when the state-run television news came on, nearly everyone in Swidnik went out and walked his or her dog in a little park in the center of town. It became a daily silent act of protest and solidarity. We refuse to watch, the people were saying in deed if not word. We reject your version of truth.

In Gdansk, there were the black TV screens. People there began moving their television sets to the windows—with the screens pointed out to the street. They were sending a sign to one another, and to the government. We, too, refuse to watch. We also reject your version of truth.

An underground press began to grow, on ancient hand-crank equipment. People began carrying video cameras and making private documentaries, which they showed secretly in church basements. Soon, Poland's leaders acknowledged that they were facing a new phenomenon, something they had to go west to name: the rise of Polish public opinion. In 1983, the government created the first of several institutes to study public opinion. Similar institutes would soon sprout up throughout Eastern Europe. But public opinion was something to-

talitarian officials could not dictate. At best, they could try to understand it and then manipulate it, not unlike Western democratic politicians. But they would not succeed.

After the Soviet bloc collapsed, leaders of the movement toward freedom would look back and think that the end of Communism owed a good deal to the coming of the new information technology and the effect it had on human souls. In the winter of 1989, Lech Walesa, the man who shortly would be elected Poland's new president, visited journalists in Washington. "Is it possible for a new Stalin to appear today who could murder people?" Walesa asked rhetorically. No, he answered himself, in the age of computers, satellites, faxes, VCRs, "it's impossible." Technology now made information available to too many people, too quickly. And information created democracy.[2]

In retrospect, looking at the evolution of democracy in Russia or China or genocidal regimes in Africa, we may wonder if Walesa was caught up in the euphoria of the moment. But his sentiment was less a reflection of naïveté than a burst of optimism coming from a part of the world that was just discovering technology and its power to do good and inspire people to fight for their freedom. And in six years, the Internet would be fully converted from a scientific and governmental system to a commercial one, available for everyday use.

What is journalism for? For the Poles and others in the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe, the question was answered with action. Journalism was for building a sense of community that the government could not control. Jour-

nalism was for citizenship. Journalism was for democracy. And as Czech president Václav Havel told a group of journalists gathered in Prague in 1991, journalism was for taking back the language from a government that had subverted it with propaganda that undermined freedom of thought itself. Millions of people, empowered by a free flow of information, became directly involved in creating a new government and new rules for the political, social, and economic life of their country. Is that always journalism's purpose? Or was that true for one moment, in one place?

Today, the question "What is journalism for?" is the implicit subject of much of the discourse found online about technology and news, and in a seemingly endless series of physical gatherings to discuss the same topics. While that discourse often has the political and theological tones of a revolutionary movement, it is far healthier than the lack of reflection about journalism's purpose that tended to dominate the twentieth century.

In the United States, during much of the last century, journalism was something of a tautology. If you owned a printing press or a broadcasting license, journalism was whatever you said it was. When we began our journey to identify the core principles that underlie reliable news some sixteen years ago, Maxwell King, then editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, summarized this lack of reflection by offering the answer journalists of the time were likely to provide: "We let our work speak for itself." Or, when pressed to account for why the public could trust them, journalists confused their good intentions

with good practice. They took it as a given that because newsrooms were insulated from commercial concerns they were working in the public interest.[3]

These simplistic answers were more harmful than journalists recognized. They invited skepticism from the public. And as the public's ability to comment openly in a worldwide interactive space grew, that skepticism became more focused and impassioned. If those who produce the news could not explain themselves, it was not illogical to think that maybe journalists' motives weren't that virtuous in the first place. By their silence, newspeople led people on the business side to believe their newsrooms were filled with smug, moralistic idealists. Journalists failed to think critically about why they did what they did, because they imagined their motives were so virtuous.

Now, in an open and competitive marketplace, the simplistic refrain that "journalism is a public service that speaks for itself" is exposed for its vacuity. Now that anyone with a computer can claim to be "doing journalism," technology has created a new economic organization of journalism in which the norms of the profession are being pulled and redefined, and sometimes abandoned altogether.

Perhaps, some suggest, the definition of journalism has been expanded by technology so that now anything can be seen as journalism. On closer examination, as the people of Poland and other nations that have escaped government control have demonstrated, the purpose of journalism is defined not by technology, nor by journalists or the techniques they employ,

but by something more basic: the function news plays in the lives of people.

For all that has changed about journalism, its purpose has remained remarkably constant, if not always well served, since the notion of "a press" first evolved more than three hundred years ago. And for all that the speed, techniques, and character of news delivery have changed, and are likely to continue to change ever more rapidly, there exists a clear theory and philosophy of journalism that flows out of the function of news that has remained consistent and enduring.

The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing.

As we have listened to citizens and journalists and watched the impact of technological disruption, it has become clear that the news' function encompasses several elements. The news helps us define our communities. It also helps us create a common language and common knowledge rooted in reality. Journalism also helps identify a community's goals, heroes, and villains. "We proceed best as a society if we have a common base of information," former NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw told the team of academic research partners who

helped us identify the principles of journalism.[4] The news media serve as a watchdog, push people beyond complacency, and offer a voice to the forgotten. "I want to give voices to people who need the voice … people who are powerless," said Yuen Ying Chan, a former reporter for the *New York Daily News* who created a journalism training program in Hong Kong.[5] The late James Carey, one of the most innovative thinkers about news, put it this way decades ago: "Perhaps in the end journalism simply means carrying on and amplifying the conversation of people themselves."[6] The rise of the Internet, blogs, social media, and mobile devices provides space for citizens to create their own journalism and obviously make this vision more relevant and contemporary than ever.

This definition has held so consistent through history, and proven so deeply ingrained in the thinking of those who produce news through the ages, that it constitutes a foundation for imagining journalism in the future. It is difficult, looking back, to separate the concept of journalism from the concept of creating community and later democracy. Journalism is so fundamental to that purpose that, as we will see, societies that want to suppress freedom must first suppress the press. They do not, interestingly, need to suppress capitalism. At its best, as we will also show, journalism helps us understand how citizens behave.

This definition of journalism as social connection and information flow also unlocks a wider and more innovative picture of journalism moving forward. It reveals that journalism has always been more of a service—a means for providing social

connection and knowledge—than a fixed product—an outlet's stories or advertising.

Today, ironically, the long-standing theory and purpose of journalism are being challenged as if they were at odds with the conversation of people. We think that is both ahistorical and self-destructive.

Among some in the digital space, there is a tendency to dismiss journalistic values as if they were self-serving for journalists and disconnected from the public. At the same time, information companies are being created on the Web that provide social connection (restaurant reviews, entertainment updates, information about local goods and services) but create no journalism, and have little or no connection to the civic good that journalism provides. Some of these companies offer gathering places where journalism is present, but it is simply another commodity flowing through them, to which no particular special value is assigned.

There has been a shift in the relationship with government in this transition as well. The threat from government is no longer simply censorship—withholding information that is in the public interest. Using new technology, government has more and more tools to subvert the press by trying to supplant it with its own content while also censoring. That list of tools includes creating pseudojournalism in the form of faux news websites, video news releases, subsidies to "media personalities" willing to accept money to promote policy, and more. Government office holders, from the President to members of the local city council, now maintain their own direct channels

to engage with the public, including offering the video feeds that generate the impression many official events don't need to be "covered" by the press because they are already "public." The Obama administration, in addition, has used technology to cast a wide net to try to identify, prosecute, and intimidate government employees who might talk to the press.

Taken together, these forces amount to a growing risk that journalism as an independent source in society for monitoring power, spotting abuse, alerting the public to problems, and creating social connection may be washed away in the flood of communication by commercial, political, and government sources. Perhaps for the first time in history, the real meaning of the First Amendment—protecting a free press as an independent institution—is threatened with the government not acting primarily as censor but instead offering a competing view of reality.

There are some who will listen to this discussion and contend that it's dangerous, or even antiquated, to attempt to define journalism. To define journalism, they argue, is to limit it. Maybe doing so violates the spirit of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law … abridging the freedom of speech or of the press." This is why journalists have avoided licensing in the manner of doctors and lawyers, they note. They also worry that defining journalism will only make it resistant to changing with the times, which probably will run it out of business.

Actually, the resistance to a definition of journalism is not a deeply held principle but a relatively recent and largely

commercial impulse. At a more innovative point in journalism's history, publishers a century ago routinely championed their news values in front-page editorials, opinion pages, and company slogans, and just as often publicly assailed the journalistic values of their rivals. This was marketing. Citizens chose which publications to read based on their styles and their approaches to news. It was only as the press began to assume a more corporate, more homogeneous and monopolistic form that it became more reticent. Lawyers advised news companies against codifying their principles in writing for fear that they would be used against them in court. Thus, avoiding definition was a commercial strategy, not a principle born of First Amendment freedoms.

On the other side, some will argue that not only should journalism's purpose be unchanging—its form should be constant as well. They see changes in the way journalism looks from when they were young, and they fear that, in the memorable phrase of Neil Postman, we are "amusing ourselves to death." These critics miss another fact. Every generation creates its own journalism largely in reaction to technological advances that allow production and/or distribution of content more effectively. But the purpose and the underlying elements of journalism, we have found, have proven remarkably constant, just as we have discovered since we first wrote this book that there are strong consistencies in the essential values of journalists across countries, cultures, and political systems, despite many superficial differences.

Although professional journalists historically have been uncomfortable defining what they do, they have fundamentally agreed on their purpose. When we set out to chart the common ground of newspeople, this was the first answer we heard: "The central purpose of journalism is to tell the truth so that people will have the information that they need to be sovereign." It came from Jack Fuller, an author, novelist, lawyer, and then president of the Tribune Publishing Company, which produced the *Chicago Tribune*.[7]

Just as intriguing, when new entrants begin to produce news and information—even those initially who would never call themselves journalists—they often adhere to the same concepts of purpose that Fuller described. Omar Wasow, founder of a website called New York Online and one of the earliest of the self-described "garage entrepreneurs," wanted to help create citizens who are "consumers, devourers and debunkers of media … an audience who have engaged with the product and can respond carefully."[8] Almost a decade later, in 2006, Shawn Williams created DallasSouthBlog.com to focus on issues of concern to African-Americans in South Dallas and the rest of the country. By 2013, the blog was called DallasSouthNews and described itself as "a non-profit news organization utilizing technology, social media and journalistic principles to empower and inform underserved communities." Williams, who says he never imagined himself to be engaged in journalism, also sat on the National Advisory Board of the Poynter Institute, one of the country's most-esteemed journalism training organizations.

We wanted to make sure these ideas weren't just the random views of a few people, so in collaboration with the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, we asked journalists what they considered the distinguishing feature of journalism. Those working in news volunteered this democratic function by nearly two to one over any other answer.[9] We also collaborated with developmental psychologists at Stanford, Harvard, and the University of Chicago, whose open-ended, in-depth interviews with a hundred more journalists revealed the same conclusion. "News professionals at every level … express an adamant allegiance to a set of core standards that are striking in their commonality and in their linkage to the public information mission," they wrote.[10]

Ethics codes and journalism mission statements bear the same witness. The goal is "to serve the general welfare by informing the people," says the code of the American Society of News Editors, the largest association of newsroom managers in North America. "Give light and the people will find their own way," reads the masthead of Scripps Company newspapers. It is no less true of outlets formed in the twenty-first century. "To practice and promote investigative journalism in the public interest," declares ProPublica's mission statement. Committed to "improving the conversation of our democracy in an increasingly interconnected world," reads that of GlobalPost.[11]

Those outside news, too, have understood that journalism has broader social and moral obligations. Listen to Pope John Paul II in June 2000: "With its vast and direct influence on

public opinion, journalism cannot be guided only by economic forces, profit, and special interest. It must instead be felt as a mission in a certain sense sacred, carried out in the knowledge that the powerful means of communication have been entrusted to you for the good of all."[12]

This democratic mission is not just a modern idea. The concept of creating sovereignty has run through every major statement and argument about the press for centuries, not only from journalists but also from the revolutionaries who fought for democratic principles, both in America and in virtually every developing democracy since.

THE AWARENESS INSTINCT

Historian Mitchell Stephens studied how news has functioned in people's lives throughout history, and he found a remarkable consistency. "The basic topics with which … news accounts have been concerned, and the basic standards by which they evaluate newsworthiness, seem to have varied very little," he wrote. "Humans have exchanged a similar mix of news with a consistency throughout history and cultures that makes interest in this news seem inevitable, if not innate."[13] Various scholars have identified the reason for this. People crave news out of basic instinct—what we call the Awareness Instinct. They need to be aware of events beyond their direct experience. Knowledge of the unknown gives them security; it allows them to plan and negotiate their lives. Exchanging this

information becomes the basis for creating community and making human connections.

News is that part of communication that keeps us informed of the changing events, issues, and characters in the world outside. In time, historians have suggested, rulers used news to hold their societies together. It provided a sense of unity and shared purpose. It even helped tyrannical rulers control their people by binding them together around a common threat.

History reveals one other important trend. The more democratic the society, the more news and information it tends to have. As societies first became more democratic, they tended toward a kind of pre-journalism. The earliest democracy, ancient Greece, relied on an oral journalism in the Athens marketplace in which "nearly everything important about the public's business was in the open," journalism educator John Hohenberg wrote.[14] The Romans developed a daily account of the Roman Senate and political and social life, called the *acta diurna*, transcribed on papyrus and posted in public places.[15] As European societies became more authoritarian and violent in the Middle Ages, communication waned and written news essentially disappeared.

THE BIRTH OF JOURNALISM

As the Middle Ages ended, news came in the form of song and story, in news ballads sung by wandering minstrels.

What we might consider modern journalism began to emerge, in the early seventeenth century, literally out of

conversation, especially in public places. In England, the first newspapers grew out of coffeehouses—numerous enough for some to be known for specializing in certain kinds of information. They became so popular that scholars complained that "nothing but news and the affairs of Christendom is discussed."

Later, in America, journalism grew out of pubs, or publick houses. Here, the bar owners, called publicans, hosted spirited conversations about information from travelers who often recorded what they had seen and heard in logbooks kept at the end of the bar. The first newspapers evolved out of these coffeehouses when enterprising printers began to collect the shipping news, tales from abroad and more gossip, and political arguments from the coffeehouses and to print them on paper.

With the evolution of the first newspapers, English politicians began to talk about a new phenomenon, which they called public opinion. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, journalists/printers had begun to formulate a theory of free speech and free press. In 1720, two London newspapermen, writing under the pen name "Cato," introduced the idea that truth should be a defense against libel. At the time, English common law had ruled the reverse: not only that any criticism of government was a crime but that "the greater the truth, the greater the libel," since truth did more harm.[16]

Cato's argument had a profound influence in the American colonies, where discontent against the English Crown was growing. A rising young printer named Benjamin Franklin

was among those who republished Cato's writings. When a fellow printer named John Peter Zenger went on trial in 1735 for criticizing the royal governor of New York, Cato's ideas became the basis for his defense. People had "a right … both of exposing and opposing arbitrary power … by speaking and writing the truth," argued Zenger's lawyer, who was paid by Franklin, among others. The jury acquitted Zenger, shocking the colonial legal community, and the meaning of a free press in America began to take formal shape.

The concept became rooted in the thinking of the Founders, finding its way into the Virginia Declaration of Rights (written partly by James Madison), the Massachusetts constitution (written by John Adams), and most of the new colonial statements of rights. "No government ought to be without censors & where the press is free, no one ever will," Thomas Jefferson would tell George Washington.[17] Neither Franklin nor Madison thought such language was necessary in the federal Constitution, but two delegates, George Mason of Virginia and Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, walked out of the convention, and with men like Thomas Paine and Samuel Adams, they agitated the public to demand a written bill of rights as a condition of approving the Constitution. A free press thus became the people's first claim on their government.

Over the next two hundred years the notion of the press as a bulwark of liberty became embedded in American legal doctrine. "In the First Amendment," the Supreme Court ruled in upholding the *New York Times*' right in 1971 to publish the secret government documents called the Pentagon Papers, "the

Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors."[18] The idea that was affirmed over and over by the courts, First Amendment scholar Lee Bollinger, then president of the University of Michigan, told us at one of our gatherings for this book, is a simple one: Out of a diversity of voices the people are more likely to know the truth and thus be able to self-govern.[19]

Even when journalism was in the hands of the yellow-press mavens at the eve of the twentieth century, or the tabloid sheets of the 1920s, building community and promoting democracy remained a core value. At their worst moments, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst appealed to both the sensational tastes and the patriotic impulses of their audiences. Pulitzer used his front page to lure his readers in, but he used his editorial pages to teach them how to be American citizens. On election nights he and Hearst would vie to outdo each other, one renting Madison Square Garden for a free party, the other illuminating campaign results on the side of his newspaper's skyscraper.

Whether one looks back over three hundred years, or even three thousand years, it is impossible to separate news from community and, over time, even more specifically from democratic community.

A FREE PRESS IN A NETWORK-CONNECTED AGE

Today, information is so free that the notion of journalism as

a homogeneous entity might seem quaint in a world in which everyone may at some point produce it. Perhaps the First Amendment itself is an artifact of a more restricted and elitist era.

Certainly, the notion of the press as a gatekeeper—deciding what information the public should know and what it should not—no longer defines journalism's role. If the *New York Times* decides not to publish something, one of countless other websites, talk radio hosts, social media networks, blogs, or partisans will. The rise of Facebook and Twitter, not to mention organizations such as WikiLeaks, has transformed the essential equation of news—how information becomes public—from "one to many" to "many to many." Countless book titles of the last decade have made this point, from Dan Gillmor's *We the Media* to Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody*.

These changes have profoundly altered the information life of everyone, even those who do not tweet, post on social networks, or offer comments online. As we search through Google for information, graze across a seemingly infinite array of outlets, share stories or links with friends, like things on Facebook pages, we become our own editors, researchers, and even news gatherers. What used to be called journalism is now only one part of the mix, and its role as intermediary and verifier, like the roles of other civic institutions, is a relatively smaller and thus weaker influence on the whole. We are witnessing the rise of a new and more active kind of American citizenship—with new responsibilities that are only beginning to be considered. The journalism of the twenty-first century must rec-

ognize this, and journalists must organize their work in a way that helps arm the public with the tools it needs to perform this more active form of citizenship.

In the gatekeeper metaphor, the press stood by an imagined village guardhouse and determined which facts were publicly significant and sufficiently vetted to be made public. In a networked world, the organized press plays that guardhouse role over a far more limited sphere of information—those stories over which they have exclusive, or practically exclusive, access, including their own enterprise reporting and some range of local information. In the age of police Twitter feeds and webcast government meetings, even this domain is rapidly shrinking.

For some, the end of the gatekeeper metaphor might suggest the end of journalism. Here comes everybody. Who needs paid observers?

We arrive at a different conclusion. We believe the end of the press's monopoly over mediating information to the public offers the opportunity to elevate the quality of journalism we receive, not weaken it. For that to happen, however, those who produce journalism must acquire a better understanding of what citizens need from their news, what citizens and the machinery of the digital network can contribute to that, and a more rigorous grasp of the tasks necessary for trained journalists to organize, verify, and add to these contributions.

What do we mean by a more rigorous understanding of the tasks of journalism? John Seely Brown, the former director of Xerox PARC, the legendary think tank in Silicon Valley,

saw early on that rather than rendering the democratic public service notion of journalism moot, technology had instead changed how journalists fulfill it. “What we need in the new economy and the new communications culture is sense making. We have a desperate need to get some stable points in an increasingly crazy world.” This means, Brown explained, that journalists need “the ability to look at things from multiple points of view and the ability to get to the core” of matters.[20] Futurist Paul Saffo described this task as applying journalistic inquiry and judgment “to come to conclusions in uncertain environments.”[21]

Thus the new journalist is no longer deciding *what* the public should know—the classic role of gatekeeper—but working with audiences and technology to make order out of it, make it useful, take action on it. This does not mean simply adding interpretation or analysis to news reporting. It involves instead performing a series of different and more discrete tasks that, if understood more carefully, news producers should begin to perform better than they have before.

In our 2010 book, *Blur: How to Know What’s True in the Age of Information Overload*, we argued that the gatekeeper metaphor masked behind one phrase what were really various different functions that the public required from journalism. We argued there that if those specific needs were recognized and understood more clearly, journalists were more likely to perform them more effectively, including understanding how better to collaborate with citizens and employ technology to create a better journalism.

One primary task of the new journalist, as with the old, is to verify what information is reliable, to play the role of *Authenticator*. In the networked world, audiences may have heard differing assertions about an event before they encounter a formal journalistic account. Thus the role of the new journalist, more than the old, is to work with audiences to sort through these different accounts, to know which of the facts they may have encountered they should believe and which to discount.

A second task of anyone trying to report and present news is to be a *Sense Maker*, to put events in context in a way that turns information into knowledge. One value of making these tasks more distinct is that the responsibilities and the presentation will shift subtly when the task changes. It is important for those who report news and information, for instance, to know when they have moved from authenticating facts to synthesizing and contextualizing them. The analysis of events crosses into another level of subjectivity, and it requires making that shift clear by sharing different evidence for why this interpretation is likely the best one.

A third task is to *Bear Witness* to events. This occurs when the person functioning as journalist is the sole observer of an event. Recognizing this as a distinct journalistic role, even in a world in which journalists no longer so regularly play the role of the gatekeeper, is useful. Those engaged in journalism are not simply interpreters who comment. Being monitors, sentinels who ask questions and dig, remains vital. Valuing being a witness bearer also means that an effort is made to cover

events that no one else is covering—so that there *is* a witness —and then to convey to readers why the event matters. It implies that institutional news organizations not deploy their resources only where there is already a crowd, and already an interest. Doing so makes a publisher less useful, even if it is the easiest way to generate traffic. For a citizen who finds him- or herself at an event that citizen considers important, and where no press appear to be present, it may mean suddenly deciding to act journalistically, to tweet or take pictures or video —so there is a record.

A fourth task, closely related to witness bearer but also different, is *Watchdog*. This is the classic role of investigative reporting, uncovering wrongdoing. But it is sufficiently different in practice and organization from the more common but often undervalued role of witness bearing that it is important they are distinguished from each other. The more routine monitoring of witness bearing may be the spark that leads to the watchdog investigation. But they are not the same.

In addition to the four roles listed above that were buried within the gatekeeper concept, there are at least five other distinct functions that the public requires of journalism. Readers of this list may well conceive more—and that will only help. The key here is to isolate the functions we need from news to help our lives. Here are the other five functions citizens require of news that we identify:

- *Intelligent Aggregator (or Curator)*: Picking the best of other accounts, perhaps comparing the conflicting ones, recom-

mending them to your audience—playing editor, in effect, of the rest of the information available.

- *Forum Leader*: Organizing public discussion in a way that reflects your journalistic values.
- *Empowerer*: Providing audiences tools and information so that they can act for themselves. This involves making information interactive, providing dates when action needs to be taken, explaining how to get more involved. It may go even further and involve organizing events that bring the community together to solve problems.
- *Role Model*: In a networked news environment, journalism is an even more public act than before. How one gathers the news, one's conduct and decision making are being watched. That behavior must be exemplary, for it is, in a more explicit way than was once true, part of the brand.
- *Community Builder*: In older models of journalism, the news spoke for itself, and what citizens did with that news and information was beyond the sphere of the news provider. That is no longer the case. The purpose of news is to help people self-govern, but that only begins with giving them the information they need to do so. News must also be about solving the problems that confront individuals and the community. There are lines between news and advocacy, but helping solve problems is different from advocacy.

JOURNALISM AS ORGANIZED COLLABORATIVE INTELLIGENCE

Some advocates of the digital disruption believe that since no one controls information anymore, professional journalists in organized settings have become largely unnecessary or their role can be reduced to a narrower zone of activity far less focused than in the past on reporting and establishing facts. Since the information in the crowd is wider and deeper than whatever could be haphazardly collected by a few journalists, it will be closer to real truth anyway. Blogger Jonathan Stray in a post for Harvard's Nieman Journalism Lab epitomized the argument: "The Internet has solved the basic distribution of event-based facts in a variety of ways; no one needs a news organization to know what the White House is saying when all the press briefings are posted on YouTube. What we do need is someone to tell us what it means."[22]

Stray was building on arguments of a host of writers who form what has been dubbed the Future of News Movement. Perhaps no clearer expression of the ideas of the group has been put down than in the "manifesto" authored under the title *Post-Industrial Journalism* by three academics, C. W. Anderson, Emily Bell, and Clay Shirky. They articulated something similar if slightly broader than Stray: "The journalist has not been replaced but displaced, moved higher up the editorial chain from the production of initial observations to a role that emphasizes verification and interpretation, bringing sense to

the streams of text, audio, photos and video produced by the public."[23]

The arguments that journalism can largely move beyond fact gathering and toward synthesis and interpretation might be called the Displacement Theory of News.

On the other hand, some have tilted too far the other way, viewing the benefits citizens and technology bring with excessive suspicion and tending to romanticize old methods. "The civic labour performed by journalists on the ground cannot be replicated by legions of bloggers sitting hunched over their computer screens," Bill Keller, then the executive editor of the *New York Times*, said in a 2007 public lecture in London.[24]

Both views go too far.

Citizens and machines should not try to "replicate" the role of professional journalists.

At the same time, and in much the same way, the notion that the public and machines can "displace" the fact-finding role of professional journalists in this collaboration is too constricted. We need journalists to do more than bring sense to the streams produced by the public. This idea of displacement or implied obsolescence or movement away from essential fact finding does not grasp the reality of how powerful institutions work or how to cover them. In the end, the notion that journalists as fact finders have been displaced is too theoretical, even dangerous. It leaves far too much power to the government, corporations, and other institutions to control the supply of public facts. The fact that the White House now has a YouTube channel, Twitter feed, and tumblr account should not be mis-

taken for an administration being open or transparent. Nor is journalism enhanced if journalists begin to limit themselves largely to material officially released rather than going out and digging for a more complete version of the truth. The Web may have given everyone publishing tools, but it does not enforce distribution of all facts that matter or structure them in a way that citizens can use.

Perhaps even more important, technology has not "solved" the problem of knowing the essential facts of events. The facts of most events that affect the public do not occur in public. Even the decisions revealed at most public meetings are made, more often than they should be, away from public view, in executive session or in even smaller more private meetings. Far too little of what we need to know is on YouTube. Yet if more of our civic proceedings moved there (which we support), there is no doubt much of the real decision making of news would then move further behind closed doors. C-SPAN did not magically make Congress work better. And the events in Afghanistan, or the impact of major health care legislation, require far more shoe leather and access than "bringing sense to the streams … produced by the public." We cannot assume, in other words, the facts of civic life to be a commodity, the gathering and submission of which are taken care of by the network.

For most stories, learning the facts of an event is a multidimensional process of discovery—an official action, event, or revelation, followed by inquiry, reaction, and observation, new questions, then more inquiry—a process that repeats it-

self and involves shoe leather as well as making sense of the streams produced by officials and the public.

The discussion about technology and the network displacing factual reporting also tends to focus on a limited range of topics, often just national affairs. “Not all journalism matters,” Anderson, Bell, and Shirky wrote in their manifesto, suggesting that a broad range of arts, sports, lifestyle reporting, and more did not. “Much of what is produced today is simply entertainment or diversion.” They are wrong. As we will describe in detail in the chapter on comprehensiveness and proportion, the reporting of culture, social events, trends, sports, and much more form a vital part of how we come to understand community and civil society and how, as citizens, we navigate our lives. Journalism that narrows itself to accountability of government agencies will limit its value, its engagement, and its chance to sustain itself.

We see the future of news in the middle, between the skeptics and the utopians. Rather than displacing journalists, the network and citizens make possible a new and enriched kind of journalism in which citizens, technology, and professional journalists work together to create a public intelligence that is deeper and wider than any one of these could produce alone.

Machines bring the capacity to count beyond anything previously imaginable—to make the news more empirical and more accurate.

Citizens bring expertise, experience, and the ability to observe events from more vantage points—knowledge and ex-

pertise that are deeper than can be found in any newsroom or in a traditional reporter's "Rolodex" of sources.

Journalists bring access, the ability to interrogate people in power, to dig, to translate and triangulate and verify incoming information, and, more important, a traditional discipline of open-minded inquiry.

Working in concert, these three contributors can create a new kind of journalism, one that might best be understood as an organized collaborative intelligence.

We need journalists of the future, in other words, to embrace the potential of the network and to vet and organize its input, while also providing the elements that skilled journalists at any given moment are best disposed to offer. This is the way to a deeper and wider foundation of facts and community understanding.

Journalists in this vision will do much more now than produce narrative stories and the graphics that illustrate them. Instead, they will help gather and organize and structure this community intelligence, combining the technology of the machine network with the knowledge and input of the broader citizens and other sources, and adding the reportorial, evidentiary, and vetting skills they possess as journalists. This view of journalism is much more than a static product. It is, as we said, a kind of organized community intelligence.

But this better journalism, one that fulfills the promise of creating community and improving the lives of citizens, does not reside in an either/or view of journalism and technology. In this view, journalists are not displaced, replicated, confined,

or elevated to synthesizers of meaning. This view does not denigrate the power of narrative, or the significance of witness-bearing reporting, or the importance of simply finding out what happened. It is a vision of journalism's future that doesn't denigrate its past.

Instead, this new vision of a new journalism depends on the networked media culture committing itself, as the old system did, to establishing verified and truthful information, and building out from that foundation of facts toward meaning. The driving force of the Age of Enlightenment, out of which grew the notion of individual worth and a public press, was the search for truthful information. This information freed the public from the control of centralized dictatorial or dogmatic power. We see parallels to that kind of control today forming in new places, corporate and governmental rather than monarchical or religious. If the journalism of verification is to survive in the new age, then it must become a force in empowering citizens with the information they need to effectively take part in self-government.

THE JOURNALIST'S THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

The question of what people need and want to know has always been critical. If the public is uninformed, the press has a responsibility to figure out why and what to do about it. But it has become more of a challenge in recent years for journalists to fulfill this responsibility.

Historically, most journalists, having no challenge to their role as mediators over information or to the profitability of their companies, were content to remain insulated from commercial pressure. They were content to let something called "news judgment," a subjective and wildly unscientific notion, dictate their decisions, the saving grace of which was that those judgments were independent from commercial pressure.

There was always reason to be concerned about how well this trust in subjective news judgment worked. We may have had the freest press imaginable, yet over the last thirty years the number of Americans who could even name their congressman was as low as three out of ten.[25] Little more than half of the American electorate votes in presidential elections —fewer than in countries without a First Amendment.[26] More than any other source, people get news from local television, a medium that largely ignores the process of how the government works.[27] In other surveys only 29 percent of respondents said they read a daily newspaper the day before, and people appear to be no more informed about the outside world than they were fifty years ago.[28] There is no evidence that with the arrival of the Internet those knowledge numbers have changed substantially.[29] Maybe, when you look hard, the idea that the press provides the information necessary for people to self-govern is revealed to be an illusion. Maybe people don't care. Maybe we don't, in reality, actually self-govern at all. The government operates, and the rest of us are largely bystanders.

This argument flared briefly in the 1920s in a debate of ideas between journalist Walter Lippmann and philosopher John Dewey. It was a time of pessimism about democracy. Democratic governments in Germany and Italy had collapsed. The Bolshevik revolution loomed over the West. There was a growing fear that police states were employing new technology and the new science of propaganda to control public will.

Lippmann, already one of the nation's most famous journalists, argued in a best-selling book called *Public Opinion* that democracy was fundamentally flawed. People, he said, mostly know the world only indirectly, through "pictures they make up in their heads." And they receive these mental pictures largely through the media. The problem, Lippmann argued, is that the pictures people have in their heads are hopelessly distorted and incomplete, marred by the irredeemable weaknesses of the press. Just as bad, even if the truth were to reach the public, the public's ability to comprehend the truth is undermined by human bias, stereotype, inattentiveness, and ignorance. In the end, Lippmann thought citizens are like theatergoers who "arrive in the middle of the third act and leave before the last curtain, staying just long enough to decide who is the hero and who is the villain."[30]

Public Opinion was an enormous success and gave birth, according to many, to the modern study of communications.[31] It also deeply moved the nation's most famous philosopher, Columbia professor John Dewey, who called Lippmann's analysis about the limits of human perception "the most effective indictment of democracy … ever penned."[32]

But Dewey, who later expanded his critique in his own book *The Public and Its Problems*, said Lippmann's definition of democracy was fundamentally flawed. The goal of democracy, Dewey said, was not to manage public affairs efficiently. It was to help people develop to their fullest potential. Democracy, in other words, was the end, not the means. It was true that the public could only be an "umpire of last resort" over government, usually just setting the broad outlines of debate. That, however, was all the Founders ever intended, Dewey argued, for democratic life encompassed so much more than efficient government. Its real purpose was human freedom. The solution to democracy's problems was not to give up on it but to try to improve the skills of the press and the education of the public.

Dewey sensed something that is easier to grasp in today's networked news culture, when citizens are producers, critics, consumers, and editors as well as audience. He believed that if people were allowed to communicate freely with one another, democracy was the natural outgrowth of the human interaction. It was not a stratagem for making government better.

Ninety years later, the Lippmann-Dewey debates still constitute the essential arguments over the viability of a free press in democratic society. For all that the world has changed, Lippmann's skepticism and Dewey's optimism are echoed in the almost theological disputes today between those worried about the demise of the professional press and those who see something superior in the wisdom of the crowd.

For all that citizens can decide—what they want to know and when, for instance—the role of journalists as agenda setters—trying to signal to the audience what news is important, the top stories—has not disappeared. Those who cover the news professionally still have to decide how to deploy resources, which stories to cover, which to cover at length, which to handle in brief, and a thousand more decisions every day.

Today, however, those judgments about journalistic choices are made publicly and in real time—and can be measured in the analytics about what is read, viewed, shared, commented on, liked, and tweeted. The agenda itself has become a dialogue, and a healthy one.

For journalists, the challenge is how to respond so that they continue to play a constructive agenda-setting role that helps their community, and their different publics, and makes the journalism they produce useful to their fellow citizens. How, for instance, do news publishers use metrics thoughtfully, rather than employing them self-destructively, shallowing their content in an effort to maximize page views with slide shows and quick posts about celebrities? How do they use metrics to understand the public while adding a sense of significance to the news, to indicate to citizens, "this story matters; you should pay attention"? (We will discuss this at length in the chapter on comprehensiveness and proportionality.)

Journalists have always been engaged in something more important than merely the production of news. Whenever editors lay out a page or website, or reporters decide what angle

or element of an event or issue to emphasize and explore, they are guessing at what readers want or need to know based on their personal interaction in daily life. As they do so, they are, however unconsciously, operating by some theory of democracy—some theory of what drives politics, citizenship, and how people make judgments.

Our purpose here is to lay out a theory that we think lies implicit, and often unrecognized, in the journalism that serves us best as citizens.

A number of critics argued that Lippmann's view dominated too much of how journalists operated over the next ninety years.[33] Studies show that newspapers and TV aimed their coverage at target markets that were designed to sell advertising rather than trying to inform a broad citizenry. Some publications, particularly newspapers, were tailored to elite demographics that were most attractive to some kinds of advertisers. Other publishers, such as local TV newscasts, were aimed at wide audiences that bought cars and beer but did little to offer civic news.[34] Policy and ideas were ignored or presented as sport, or were couched in the context of how a certain policy position is calculated to gain someone power over a rival.[35] Even the practice of interviewing voters in political campaigns, reporters admit, became a vanishing art, replaced by the perceived science of public opinion polling in which the public was merely a responder to questions invented by media. Even the representation of the public was incomplete, as surveys often screened out nonvoters, leaving results that gave no voice to an important segment of the population. As

he saw the rise of polling, scholar James Carey wrote that we had developed "a journalism that justifies itself in the public's name but in which the public plays no role, except as an audience."[36] Citizens have become an abstraction, something the press talks about but not to.

No doubt the rise of citizen media and the empowering of consumers have helped address the problem of the public becoming an abstract construct in our public debates. The public is forcing itself into the conversation. It makes sense that those with their own political agendas are more likely to be exposed. Traditional journalism was always better at covering official debate that occurred in public spaces than at covering real public debate that occurred around the kitchen table.

The journalists who claim to know what citizens care about through today's discourse in social media will quickly find out they are equally as wrong.

Yet this does not solve for journalists the problem of discerning what it is citizens want and what they need. It calls instead for an even clearer theory of democracy and citizenship for the press.

As we examine the interactive relationship between journalists and citizens in the new public and networked sphere online, we see a more complicated and fluid vision of the public than the traditional debates usually offer. We think this vision holds a key to how both citizens and many journalists really operate.

THE THEORY OF THE INTERLOCKING PUBLIC

Dave Burgin, a newspaper editor who worked in venues from Florida to California, had a theory about news audiences that he passed on to young staffers when he taught them the art of page layout. Imagine, he would say, that no more than roughly 15 percent of your readers would want to read any one story on the page (for Burgin, who worked in newspapers, this meant a printed page). Your job was to make sure each page had a sufficient variety of stories so that every member of the audience would want to read at least one of them.[37]

Implicit in Burgin's theory of a diversified menu of news on each page is the idea that everyone is interested and even expert in something. The notion that some people are simply ignorant, or that other people are interested in everything, is a myth. As we listened to journalists and citizens talk, we realized that Burgin's theory was a more realistic description of how people interact with the news to form a public.

We call this the Theory of the Interlocking Public.

For the sake of argument, let's say there are three broad levels of public engagement on every issue, each with even subtler gradations. There is an involved public, with a personal stake in an issue and a strong understanding. There is an interested public, with no direct role in the issue but that is affected and responds with some firsthand experience. And there is an uninterested public, which pays little attention and will join, if at all, after the contours of the discourse have been laid out

by others. In the interlocking public, we are all members of all three groups, depending on the issue.

An autoworker in suburban Detroit, for instance, may care little about agriculture policy or foreign affairs, and may only sporadically buy a newspaper or watch TV news. But he will have lived through many collective bargaining debates and know a good deal about corporate bureaucracy and workplace safety. He may have kids in local schools and friends on welfare, and know how pollution has affected the rivers where he fishes. To these and all other concerns he brings a range of knowledge and experience. On some matters he is the involved public; on others, the interested; and on still others, remote, unknowledgeable, and unengaged.

A partner in a Washington law firm will similarly defy generalization. She is a grandmother, avid gardener, and news junkie who looks from a distance like a classic member of the involved "elite." A leading expert on constitutional law who is quoted often in the press, she is also fearful of technology and bored by and ignorant of investing and business. Her children grown, she no longer pays attention to news about local schools or even local government.

Or imagine a stay-at-home mom in California with a high school education, who considers her husband's career her own. Her volunteer work at children's schools gives her keen ideas about why the local paper is wrong in its education coverage, and from her own life she has an intuitive sense about people.

These sketches are obviously made up, but they bring the complex notion of the public down to earth. The sheer magnitude and diversity of the people are the public's strengths. The involved expert on one issue is the ignorant and unconcerned citizen on another. The three groups—which themselves are only crude generalizations—work as a check on one another so that no debate becomes merely a fevered exchange between active interest groups. What's more, this mix of publics is usually much wiser than the involved public alone.

Listen to some journalists talk about the audience they imagine as they work, and you will hear a sense of the interlocking public. When Byron Calame was public editor of the *New York Times*, he heard it when he interviewed colleagues. "Several editors, including Suzanne Daley, who just became national editor after a stint as education editor, noted that they must keep two kinds of readers in mind. 'One is an expert on whatever subject we are writing about, someone who will read this story no matter what, but who will be highly judgmental.... The other is your basically curious person, but without a lot of time, who is, in my mind, the real challenge. He or she might read the story. But it has to hook them. The game in my head is: Okay, how do we write this so that it is accurate and has weight, but is still fun to read for someone who really doesn't care much about say, college dorms or tutoring?' "[38]

CUNY professor C. W. Anderson, in his writings about the fragmenting effect of the Web on audiences, has thought about a complex series of publics in ways that connect with our ideas here. He has suggested that different publics form

around different issues and concerns that are more nuanced than people have generally suggested and that the Web lets us see these and connect with them. But he also has noted that the public does not form itself into a representative whole on the Web. It is more random parts. “Online, all publics appear fragmentary. There is always an element of the public that cannot be networked. There is always a fraction of this uncaptured public only a mouse click away.”[39]

Our concept of the Interlocking Public and Anderson’s idea of multiple publics are closely related, although what Anderson sees as fragmentary we would describe as pluralistic. Seen as blocks of people that intersect, and which benefit from the diversity of more intense and less intense interest, we think the public is far more able than Lippmann dreamed, and the press does not have the daunting job of delivering “truth” to a passive public as he imagined.

What is required from the news media—one that is now more a network of professionals and citizens together—is that they provide this more complex and dynamic public what it needs to sort out the truth for itself over time.

This more complex understanding of the public carries with it an indictment of the modern professional press. A journalism that focuses on the expert elite—the special interests—may be in part responsible for public disillusionment. Such a press does not reflect the world as most people live and experience it. Similarly, political coverage that focuses on tactical considerations for the political junkie and leaves the merely interested and the uninterested behind is failing in the

responsibilities of journalism. On the other side of the scale, a journalism that leaves out important issues in favor of only featuring things that will generate the largest conceivable audience—all stories that could go viral all the time—actually leaves most of the audience behind.

In short, this more pluralistic vision of the interlocking public suggests that our news media should still try to serve the interests of the widest community possible. Even media that is niche in its interests has a community. One way to do that is to imagine and serve gradations of interest and knowledge in covering events. At the same time, trends developing in our new century make it clear that recognizing the needs of the more complex interlocking public will be more difficult than ever. The networked media of the digital age, for instance, has struggled to understand or create a coherent narrative for the fault lines in the American electorate, other than to label the country as "polarized." The press largely failed to see the conservative wave of the first two elections of the twenty-first century, as well as to anticipate or understand the rise of the Tea Party movement. The press similarly failed to anticipate the counter-movements, the election of Obama in 2008 and, with a handful of exceptions, his relatively easy reelection in 2012, fueled by what the media would almost instantly label as the inevitable result of changing demographics.

The failure of both the establishment press and our new more networked media to anticipate or explain these shifting patterns not only reveals how complex the interlocking public really is but also suggests that part of the problem is the way

both the old media and the new frame issues. The country dismissed as polarized in 2013, for instance, contains a broad majority (73 percent) of people who support more background checks on gun buying, but Congress is still unable to pass such legislation.[40]

In an increasingly crowded media environment, the most precious commodity of all becomes attention. To gain it, and hold it, some publishers have resorted to the political version of sensationalism: to fear monger, to employ stereotypes and labels that marginalize and demean one's antagonists. Often in coverage of the great social issues of the latter half of the twentieth century—civil rights, the sexual revolutions, anti—Vietnam War sentiment, immigration, and globalization—traditional media employed such generalizations and pigeonholing and depended on spokespeople for the extremes. These stereotypes and labels became the lingua franca of the public debate and pulled the news media away from stopping to ask to what extent these positions were widely held, or even what they meant. In the open culture of the Web, where the most passionate and organized interests can marshal voices that look like "the public," the tendency toward extremism and polarization may have only increased. The mistake we often make is imagining that discourse in social media is somehow more real, or closer to the true public, because it is unmediated. It is an illusion, and not just because only a fraction of Americans are active in social media (only 18 percent of Americans with Internet access used Twitter in 2013). The conversation in social media is also unrepresentative. When

the Pew Research Center monitored the discourse on Twitter over the course of a year and compared it to scientific samples of the public answering survey questions on the same issues, it found little correlation. The sentiment in social media, rather, tended to be dominated by whatever side was outraged at a given moment.[41]

That poses a whole new set of challenges for understanding the public, as Anderson has said. And it raises the responsibility. If our new journalism is to work for citizens of a democratic society, then it must begin to facilitate the understanding that allows the sort of compromise on which governance of a complex interlocking public depends.

The Theory of the Interlocking Public also casts a shadow over the concept of niche marketing in a media landscape where more voices are vying for attention. Many of the niches created by the new information delivery platforms are much harder to define than the artificial categories identified by marketing research may imply. Television aimed at women ages eighteen to thirty-four (or Generation X, or soccer moms, or football fans) is likely to alienate larger numbers than anticipated of the very group at which it is aimed. People are simply more complex than the categories and stereotypes we've created for them.

THE NEW CHALLENGE

If the Theory of the Interlocking Public reinforces the notion that news should enhance democratic freedom, journalism

may face its greatest threat yet in the early decades of the Web.

At the beginning of the Internet age, more traditional media companies saw the future in terms of size. That led to a wave of consolidations and mergers—and nearly all of these concentrations failed. As these companies consolidated, however, they began to move their interests further away from journalism and further toward commercial gain—away, in a sense, from mission and toward profit as a reason for being.

When his company won television rights for Singapore, media baron Rupert Murdoch praised the country for being undemocratic:

> Singapore is not liberal, but it's clean and free of drug addicts. Not so long ago it was an impoverished, exploited colony with famines, diseases, and other problems. Now people find themselves in three-room apartments with jobs and clean streets. Material incentives create business and the free market economy. If politicians try it the other way around with democracy, the Russian model is the result. Ninety percent of the Chinese are interested more in a better material life than in the right to vote.[42]

Never before had a modern publisher advocated capitalism without democracy in this way. Yet, following Murdoch's pronouncement, other examples would follow of ownership that subordinated journalism to other commercial interests.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the word *media* is now used to describe companies that create little content of their own and are larger and more powerful than any of

the media companies of the previous century. They also have little commitment to creating the public service and accountability reporting that journalism historically laid claim to.

By 2013, five companies controlled 64 percent of the ad revenue derived from the Internet—Google, Yahoo, Facebook, Microsoft, and AOL.[43]

Writer Dan Gillmor has suggested that Google's power has become so great the company is in effect the "Internet overlord."[44]

Writer Rebecca MacKinnon has argued that Google, Facebook, and a handful of others have such power over our lives that they operate as de facto sovereigns. "Our desire for security, entertainment and material comfort is manipulated to the point that we all voluntarily and eagerly submit to subjugation." She ends with a rallying cry: "We have a responsibility to hold the abusers of digital power to account, along with their facilitators and collaborators. If we do not, when we wake up one morning to discover that our freedoms have eroded beyond recognition, we will have only ourselves to blame."[45]

Those companies, which MacKinnon calls digital sovereigns, are also dissociated from geography, civic space, and even nation—the implications of which raise another level of uncertainty about the concept of corporate citizenship or social responsibility in the context of news.

Some, such as Harvard's Nicco Mele, author of *The End of Big*, have suggested that these large companies may be short-lived. To create new innovation, the conditions of the networked economy favor the nimbleness of individuals loosely con-

nected. But even if Mele is right, these large companies seem likely to be replaced by other short-lived giants. The currency of the new media economy may lean more heavily on stock options, public offerings, getting in, getting out. And in this world, corporate responsibility and values seem antiquated, even irrelevant.

If the distribution companies begin to buy up news, or create it themselves, the managers of the news subsidiaries will fight and protest for their independence, but history suggests they will suffer from the position of minority status. “We look at the 1930s and we see steel and chemical industries starting to buy up the journalism of Europe,” journalism scholar James Carey noted at the dawn of the Internet age. That altered how the press of Europe saw the rise of fascism. Militarism was good business. Today, he foresaw, American journalism is beginning to be “bought up by the entertainment business —and e-commerce. Entertainment and e-commerce are today what the steel and chemical industries were in the 1930s.”[46]

The notion of freedom of the press is rooted in independence and diverse voices. Only a press free of government censors can tell the truth. In the modern context, that freedom was expanded to include independence from other institutions as well—parties, advertisers, business, and more. One by-product of the economic collapse of news is that the press as an independent institution is threatened. Not only can news not stand alone as a business, as it once did, but also its production is increasingly intermingled with other products (the rental of financial terminals at Bloomberg News) or with polit-

ical causes (advocacy groups producing their own journalism). And while technology has created an unprecedented free flow of information and opinion, shrinking newsrooms have also meant a decline in accountability journalism. It is a fact and one about which all citizens should worry.

In the end, the question is this: Can journalism sustain in the twenty-first century the purpose that forged it in the three and a half centuries that came before?

Answering this question begins with identifying what journalism's purpose is. The next step is understanding the principles that allow those who gather the news to sustain that purpose on behalf of the rest of us.

2

Truth: The First and Most Confusing Principle

A few days after John F. Kennedy was murdered, the man who succeeded Kennedy as president, Lyndon Johnson, sent for his secretary of defense. Johnson wanted to know what was really going on ten thousand miles across the globe, in a tiny country called Vietnam. Johnson didn't trust what he'd been told as vice president. He wanted his own information. Press reports at the time suggested the situation in South Vietnam had deteriorated in recent months following the takeover of a new government in a coup d'etat. How bad was it? Defense Secretary Robert McNamara flew to Saigon and spent three days talking to all the generals and touring the various battle zones.

On his way back, McNamara gave a press conference at Tan Son Nhat Airport. The enemy activity had eased, he announced, and he was "optimistic as to the progress that can be made in the coming year."[1] When he landed at Andrews

Air Force Base the next day, McNamara took a helicopter to the White House to report to Johnson personally. Afterward, in brief remarks to White House reporters, he described his meeting with the president: “We reviewed in great detail the plans of the South Vietnamese and the plans of our own military advisors for operations during 1964. We have every reason to believe they will be successful. We are determined that they shall be.” As Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of the *Washington Post* at the time, would put it many years later, “And the world heard nothing more about the secretary’s visit or his report to President Johnson.”[2]

Eight years later, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* published a secret government-written history about what the leaders really knew and thought about the Vietnam War. Among the mountain of documents, which came to be called the Pentagon Papers, was the substance of what McNamara in fact had reported to the President that day. “The situation is very disturbing,” McNamara’s private memorandum to Johnson warned. “Current trends, unless reversed in the next 2–3 months, will lead to neutralization at best,” he wrote, using the term at the time for a stalemate, “and more likely to a Communist-controlled state,” in other words, utter U.S. defeat in Vietnam in early 1964. The new South Vietnamese government was “indecisive and drifting.” The U.S. team helping them “lacks leadership, has been poorly informed, and is not working to a common plan.” The situation with the enemy “has been deteriorating in the countryside since July to a far greater extent than we realized.…”

It was a startling appraisal, utterly at odds with everything McNamara had said publicly, starker and more alarming than anything that the American public would know.

The seriousness of the situation in Vietnam was hardly a mystery to reporters in Vietnam. Two days after McNamara's report to the President, David Halberstam of the *New York Times* authored a detailed assessment of the situation there. The struggle in Vietnam had reached "a critical point," wrote Halberstam, who had just returned from fifteen months in the country. Halberstam's thesis in some ways even mirrored McNamara's private memo.[3] Halberstam's sources, however, were anonymous, described in the couched language of "experienced Western observers" and unnamed "officials." United Press International reporter Neil Sheehan had gone even further. His story about McNamara's visit to Vietnam suggested that the defense secretary had been blunt with Vietnamese leaders about how badly things were going. Yet Sheehan's sources were also unnamed, and he made no mention, or apparently had no idea, of how stark an assessment McNamara would give to Johnson.

"What might have happened," Bradlee would wonder two decades later, "had the truth emerged in 1963 instead of 1971," about what McNamara really thought and what he had really told the President?[4]

We use the words every day—*truth* and *lies, accurate* and *false*—and we think they convey something meaningful. McNamara *lied* during his press conferences. The Pentagon Papers revealed the *truth* of what he really thought

and reported to Johnson. The press reported accurately what McNamara said in his press conferences. Some reporters even tried to convey, using unnamed sources, the sense that McNamara might have been more worried than he was letting on. But they did not get at the truth of what he had written and told the President. The Pentagon Papers would be a sensation eight years later, so much so that the Nixon White House would try—and fail—to use the Supreme Court to stop their publication. The war would go on another decade before the defeat McNamara predicted finally occurred.

Over the last three hundred years, news professionals have developed a loose set of principles and values to fulfill the function of providing news—the indirect knowledge by which people come to form their opinions about the world. Foremost among these principles is this:

Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.

On this there is absolute unanimity and also utter confusion: Everyone agrees journalists must tell the truth, yet people are befuddled about what "the truth" means.

When the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Committee of Concerned Journalists asked journalists

in 1999 which news values they considered paramount, 100 percent answered "getting the facts right."[5]

In long interviews with our university research partners, journalists from both old and new media similarly volunteered "truth" overwhelmingly as a primary mission.[6] In forums, even ideological journalists gave the same answer. "What we're saying is you cannot be objective because you're going to go in with certain biases," said Patty Calhoun, the editor of the alternative weekly paper *Westword*. "But you can certainly pursue accuracy and fairness and the truth, and that pursuit continues."[7]

The desire that information be truthful is elemental. Since news is the material that people use to learn and think about the world beyond themselves, the most important quality it can possess is that it be usable and reliable. Will it rain tomorrow? Is there a traffic jam ahead? Did my team win? What did the President say? Truthfulness creates, in effect, the sense of security that grows from awareness and is at the essence of news.

This basic desire for truthfulness is so powerful, the evidence suggests it is innate. "In the beginning was the Word" is the opening line of the Gospel of John in the New Testament. The earliest journalists—messengers in preliterate societies—were expected to recall matters accurately and reliably, partly out of need. Often the news these messengers carried was a matter of survival. The chiefs needed accurate word about whether the tribe on the other side of the hill might attack.

It is interesting that oppressive societies tend to belittle literal definitions of truthfulness and accuracy, just as postmodernists do today (although for different reasons). In the Middle Ages, for instance, monks held that there was actually a hierarchy of truth. At the highest level were messages that told us about the fate of the universe, such as whether heaven existed. Next came moral truth, which taught us how to live. This was followed by allegorical truth, which exclaimed the moral of stories. Finally, at the bottom, the least important, was the literal truth, which the theorists said was usually empty of meaning and irrelevant. As one fourteenth-century manual explained, using logic similar to what we might hear today from a postmodern scholar or a Hollywood producer, "Whether it is truth of history or fiction doesn't matter, because the example is not supplied for its own sake but for its signification."[8]

Modern political operatives are enamored of similar notions and often preach the idea that in public life perception is reality. The operatives around Richard Nixon in 1968 extolled such notions to aggrandize their role in that election, for instance, as would operatives for politicians as diverse as Bill Clinton and Mitt Romney.[9]

Consider also what an anonymous advisor to George W. Bush told reporter Ron Suskind for a 2004 piece in the *New York Times Magazine* about how the government tries to control information in the new world: "[Journalists] are in what we call the reality-based community.... That's not the way the world really works anymore.... When we act, we create our

own reality. While you are studying that reality … we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too."[10]

The tools for such information management arguably are even greater today. The technology that creates the idea of citizen journalism also empowers political powers to control the image of them that is presented to the public. A 2013 study of Twitter messages from reporters at fifty-one U.S. newspapers found that "politicians were quoted in tweets 12 times more often than citizens, and along with government employees, accounted for 75 percent of quotes," reflecting the extent to which new communications technology has opened the public mind to special interest messages.[11]

The goal of official message management, whether it was medieval church leaders or modern political operatives today, is not enlightenment so much as control. They don't want literal facts to get in the way of political or religious persuasion. An accurate understanding of the day offers contradiction and dissonance to orthodoxy.

As the modern press began to form with the birth of democratic theory, the promise of being truthful and accurate quickly became a powerful part of even the earliest marketing of journalism. The first identifiable regular newspaper in England proposed to rely "on the best and most certain intelligence." The editor of the first paper in France, though his enterprise was government-owned, promised in his maiden issue, "In one thing I will yield to nobody—I mean in my endeavor to get at the truth." Similar promises to accuracy are

found in the earliest papers in America, Germany, Spain, and elsewhere.[12]

The earliest colonial journalism was a strange mix of essay and fact. The information about shipping and cargoes was accurate. The political vitriol was less so, yet it was also obviously more opinion or speech than strict information. Even James Callender, the notorious scandal monger who made his reputation with sex exposés of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, did not make his stories up, but trafficked in facts mixed with rumor.[13]

In the nineteenth century, as it disentangled itself from political control, journalism sought its first mass audience in part by relying on sensational crime, scandal, thrill seeking, and celebrity worship, but also by writing the news in plain language for regular people. The move away from party affiliation began with the *New York Sun* in the 1830s, and journalism gained new heights of popularity and sensation at the end of the century. These were the years of William Randolph Hearst, Joseph Pulitzer, and "yellow journalism." Yet even the Lords of the Yellow Press sought to assure readers that they could believe what they read, even if the pledge was not always honored. Hearst's *Journal*, which was guilty more of sensationalism than of invention, claimed it was the most truthful paper in town. Pulitzer's *World* operated under the motto "Accuracy, Accuracy, Accuracy" and was more reliable than is usually credited.[14]

To assure his readers they could believe what they read, Pulitzer created a Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play in the *New*

York World in 1913. In a 1984 article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Cassandra Tate described how the *World*'s first ombudsman noticed a pattern in the newspaper's reporting on shipwrecks: Each such story featured a cat that had survived. When the ombudsman asked the reporter about this curious coincidence, he was told:

> One of those wrecked ships had a cat, and the crew went back to save it. I made the cat a feature of my story, while the other reporters failed to mention the cat, and were called down by their city editors for being beaten. The next time there was a shipwreck, there was no cat but the other ship news reporters did not wish to take a chance, and put the cat in. I wrote the report, leaving out the cat, and then I was severely chided for being beaten. Now when there is a shipwreck all of us always put in the cat.[15]

The irony, of course, is that the embellishments were all put there to create a sense of realism.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, journalists began to realize that realism and reality—or accuracy and truth—were not so easily equated. In 1920, Walter Lippmann used the terms *truth* and *news* interchangeably in his book *Liberty and the News*. But in 1922, in *Public Opinion*, he wrote: "News and truth are not the same thing.... The function of news is to signalize an event," or make people aware of it. "The function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality upon which

men can act."[16] By 1938, journalism textbooks were beginning to question how truthful the news could really be.[17]

Over the next fifty years, after decades of debate and argument, sometimes by political ideologues and sometimes by postmodern deconstructionist academics, we came to the point where some denied that anyone could put facts into a meaningful context to report the truth about them. An epistemological skepticism began to pervade every aspect of our intellectual life, from art, literature, law, and physics to history. Columbia University historian Simon Schama suggested that "the certainty of an ultimately observable, empirically verifiable truth" was dead.[18]

With the digital age, some have suggested that what we considered truth was merely "consensus" arrived at by an oligarchical press system canvassing the opinions of a limited number of establishment sources, something changeable and far less solid than what we imagined. "Truth is a judgment about what persuades us to believe a particular assertion," NYU professor Clay Shirky has argued.[19]

The arguments doubting that there is anything such as truth, in other words, are long-standing. Truth, it seems, is too complicated for us to pursue—in our journalism or anything else. Or perhaps it doesn't even exist, since we are all subjective individuals. These are interesting arguments—maybe, on some philosophical level, even valid. But where does that leave what we call journalism? Is the word *truth* now something adequate for everyday conversation but something that doesn't hold up to real scrutiny?

Clearly, there are levels. "The journalist at the *New York Times* told us the other day that the New York Giants lost a football game by a score of 20–8," journalist and press critic Richard Harwood told us at one of the forums we organized to research this book. "Now that was a small piece of truth. But the story of why the Giants lost can be told in a hundred different ways—each story being written through a different lens that is fogged over by stereotypes and personal predilections."[20]

So what does journalism's obligation to the truth mean? The usual efforts to answer this question, at seminars or in philosophical tracts, end up in a muddle. One reason is that the conversation is usually not grounded in the real world. Philosophical discussions of whether "truth" really exists founder in semantics.

Another reason is that journalists themselves have never been very clear about what they mean by truthfulness. Journalism by nature is reactive and practical rather than philosophical and introspective. The serious literature by journalists thinking through such issues is not rich, and what little there is most journalists have not read. Theories of journalism are left to the academy, and many newspeople have historically devalued journalism education, arguing that the only place to learn is through osmosis on the job. As Ted Koppel, the highly respected network TV journalist, once declared: "Journalism schools are an absolute and total waste of time."[21]

The conventional explanations by journalists of how they get at the truth tend to be quick responses drawn from interviews or speeches or, worse, marketing slogans, and they often

rely on crude metaphors. The press is “a mirror” on society, said David Bartlett, then president of the Radio and Television News Directors Association, echoing a common phrase of the time. Journalism is “a reflection of the passions of the day,” leading television broadcaster Tom Brokaw told our academic research partners. News is whatever is “most newsworthy on a given day,” said a CNN producer.[22] These explanations made journalists seem passive—mere recorders of events rather than investigators, selectors, or editors.[23] It’s as if they thought truth was something that rises up by itself, like bread dough. Rather than defend their techniques and methods for finding truth, journalists tended to deny that they existed.

Whether it was secrecy, idealism, or ineptness, the failure by journalists to articulate what they were doing left citizens suspicious that the press was either deluding itself or hiding something. This is one reason the discussion of journalistic objectivity became such a trap. The term is so misunderstood and battered, the discussion mostly goes off track. It is also one of the reasons that a new era of digital pioneers, as they tried to contemplate the journalism they were disrupting, have tended to dismiss journalistic professionalism. They imagined journalists were largely stenographers, with random lists of sources, using fairly crude notions of balance to get at accuracy. Many if not most journalists were doing much more. But they had little vocabulary, let alone standard method, and even less journalistic literature, to explain themselves.

As we will discuss in more depth in chapter 4, on verification, originally it was not the journalist who was imagined

to be objective. It was his or her method. Today, however, in part because journalists have failed to articulate what they are doing, our contemporary understanding of objectivity is mostly muddled and confused. Most people, as we noted earlier and will detail more later, mistake objectivity to mean neutrality.

Despite the public's confusion, there is little doubt that journalists believe themselves to be engaged in pursuing truth, not just free speech or commerce. They have to be—for this is what society requires of them.

And, as we will see, "journalistic truth" means more than mere accuracy. It is a sorting-out process that takes place between the initial story and the interaction among the public, newsmakers, and journalists. This first principle of journalism—its disinterested pursuit of truth—is ultimately what sets journalism apart from other forms of communication.

JOURNALISTIC TRUTH

To understand this sorting-out process, it is important to remember that journalism exists in a social context. Out of necessity, citizens and societies depend on accurate and reliable accounts of events. They develop procedures and processes to arrive at what might be called "functional truth." Police track down and arrest suspects based on facts. Judges hold trials. Juries render verdicts. Industries are regulated, taxes are collected, and laws are made. We teach our children rules, history, physics, and biology. All of these truths—even the laws of sci-

ence—are subject to revision, but we operate by them in the meantime because they are necessary and they work.

This is what our journalism must be after—a practical or functional form of truth. It is not truth in the absolute or philosophical sense. It is not the truth of a chemical equation. Journalism can—and must—pursue the truths by which we can operate on a day-to-day basis. "We don't think it's unreasonable to expect jurors to render fair verdicts, or teachers to teach honest lessons, or historians to write impartial history, scientists to perform unbiased research. Why should we set any lower goals for poor journalists?" Bill Keller of the *New York Times* asked us. "Whether true objectivity is ever possible—I don't think that is what we're here for.... We strive for coverage that aims as much as possible to present the reader with enough information to make up his or her own mind. That's our fine ideal."[24]

Does this suggest that journalism should stick simply to accuracy, getting the names and dates right? Is that sufficient? The increasingly interpretative nature of most modern journalism tells us no. A journalism built merely on accuracy fails to serve contemporary civil society.

In the first place, mere accuracy can be a kind of distortion all its own. As long ago as 1947, the Hutchins Commission, a group of scholars who spent years producing a document that outlined the obligations of journalism, warned of the dangers of publishing accounts that were "factually correct but substantially untrue."[25] Even then, the commission cited stories about members of minority groups that, by failing to provide

context or by emphasizing race or ethnicity pointlessly, reinforced false stereotypes. “It is no longer enough to report the fact truthfully. It is now necessary to report the truth about the fact,” the commission concluded.

Mere accuracy is also not what people are looking for. In his book *News Values* journalist Jack Fuller described how philosophers imagine there are two tests of truth: one is correspondence, the other is coherence. For journalism, these tests roughly translate into getting the facts straight and making sense of the facts. Coherence must be the ultimate test of journalistic truth, Fuller decided. “Regardless of what the radical skeptics argue, people still passionately believe in meaning. They want the whole picture, not just part of it.... They are tired of polarized discussion....”[26]

Common sense tells us something similar. A report that the mayor praised the police at the Garden Club luncheon seem inadequate—even foolish—if the police are in fact entangled in a corruption scandal; the mayor’s comments are clearly political rhetoric, and they come in response to some recent attack by his critics.

This is far from suggesting that accuracy doesn’t matter, that facts are all relative—just another form of fodder for debate. On the contrary, accuracy is the foundation upon which everything else is built: context, interpretation, debate, and all of public communication. If the foundation is faulty, everything else is flawed. A debate between opponents arguing with false figures or purely on prejudice fails to inform. It only inflames. It takes the society nowhere. It is more helpful, and

more realistic, to understand the truth we seek or can expect from journalism to be a process—or a continuing journey toward understanding—that begins with the first account of an event and builds over time. For instance, the first news accounts signal a new situation or trend. They may begin with reports of something simple—an accident, a meeting, an inflammatory statement. They may come in the form of a brief alert with few details. The time and place of the accident, the damage done, the types of vehicles, arrests, unusual weather or road conditions—in effect, the physical externalities of the case—are facts that can be recorded and checked. Once they have verified the facts, those engaged in reporting the news should strive to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, valid for now, subject to further investigation. Journalist Carl Bernstein has described this as reporters striving to provide "the best obtainable version of the truth."[27] Journalist Howie Schneider has called it "conditional truth," subject to revision with new information. The principles of the *Washington Post*, drafted by Eugene Meyer in 1933, describe telling "the truth as nearly as the truth may be ascertained."[28]

An individual reporter may not be able to move much beyond a surface level of accuracy in a first account, particularly if that account is written in real time as a blog post or an alert. But the first account builds to a second, in which the sources of news have responded to initial mistakes and missing elements, and the second account builds to a third, and so on. Context is added in each successive layer. In more important and complex stories, there are subsequent contributions on

the editorial pages, in blogs, social media discourse, in official responses—the full range of public and private conversation. This practical truth is a protean thing that, like learning, grows like a stalactite in a cave, drop by drop, over time.

The truth is a complicated and sometimes contradictory phenomenon, but if it is seen as a process over time, journalism can get at it. First by stripping information of any attached misinformation, disinformation, or self-promoting bias and then by letting the community react, in the sorting-out process that ensues. As always, the search for truth becomes a conversation.

This definition helps reconcile the way we use the words *true* and *false* every day with the way we deconstruct those words in the petri dish of a philosophical debate. This definition comes closer to journalists' intuitive understanding of what they do than the crude metaphors of mirrors and reflections that are commonly handed out.

We understand truth as a goal—at best elusive—and still embrace it. We embrace it the same way as Albert Einstein did when he said of science that it was not about truth but about making what we know less false. For this is how life really is—we're often striving and never fully achieving. As historian Gordon Wood has said about writing history: "One can accept the view that the historical record is fragmentary and incomplete … and that historians will never finally agree in their interpretations" and yet still believe "in an objective truth about the past that can be observed and empirically verified." This is more than a leap of faith. In real life, people can tell when

someone has come closer to getting it right, when the sourcing is authoritative, when the research is exhaustive, when the method is transparent. Or as Wood put it, “Historians may never see and present that truth wholly and finally, but some of them will come closer than others, be more nearly complete, more objective, more honest, in their written history, and we will know it, and have known it, when we see it.”[29]

Those who have worked in news or in public life say much the same thing: Getting news that comes closer to a complete version of the truth has real consequences. In the first hours of an event, when being accurate is most difficult, accuracy is perhaps most important. It is during this time that public attitudes are formed, sometimes stubbornly, by the context within which the information is presented. Is it a threat to me? Is it good for me? Is it something I should be concerned about? The answer to these questions determines how carefully I follow a new event, how much verification of the facts I will look for. Based on his experience, Hodding Carter, a longtime journalist who served as assistant secretary of state for public affairs in the Carter administration’s State Department, has said that this is the time in which the government can exercise its greatest control over the public mind: “If given three days without serious challenge, the government will have set the context for an event and can control public perception of that event.”[30]

The digital age adds pressures in both directions to this process of searching for functional or conditional truth. The first pressure is speed. In the context of gathering news, speed is al-

most always the enemy of accuracy. It offers those who seek to report less time to check facts. This is why cable news channels that report continuously (such as CNN and Fox News) tend to report more erroneous information than the broadcast channels (NBC, CBS, or ABC) that have hours to vet their reports for a single network evening newscast. Posting news in real time on Twitter or elsewhere online, thus, tends to make all news organizations as vulnerable as cable.

The second pressure is the growing orientation toward commentary and argument. As people compose polemics, they are focused on persuasion. They naturally tend to choose facts that help them make their case. But this pushes the emphasis away by degrees from fact checking, from getting to the bottom of what happened and arriving at the most complete understanding of the facts.

An open networked media environment also means that more rumors, more misinformation are passed along in public—creating more confusion for users and more pressure on news organizations.

Those pressures pulling against truth and accuracy are balanced against others brought by the digital age that move in the opposite direction. The opening of the media system to more voices, particularly through social media, has the potential to strengthen the process of verification magnificently. More sources are likely to spot falsehoods and point them out. And there are countless examples. During political speeches, such as Paul Ryan's vice presidential acceptance speech at the 2012 Republican Convention, people pointed out inaccur-

acies in almost real time. When some media outlets in 2011 mistakenly reported that Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords had been shot to death by a gunman in Tucson while others reported she had been taken to a hospital, citizens pointed out the discrepancy on Twitter immediately, and news organizations had corrected the error within fifteen minutes.

As powerful and profound as the network is, however, it's an oversimplification—a hope that cannot be sustained—to think that in the networked culture the sorting out process always works efficiently—that the Internet, as some have put it, is a self-cleaning oven. In addition to the speed, a variety of other factors get in the way. In a fragmented media culture, more people may be operating in their own bubbles of self-selected interests and sources. We may, as we scatter to our own sources for information, lack a central gathering place or a common understanding of the basic facts. The initial account of an event is always the most important, and the more hastily it is put together, the more inaccurate it is likely to be. That problem is added to by the phenomenon of our simply moving on, deciding we have learned what we needed about something and are on to the next thing, like the student only paying half attention in class and getting a general sense of the topic but botching all the details. Only there is no test at the end of the unit to tell us we got it about half-wrong.

The more compelling sense is that truth requires commitment, a dedication to a process of verification, and that search is made more powerful when journalists and the public are knit together in a way that mixes the structure of traditional

journalism techniques and authority with the power of the networked community.

Consider the case of Ian Tomlinson, a newspaper vendor who died after being caught in the middle of a protest over the G20 meeting in England in April 2009. The initial police account held that Tomlinson suffered a heart attack while walking home and that protesters were culpable for getting in the way of medics whose treatment might have saved his life. The next day's *Evening Standard* newspaper, the paper Tomlinson sold, bore the headline: "Police pelted with bricks as they help dying man."

The *Guardian* newspaper, skeptical of that version and of police secrecy surrounding the case, pursued two lines of inquiry to go deeper. One, traditional shoe-leather reporting, had journalists covering the protest go through their notebooks of interviewees to identify possible eyewitnesses; the paper also pored over its photos to see if anyone had inadvertently caught a glimpse of the incident. The effort found one eyewitness and photographic evidence that seemed to prove Tomlinson had fallen to the ground at the feet of police, one hundred yards from where he would later fall again and die.

The second line of inquiry reached out to readers on the Internet. After taking four days to conclusively establish that its photos indeed proved Tomlinson had fallen earlier, near police, the *Guardian* put its photographic evidence online and asked if anyone knew more. The paper thus became part of the online conversation questioning the circumstances of Tomlinson's death. Via Twitter, *Guardian* reporter Paul Lewis

discovered photo albums on another social media platform, Flickr, that contained more images raising doubts about Tomlinson's death. But all of this was circumstantial evidence, feeding online speculation, Lewis thought, not yet proof of any wrongdoing. The crowd, like the *Guardian*, in other words, was uneasy, but it did not really know what had happened.

One member of that crowd was Chris La Jaunie, an investment fund manager in New York who had been in London during the protest. La Jaunie had shot video that he thought might be explosive; it showed a policeman pushing Tomlinson. He had considered releasing it on YouTube, but had had second thoughts. It might go unnoticed. It might be challenged. It would also lack any context, a lone video posted by an unfamiliar source. Believing the *Guardian* had been the most effective interrogator of the police version of events, he contacted Lewis. The paper verified his account, triangulated his footage with other evidence, and eight days later overturned what in effect was a police cover-up, establishing that Tomlinson had died as a result of actions by police.

The Tomlinson case, Lewis argues, illustrates the synergy of what the *Guardian* calls Open Journalism, which combines the professionalism of journalists and their access to the observations and knowledge of public witness and experience.[31]

One striking feature of the Tomlinson story is that there are parallels to it from earlier times, which reveal just how much the means of getting at the truth have changed, while the goal of pursuing it has not.

Fifty years earlier, in Orangeburg, South Carolina, three students were killed and more than twenty others injured in what police described as “an exchange of gunfire” with state troopers during a protest over civil rights. After hearing about the shootings, reporter Jack Nelson, the Atlanta bureau chief of the *Los Angeles Times*, flew to South Carolina to check out the story. While most reporters were gathered at press conferences, Nelson went to the Orangeburg Regional Hospital, where twenty-seven wounded students were being treated. He stuffed two reporter’s notebooks in his inside jacket pocket, creating a bulge underneath that resembled a shoulder holster holding a handgun, and walked into the office of the hospital administrator, Phil Mabry. Nelson identified himself “as being from the Atlanta bureau” and said he wanted to examine the medical records of the wounded students. Mabry assumed Nelson was from the Atlanta office of the FBI. Nelson did not disabuse him.

The dutiful hospital administrator laid the medical records out on his desk. The records showed what had really happened. Most of the wounded students, and the ones who had died, had been shot in the back, caught in the cross fire as they were running away. Nelson corroborated the medical records with eyewitness interviews and other official records to prove the police account was false. He wanted his story to be airtight. His account proved the state police were lying and added momentum to the civil rights protests.[32]

Paul Lewis combined traditional shoe leather, documentary evidence, and the power of social media to get definitive proof

of what happened to Ian Tomlinson. A half century earlier, Jack Nelson used toughness, bluff, the trained knowledge of where official documentary records could be located, and the formal and informal reporting techniques required to establish what really happened in Orangeburg. In both cases, truth was a process—but within reach.

Over time there have been people, even inside traditional journalism, who were unsure if truth was a practical goal for news. At different times, some journalists have suggested substitutes. Probably the two most common of these have been fairness and balance. If newspeople cannot know the truth, they can at least be fair and balanced. But both of these concepts, under scrutiny, are inadequate. Fairness is too abstract and, in the end, is more subjective than truth. Fair to whom? How do you test fairness? Truthfulness, for all its difficulties, at least can be tested.

Balance, too, is subjective. Balancing a story by being fair to both sides may not be fair to the truth if both sides do not, in fact, have equal weight. And in those many cases where there are more than two sides to a story, how does one determine which side to honor? Balance, if it amounts to false balance, becomes distortion.

Technology has added obstacles to the process before. By the late 1990s, as we detailed in our book *Warp Speed*, various forces were converging to weaken journalists' pursuit of truthfulness, despite the continuing allegiance most journalists professed to it. With the advent of the continuous 24-7 news cycle, which began with cable and grew with the Web,

the news became more piecemeal; what were once the raw ingredients of journalism began to be passed on to the public directly. As the number of outlets for news proliferated, the sources who talked to the press, and wanted to influence the public, gained more relative power over the journalists who covered them; more outlets, in effect, made it more of a seller's market for information. As audiences fragmented, different news outlets began to adapt differing standards of journalism. In the continuous news culture, news channels trying to shovel out the latest information had less time to check things out. Amid growing competition and speed, there emerged what we called a new Journalism of Assertion that was overwhelming the more traditional Journalism of Verification, which had moved more slowly and put a higher premium on getting things right first.

That process was well under way before the arrival of the Internet as a force in our news culture. In the first years of the Web, as the audience further fragmented and a proliferating number of news outlets competed to get the attention of that audience, we saw the rapid rise of a third model of media—a Journalism of Affirmation, epitomized by talk show hosts like Rush Limbaugh and Rachel Maddow, who attracted audiences through reassurance, or the affirming of preconceptions. (We will talk more about these different models in later chapters.)

In short, what had been a fairly homogeneous notion of journalism that was grounded in reporting, even if it had somewhat differing styles in alternative weeklies versus daily newspapers or nightly local TV, was giving way to different

models built on speed and convenience in one model and reassurance in another. The changes were subtle. Even some of the journalists who worked in these new media barely recognized the values shift occurring. Cable TV journalists did not readily acknowledge that they put less of a premium on verification. They just imagined they did it differently. The shift in the core appeal to the audience represented, however subtly, a shift in ethics. And that shift was predicated on more choice and more competition for the one thing that could not grow —the amount of time in the day. More outlets were competing for what was a finite level of audience attention.

With the Internet, there emerged a new and important fourth model—a Journalism of Aggregation—in which publishers such as Yahoo News, search engines such as Google, or Web communities such as Reddit—and with the rise of social media, in turn, individual citizens themselves—recommended and passed along content that they had no direct role in producing and, often, made no effort to verify. Google became one of the most powerful institutions on earth by aggregating for users the material produced by others, with the assurance that its computerized algorithm was ranking its searches based on the reputational record of the source. There is no doubting the incomparable richness of a curated news environment. The experience of sorting through numerous accounts of an event effortlessly in minutes offers a depth, context, and control that the reading of the single account in the past could not come close to. But it is also important to recognize that we now operate in a distributed media envir-

onment where most publishers are passing along work they cannot possibly vouch for—and may make no effort to—and that we accept this now without a second thought. The burden of verification has been passed incrementally from the news deliverer to the consumer.

Add to this pressure the shrinking resources in newsrooms dedicated to direct reporting, as the advertising dollars in legacy platforms were replaced by digital dimes. It is a world in which an initial error in reporting or editing or interpretation can turn into a kind of original sin that influences us forever.

The instinct for truth is no less important today—but it is more pressured. Peter Viereck, professor emeritus in history at Mount Holyoke College, has argued that in a networked and connected world, the value of a group dedicated to pursuing truth is now greater. “I can think of nothing more gallant,” Viereck says, “even though again and again we fail, than attempting to get at the facts; attempting to tell things as they really are. For at least reality, though never fully attained, can be defined. Reality is that which, when you don’t believe it, doesn’t go away.”[33]

In practical terms, more information makes truth more challenging, even though it means that at the end of the process the truth we arrive at will likely be more accurate. The process, however, becomes more demanding. Call it the paradox of learning in the Information Age. When information is a commodity in oversupply—when there is so much more input—knowledge becomes more difficult to acquire because one must sift and synthesize more information to set things in

order. The knowledge acquired may be deeper and better, but it will likely also be more specialized.

This paradox may be the most daunting tension currently affecting our ability to know what's true. There is a gulf between the abundance of news and information available and our ability to sort through it all.

And when the media become background noise, our capacity to focus is diminished. It becomes more difficult to rise above the din. If Winston Churchill was correct that "a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on," greater technology has only speeded up the process, aiding truth and falsehood alike.[34]

These factors help to explain why the new partisan journalism of the twenty-first century, the Journalism of Affirmation, is even more appealing for some audiences. It makes things easier. It is a way of achieving order in a more confusing world, without so much sifting and heavy lifting. It offers comfort. They tidied up our mental rooms for us. The neo-partisans, be they Bill O'Reilly or Stephanie Miller or a growing array of ideological websites, create the impression for audiences that they are sense makers.

Rather than rush to add interpretation, we need to ensure that we also have a journalism that establishes what has truly happened before it rushes to tell us what it means—a journalism that first concentrates on context and verification. We should look for news that makes transparent how it was produced—the sourcing, evidence, and journalistic decision making that went into it. We should look for journalism that

has explicitly tried to sift out rumor, innuendo, and spin and shows evidence of that effort. We need a journalism, in other words, that allows us to answer the question "Why should I believe this?" rather than "Do I agree with it?"

And the more journalism, through its transparency, encourages consumers to think about how the news was put together, the more it will increase their skills for making informed judgments about what constitutes reliable news.

What we need from our journalism in the twenty-first century, in short, is not so different from what we needed in the twentieth. What journalism looks like, however, how it is presented, and even the routines that journalists use to achieve those goals are very different. The new journalism cannot presume anymore to be the only content its audience sees. It cannot present itself as a singular omniscient account of events. It must assume that we have seen other, more partial information in real time, but it also must provide a coherent account on its own in case we have not. It must be conscious and try to correct false information that has previously been presented, particularly if there is a reason to think that misinformation has resonated in the marketplace of ideas. Put more simply, the best new journalism will compete in the marketplace of ideas by being more deeply reported and more transparent, by correcting the record for audiences that have been misinformed and by answering questions other accounts have left unclear.

The impact of this new journalism, in turn, will extend beyond its direct audience, for it will impact and change the

work others produce about the same news events. And if it is produced by smart managers, they will spend more effort than they once did marketing this work to elevate its impact both on the public and other news producers and analysts.

We will explain the new ways in which this journalism must be created and presented in subsequent chapters. But it all begins with the recognition that the new journalism, even in a networked era, must be built on a foundation of truth—and that truth cannot be assumed to occur automatically based on the presence of more sources. The pursuit of truth is a process that requires an intellectual discipline and vigilance. It also requires memory—not forgetting about misinformation simply because the discussion has quickly moved on. And the need for this is greater, not lesser, in the new century, because the likelihood of untruth has become so much greater.

For truth to prevail, journalists must make clear to whom they owe their first loyalty. That is the next step.

3

Who Journalists Work For

In most businesses, accountability is tied to fairly straightforward metrics. Usually, success is measured in dollars. The bonuses of lawyers, doctors, businesspeople, and most of upper management are tied to how much money their operations bring in.

What is the best mark of value for someone producing journalism?

For years, journalists were evaluated mostly based on highly subjective judgments about the quality of their work. The number of stories reporters produced might be part of the mix, but that varied widely by beat and was not necessarily relevant to how their bosses, the editors themselves, were judged.

At the end of the twentieth century, a new trend emerged: As the industry began to worry more about efficiency and profit, under the assumption that it now was a mature industry whose audience could not grow, it began to tie the perform-

ance of top news managers to the profitability of the news enterprise rather than the quality of the content produced under their watch, just as it had previously done with its advertising and circulation executives. Quality factors started to make up half or less of the decision criteria about the performance of news executives and how much they should be paid. The bonuses, at least for managers, began to be based in large part on how much profit their companies made.[1]

These corporate incentive programs formalized a new theory of newsroom management. In deed if not in name, by 2000 America's journalistic leaders had been transformed into businesspeople. Half of newspaper newsroom leaders reported that they spent at least a third of their time not on journalism but on business matters.[2]

At a minimum, the shift in focus did not have the desired effect. The effort to turn newsroom leaders into cost managers was part of the collective failure of the news industry to adapt to disruption. Ensuring that everyone was focused on maximizing profit and share price only broadened and reinforced the defensive fortress mentality in news companies, which became concentrated on protecting revenue rather than innovating the product. It made it more difficult for newsroom leaders to advocate for the public interest within their companies, and to push for risky, expensive experiments in coverage that might hurt short-term profitability. Publishers and executives talked openly about trying to blow up the culture of the newsroom because it resisted these business imperatives. These changes in the culture of news companies,

not coincidentally, showed up in the data about why citizens began to lose their faith in and connection to the news. The public began to see the news as much more of a business and much less of a public service—precisely when the industry tied the compensation of newsroom leadership to those business demands.

Perhaps it made no difference. The fortress mind-set that blocked innovation, and even led more innovative people in news companies to flee, might have occurred anyway. But the move to make those who produced the news accountable not for the quality of their journalism but for the profit they helped generate came just at the moment that the industry needed to reimagine its product, not protect its revenue.

Today, in the networked news environment, evaluating success in journalism is even more complicated. Many emerging media outlets do not expect to generate revenue at the outset as much as build audience and trusted brand. That might suggest measuring success by the traffic the content generates. Yet it quickly becomes obvious that this is also problematic. The coverage of the local champion college football team will surely generate more page views than the work of the reporter whose enterprise has revealed critical problems with the city's water supply. The investigative reporter covering the CIA and the NSA, whose profile must be low to protect his often anonymous sources, is not likely to want to compete at promoting himself in social media with the film critic who appears on television, blogs avidly about movies and celebrities, and is highly visible on Twitter.

A number of people trying to contemplate the metrics of the Web have begun to think a more proper measure of journalism value should be "impact." In a morass of numbers, where page views, unique visitors, and time on site seem to create a muddle of conflicting opinions, with each rating company offering conflicting data, shouldn't the criteria of whether journalism has value—and will build your brand—be the good it does for democratic society? This new discussion is highly idealistic. And those pushing this argument are quick to admit that the task is complex and that any metrics are only proxies, just the beginning of the quest.

Wherever this comes out, the struggle over how to assess the value of a work of journalism goes to the heart of an underlying issue: We established in the previous chapter the idea that journalists must seek out the truth. But what conditions are necessary for those who practice journalism to be able to get at the truth, and also to communicate that truth to the public in a way that their citizens will believe it? The answer—the second principle of journalism—is loyalty.

No one questions that news organizations answer to many constituencies. Community institutions, local groups, parent companies, shareholders, advertisers, and many more interests must be considered and served by a successful news organization. Yet what newspaper publishers gradually came to understand in the nineteenth century—and what generations of news publishers across other technologies refined with significant hardship and later, under duress, began to forget in the twentieth—is that those who produce news in an or-

ganization (whether the ultimate motive is profit, prestige, community building, authority, audience reach, or some mix) must have one allegiance above all others. And this commitment forms the second element of journalism:

Journalism's first loyalty is to citizens.

A commitment to citizens is more than professional egoism. It is the implied covenant between someone producing a work of journalism and the public that consumes it that the work is honest. In some cases, this is a covenant among citizens themselves to be transparent about who they are and why they are sharing or creating content in the first place. Whoever produces the news, it is an understanding about purpose that tells the audience that the movie reviews are straight, that the restaurant reviews are not influenced by who buys an ad, that the coverage is not self-interested or slanted for friends or underwriters, that the work is not a veil whose real purpose is something different than it is presented to be.

The notion that those who report the news are not obstructed from digging up and telling the truth—even at the expense of the owners' other financial interests, the funders' political agenda, or the sponsors' products—is a prerequisite of telling the news not only accurately but also persuasively.

It is the basis for why citizens believe what they are seeing or hearing or reading. They know they are not being misled or lied to. In short, loyalty to citizens is the most important asset of any publisher that claims to produce journalism. It is what makes the news content trustworthy. And that, in turn, is what makes the publication's advertising more credible. It makes the e-commerce transactions readers engage in on the site seem safer. It makes the events that generate revenue seem more worth attending. It also means that any new experiments to make advertising messages more compelling, whether they are called "native advertising" or "sponsored content" or something else, must also be designed in a way that does not undermine the credibility of the news enterprise. All of this begins with the idea of loyalty to the citizen, to the audience, to the concept that the public is being served rather than exploited or, worse, deceived.

Thus people who produce journalism have different loyalties from employees engaged in other types of work. They have a social obligation that at times overrides employers' or financial sponsors' immediate interests, and yet this obligation is the source of their employers' financial success.

Allegiance to citizens is the meaning of what we have come to call journalistic independence. As we will see, the phrase has often been used as a synonym for other ideas, including disengagement, disinterestedness, detachment, or neutrality. These other terms, ironically, have tended to create confusion and to reflect a fuzzy understanding of what the intellectual independence of journalism really means. Professional jour-

nalists contributed to their woes by passing that confusion on to the public, and citizens have understandably become skeptical, even cynical and angry, as a result.

That journalists' primary commitment is to the public is a deeply felt tradition among both journalists and citizens. In a survey on values by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Committee of Concerned Journalists, more than 80 percent listed "making the reader/listener/viewer your first obligation" as a "core principle of journalism."[3] In open-ended, in-depth interviews with developmental psychologists, more than 70 percent of journalists similarly placed "audience" as their first loyalty, well above their employers, themselves, their profession, or even their families.[4] "I always worked for the people who turned on the television set," said Nick Clooney, the father of the actor George and a former newscaster in Los Angeles, Cincinnati, and elsewhere. "Always. Whenever I was having a discussion with a general manager or a member of the board of directors, my bottom line was always, 'I don't work for you. You're paying my check, and I'm very pleased. But the truth of the matter is, I don't work for you, and if it comes down to a question of loyalty, my loyalty will be to the person who turns on the television set.... When I made that position clear, [it was] never questioned."[5]

This sense that the journalist has a loyalty beyond and above that to his or her employer is so deeply held that it manifests itself at the very best news organizations in dramatic, public rebellions of a sort inconceivable in other industries. In

2003, when reporters and editors at the *New York Times* felt that the two most powerful people in their newsroom—the executive editor and the managing editor—had violated this loyalty in condoning the conduct of and then trying to avoid responsibility for Jayson Blair, a reporter who plagiarized and fictionalized, the newsroom's anger effectively forced the publisher to remove these editors.[6] When the publisher's handling of controversial reporter Judith Miller's involvement in a leak investigation in 2005 evoked similar concerns, *New York Times* reporters Don Van Natta Jr., Adam Liptak, and Clifford J. Levy were not shy about revealing these shortcomings in the paper.[7] And then in a very public warning to her boss, columnist Maureen Dowd threatened in the opinion pages that if Miller were allowed back on her beat, the public shouldn't trust the newspaper. Eventually, Miller resigned.

The revolt was not unique. The *Los Angeles Times* had a similar response from its newsroom over a sweetheart deal with a local sports arena, which toppled the editor and publisher. The *Washington Post* backtracked on an ill-conceived plan for private dinners between lobbyists and lawmakers.

It is fair to ask whether this sense of mission has weakened as news organizations have lost revenue. Is the commitment to audiences first a luxury of high profit margins, something that we may look back on, as news organizations seek new kinds of revenue, as an artifact of a passing era?

There is too much evidence to suggest this impulse goes deeper—that the commitment of those trying to get to the bottom of things is to a strongly felt, almost spiritual sense of

mission on the public's behalf. It is a sentiment that we have heard countless times from journalists we have met, from countless countries. "I see journalists all around the world as soldiers in an army of truth," Idriss Njutapvoul, a journalist from Cameroon who writes for the website Journal du Cameroun, told us in 2013.[8] There is something in the act of trying to find out the truth of events, and relate them in a way that connects to the public, that binds those who gather the news. The similarities among journalists working in different countries, in different traditions and media, are far more important than their differences.

And the public also expects this commitment from those who provide news, particularly professionals. For years, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press has asked people whether they want news that reflected their point of view or news that reflected all sides. While trust, accuracy, and a host of other metrics fell, the numbers never significantly wavered. More than six in ten Americans, roughly two-thirds (64 percent) in 2012 preferred news that was not aligned with a particular point of view.[9]

This kind of understanding did not come easily. Though news produced on behalf of the public rather than the party first began to emerge in the 1830s, it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that a large number of leading daily newspaper publishers began to substitute editorial independence for political ideology. The most famous declaration of this intellectual and financial independence came in 1896, when a young publisher from Tennessee named Adolph Ochs

bought the struggling *New York Times*. Ochs was convinced that a good many New Yorkers were tired of the tawdry sensationalism of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, and that they would welcome a more tasteful—and accurate—style of journalism. Under the simple headline BUSINESS ANNOUNCEMENT, Ochs published on his first day as owner the words that would become his legacy. It was his "earnest aim," he wrote, "to give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of party, sect or interests involved."

Other publishers had made similar claims to independence, but as authors Alex Jones and Susan Tifft put it in their history of the *Times*, Ochs "actually believed what he wrote."[10] Newspapers across the country reprinted the statement in full. As the *Times* went on to become the most influential paper in New York and then the world, others followed the Ochs model, staking their business plan on the idea that putting the audience ahead of political and immediate financial interests was the best long-term financial strategy. After buying the *Washington Post* in 1933, for instance, Eugene Meyer crafted a set of principles that stated, among other items, "In pursuit of the truth, the newspaper shall be prepared to make sacrifices of its material fortunes, if such a course be necessary for the public good."[11]

As owners began trumpeting editorial independence in their marketing, journalists seized on it to upgrade their professionalism. A generation of early press critics emerged, such as Will Irwin, a former newspaper reporter and editor of *McClure's Magazine*, who in 1911 published a bracing fifteen-part series

in *Collier's* chronicling in bold detail the abuses of the press. Seizing on the new technology of the lightbulb, Irwin called on a new public service role for journalism, "an electric light in a dark alley."[12] Newspaper editors in turn reacted to the rhetoric of their bosses and the rebukes of the critics, and they tried to professionalize as a group. Malcolm Bingay, a columnist for the *Detroit Free Press*, has traced this development to the genesis of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the primary trade association for those who run America's newspaper newsrooms. In 1912, a group of editors had gathered to preview Glacier National Park one summer night in the Rockies:

> As they sat around a campfire they heard [Casper] Yost [editorial page editor of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*] discuss an idea which possessed him. His dream was the creation of an ethical organization of American newspaper editors.... Little Casper, tagged Arsenic and Old Lace by his contemporaries, might more appropriately be remembered as creating the modern concept of responsibility of the press, a concept often lost today in the more dramatic scuffles about press freedom.[13]

The organization's code of ethics placed editorial independence above all: "Independence: Freedom from all obligations except that of fidelity to the public interest is vital," it stated. "Promotion of any private interest contrary to the general welfare, for whatever reasons, is not compatible with honest journalism.... Partisanship, in editorial comment which knowingly departs from the truth, does violence to the best spirit of

American journalism; in the news columns it is subversive of a fundamental principle of the profession."

In the commercial era, at the height of its monopoly over audience attention, news organizations were periodically tested to see how seriously they took these statements of public commitment. When one of its columnists, Foster Winans, was caught engaging in insider trading in the 1980s, the *Wall Street Journal* felt compelled to publicly reexamine and rewrite its code of conduct. "The central premise of this code is that Dow Jones' reputation for quality and for the independence and integrity of our publications is the heart and soul of our enterprise." This was a financial premise, not a purely journalistic one, just as it is for other news organizations as well. "Dow Jones cannot prosper if our customers cannot assume that … our analyses represent our best independent judgments rather than our preference, or those of our sources, advertisers or information providers."[14]

Newspapers became monopolies in the 1960s and generally toned down such declarations, except—like the *Journal*—in times of crisis. But television journalism, which is far more commercially competitive, continued to market itself in the public's name. Throughout the 1990s, for instance, at the very time of rising suspicions about the press, "On Your Side" and "Working 4 You" were two of the most popular slogans in local television news. Internal station research, as well as focus groups conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, suggest they were also the most effective slogans.[15]