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## The Future of Journalism and Citizenship

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*This essay is the fifth in a series exploring the role of professions in a modern, liberal democratic society and their effect on the civic culture of the nation. For more information about AEI's Program on American Citizenship, visit [www.citizenship-aei.org](http://www.citizenship-aei.org).*

In 2012, the Pulitzer Prize committee awarded the prize for breaking news reporting to the *Tuscaloosa News* in Alabama for its coverage of a wave of tornados that had swept through Alabama and other southern states the previous spring. There had been hundreds of dead and missing. Buildings were smashed or lost power—and one was the paper's printing plant. While the *News* was getting its operations up and running at another plant 50 miles away, it used Google Documents and social media to report on storm developments and coordinate searches for missing persons.

It is an inspiring story for watchers of storms, but a depressing one for watchers of journalism—a newspaper gets praise for finding an alternative to publishing a newspaper. That, in microcosm, describes journalism's encounter with information technology over the past decade. The efficiencies brought by open trade and the easy flow of information were revolutionizing many industries by the 1970s. It took a very long time for these developments to work their way into the journalism world, but when they arrived, they did so with a vengeance.

The number of working journalists in the United States has fallen back to its 1971 level, although the country's population has increased by half since then. According to a 2009 report by *Washington Post* Vice President Leonard Downie Jr. and historian Michael Schudson, the *Baltimore Sun's* newsroom has in recent decades fallen from 400 journalists to 150, the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* from 600 to 300, and the *San Francisco Chronicle's* from 500 to 200.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to mention the prestigious papers that have simply died, from the *Rocky Mountain News* to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (which now appears only online) or those, including the *Newark Star-Ledger* and the *Washington Post* itself, that have systematically replaced seasoned journalists with inexpensive—and inexperienced—younger ones in hopes of producing a five-star product on a two-star budget. Journalists in the first decades of the 21st century live lives similar to those of the Rust Belt factory workers that Bruce Springsteen sang about in the 1970s and 1980s: harried, precarious, and subject to a barrage of propaganda about how pointless the march of history has rendered their calling.

A foreign correspondent or a city hall beat reporter stripped of his job is no more deserving of our sympathy than is a smelter or a machinist. But we should not ignore, either, that there has always been something special about journalism that makes its evolution a matter of broad significance. There are successful countries that do not produce their own coal or automobiles. But for the past two centuries, there have been no countries worthy of the name “free” in which journalism does not thrive.

Journalism has an intimate relationship to citizenship. What remains of that relationship after the information revolution will give us some idea of what American politics is going to look like in the future—how democratic and cultured it will be, and how likely to enhance (or demean) our public life.

## The Role of Journalists in the 20th Century

Opinions about the role of the journalist in a free society vary widely according to political ideology. But there is a rough consensus about why top-quality journalism flourished for a while in the 20th century. The basic problem that brings mass journalism into being is that political democracy and technological complexity mix poorly. Although our world grows more networked and complicated every day, we claim to want to make our political life more democratic, more answerable to the public.

Journalism exists to help citizens understand the society around them well enough to act responsibly in it.

There is no obvious way to do this. A question about tariffs on fish oil may involve subtle issues of diplomacy (which of two distant fish-oil exporters should be rewarded as the more trustworthy ally?) and science (which fish oil is more environmentally damaging to procure?), not to mention economics and employment. You cannot expect the average or even the highly educated voter to master the detail necessary to decide the matter. But you cannot entrust the running of a democracy to experts, either. They will rule in their own interests, get captured by other interests, or—the most usual case—rule as honestly as they can, but following biases invisible to them (“What’s good for fish oil is good for America”) until the country finds itself in a mess.

Demagoguery is the oldest, most time-honored way of reaching political decisions in the absence of complete factual knowledge. But journalism can do better than that. At least that is what people who are optimistic about liberal democracy believe. Journalism exists to help citizens understand the society around them well enough to act responsibly in it. Most journalists, and most theorists of journalism, take the words “understand” and “act” in their political sense. They are wrong to.

Politics is only a limited part of life, and it is only a limited (although relatively bigger) part of journalism. Journalism enables citizens to act not just by stripping

the rhetoric away from the Republican and Democratic budget plans and analyzing what they will mean for them personally. Journalism also helps citizens by telling them that the circus is in town; that Masses are at 7:30 a.m., 10:00 a.m., and 12:00 p.m.; that Stephen King’s new novel is his best yet; that the Tigers can forget about the playoffs unless they find a decent middle reliever; or that it is raining. We should be skeptical about theories of journalism that fail to explain why newspapers have garden columns and funny pages.

But the virtues and purposes of journalism are indeed most visible when the subject is politics. The more imperiled ordinary politics is, the more important the role of the journalist becomes. “Live Not by Lies” and other articles that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote before he was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1974 are the archetype of this kind of journalism. Konstanty Gebert, a reporter for Warsaw’s *Gazeta Wyborcza* who wrote about the Solidarity movement under Polish Communism, said, with regard to *samizdat* printing during the Cold War: “Democrats have an obligation to know underground printing the way a person has an obligation to know first aid.”<sup>2</sup>

It is a self-aggrandizing fantasy of many Western bourgeois journalists that they inhabit *this* world of journalism; whether one has Solzhenitsyn’s virtues is generally unknowable until one faces Solzhenitsyn’s challenges. But journalism well practiced, even in free countries and in prosperous times, does require the two great virtues of the citizen: honesty and courage.

### Walter Lippmann’s Journalistic Code

It was Walter Lippmann, the great author, editor, and columnist of the early 20th century, who laid out the code around which American journalistic culture was built. Starting in *Liberty and the News* (1920), Lippmann focused squarely on the tensions between democracy and complexity, discussed previously. Modern life, Lippmann explained, raises “questions more intricate than any that church or school had prepared [citizens] to understand.”<sup>3</sup> There was something reactionary about this progressive’s mission, as the language of church and school makes plain: journalism is the tool that makes it possible to be an old-style citizen amidst new-style complexity.

Lippmann took his critique even further. He thought that the world had grown too complicated not just for the average reader but also for the average journalist. “The news from which he must pick and choose,” Lippmann wrote, “has long since become too complicated even for the most highly trained reporter.”<sup>4</sup>

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An overload of information was not the only threat journalists faced. Organized interests were constantly trying to pervert journalists’ mission to serve the ends of partisan politics or big business. Lippmann described this process by inventing a phrase that has remained one of the key terms of journalism studies in our day: “The manufacture of consent,” he wrote, “is an unregulated private enterprise. For in an exact sense the present crisis of western democracy is a crisis in journalism.”<sup>5</sup> The “manufacture of consent” is probably what the writer George Packer meant when he wrote recently of “the default force in American life, organized money.”<sup>6</sup>

There is something not often remarked about Lippmann that needs to be stressed here, especially as we witness the changes being caused by Internet journalism: he was relatively unconcerned about the threat that complexity and vested interest posed to opinion. He was less worried that newspapers would begin publishing propaganda than that they would interrupt or corrupt the flow of facts. Facts themselves had, in his time as in ours, lost prestige in the journalistic profession. “Since the war especially,” Lippmann wrote, “editors have come to believe that their highest duty is not to report but to instruct, not to print news but to save civilization. . . . They believe that edification is more important than veracity.”<sup>7</sup> In so doing, they played into the hands of organized money, not to mention organized politics. Vested interests did not fear a self-regarding orator of the penny press who would “stand

up” to them in a denunciation laden with adjectives. They feared a reporter who would reveal an unpleasant fact—a bribe, say, or a secret agreement, or even a fact that was known to many but not *officially* known.

Opinion was prestigious. It was the part of journalism closest to the humane arts of history and philosophy, and it was the part in which Lippmann had won his reputation. But it was the humble reporter, not the columnist, who was at the heart of the journalistic enterprise. In Lippmann’s view, “reporting is a post of peculiar honor.”<sup>8</sup> And Lippmann laid out a code of journalistic honor that, to an extent, remains the model for journalistic conduct even today. It can be summed up in the word “objectivity.”

The code of objectivity was, on its surface, just a few rules of good conduct and quality control—a matter of double-checking the facts of story A and listening to the people who believed the *real* story was story B. Like progressives in other walks of society at the time, Lippmann had a range of draconian laws and regulations to propose. “False documentation should be illegal,” he wrote. A press diploma should be “a necessary condition for the practice of reporting.”<sup>9</sup> He professed unease about offering these rules—and with good reason, we would now say.

But objectivity was more than a code. It was also a philosophy of how the citizen-journalist fit into society at large. Out of this philosophy arose what has often been called “accountability journalism.”<sup>10</sup> Journalists would hold politicians’ feet to the fire in the name of a public that deserved honest government. They would hold moguls’ feet to the fire in the name of easily exploited consumers and investors. This philosophy placed the journalist in a position of skepticism toward power. It assumed there was a tendency among the holders of power to manipulate the public debate.

Journalists were objective, but they could not be neutral in the face of manipulation. Indifference, Lippmann believed, “is too feeble and unreal a doctrine to protect the purpose of liberty, which is the furnishing of a healthy environment in which human judgment and inquiry can most successfully organize human life.”<sup>11</sup> No work was more important, Lippmann wrote. For this reason, journalists themselves were “accountable” in a way that ordinary citizens were not. They were accountable to the ideal of objectivity.

## The Internal Contradictions of Lippmann's Ideal

This ideal was noble in its way, but full of contradictions—contradictions so serious that they would undermine the coherence of the journalistic profession and eventually the credibility of journalism itself. Were members of the press operating as tribunes of the citizenry (with all the powers that implied) or as citizens themselves (with all the inviolability and innocence that implied)? Were they crusaders or neutral interpreters? They could hardly be both, although journalists are very fond of claiming both roles.

The contradictions were particularly troubling whenever people considered journalism's complicated relationship to citizenship and patriotism. French republicans have traditionally accorded schools the role of “mills of citizenship,” and American politicians of the last two generations have followed their lead. But the writers of the Constitution and members of the early congresses instead saw journalists and pamphleteers in that citizen-forging role, and mandated the cheap postal rates to make that possible.

As long as journalists could claim to be simply acting as citizens, you might think that what makes a good citizen makes a good journalist. But eventually, reporters came to see their professional duty as trumping their civic duty—because their professional duty was, in effect, a higher civic duty. A striking example of this view came during a 1987 public television forum at Montclair State University in New Jersey. Harvard University law professor Charles Ogletree asked ABC news anchor Peter Jennings and Mike Wallace of CBS's *60 Minutes* if, for reporting purposes, they would join a hypothetical “North Kosanese” unit in an ambush of US soldiers. Both replied—Wallace forthrightly and Jennings after a bit of hemming and hawing—that they would simply report it as another story, without feeling any need to notify the US troops.<sup>12</sup>

There was much outrage at the time, but reporters have generally continued to see their professional duties as outweighing their civic ones. During the George W. Bush administrations, the *New York Times* revealed an active, and highly effective, program for tracking down the finances of al-Qaeda. Both the *Washington Post* and the (British) *Guardian* cooperated with Edward

Snowden, the leaker of National Security Agency transcripts, before he fled into exile in June 2013.

It sounds romantic to describe journalists as critics of entrenched power. But if the power has been entrenched legitimately and democratically, then destabilizing it may be a danger to freedom. The alternative to legitimate power may not be “transparency,” as journalists are fond of claiming, but illegitimate power. This argument has been made implicitly by the Obama administration's Department of Justice. Since praise for the press's “watchdog” role has been seen as a progressive disposition, the Obama administration's draconian reaction to it has been surprising. Obama officials have shown zero tolerance for leaks, and have dismissed the idea that a journalist has a special duty to his readership—the citizenry—that would release him from the duty of obedience to authority. They have done so with less equivocation than any administration since the 1950s. These days, a good journalist is a patriotic journalist, narrowly understood as a journalist who supports the current government.

## Media Bias

But maybe this is a natural evolution. The close association of journalists with political power, even for the purpose of keeping politicians “honest,” gives politicians and the press certain interests in common. New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen has been sharp-eyed in noting this overlap of interests. “Objectivity and the adversarial style,” Rosen writes, “are really features of the same environment, a self-aggrandizing professional culture that attaches the journalist to politics in order to make possible the peculiar act of detachment that identifies the press to itself.”<sup>13</sup>

The relationship between press and government has often been described as one of “bureaucratic affinity,” after an analysis developed by Mark Fishman in his 1980 book *Manufacturing the News*. “Only other bureaucracies,” Fishman writes, “can satisfy the input needs of a news bureaucracy.”<sup>14</sup> The result is the system of “beats” under which journalists get assigned to highly specific parts of the government apparatus. The beat system was efficient, in the sense that it afforded reporters unprecedented expertise about the inner workings of government. But it was also corrupting, in the sense

that the two bureaucracies came to mirror one another. Government increasingly shaped its actions to be “spun” well in news stories. And journalists shaped their coverage in such a way as to guarantee the future flow of information.

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Lippmann saw this problem coming. Of the ordinary daily reporter he wrote: “If he is openly hostile to those in authority, he will cease to be a reporter unless there is an opposition party in the inner circle who can feed him news.”<sup>15</sup> Even today, reporters perform a certain balancing act. If the value of a journalist to his newspaper (or network or website) is his “access” to top-level White House aides, then his livelihood is jeopardized should he become too adversarial. Journalists were not and are not formally beholden to government. But they were, and are, *informally* beholden in a massive way. It is a version of what the economist George Stigler called “regulatory capture.” Anyone who wants to level a serious criticism at power must move out of proximity to power, and thus run the risk of being dismissed by those in power as a “crank.” It is understandable that the great classics of muckraking appeared in magazines, not newspapers. Magazine writers do not have to sustain relationships with the people they interview.

These social pressures do not encourage in practice the investigative or accountability journalism that many theorists of the press see as journalism’s *raison d’être*. One can even question whether there is really any such skill as “investigative” journalism at all, as opposed to instances of savvy political operatives “feeding” reporters material about their political adversaries. Journalist Edward Jay Epstein made this point forcefully with regard to the coverage of the Watergate scandal in the 1970s. Almost everything we have learned about Watergate since—including the identification of the *Washington Post’s* key anonymous source, “Deep Throat,” as the late, passed-over, grudge-carrying Federal Bureau of Investigation bureaucrat Mark Felt—confirms this view.

The liabilities of this Lippmannesque model did not stop there. There was something in the nature of Fishman’s “bureaucratic affinity” that left reporters generally biased in favor of progressive approaches to policy issues—“caring,” reform, problem-solving. Whether this was something journalists learned from the bureaucrats they covered, whether it was a version of the “Stockholm syndrome” undergone by people who were dependent on bureaucrats for their livelihood, or whether it was an innate predisposition of the bureaucratic “personality type” from which journalists were increasingly drawn, it gave journalists a readily identifiable ideological profile, and it was very similar to that of the left-leaning bureaucratic cadres they covered.

Journalists may have been “objective,” but they were not objective. In Lippmann’s time, journalism was a humble profession. Journalists’ collusion with the people they covered was considered an unfortunate limitation, and sometimes a blind spot. But by the time of Watergate, the press had developed extravagant ideas of its own glamor, virtue, and nobility. So the public came to view journalists’ blunders and misdeeds as something worse than a limitation: hypocrisy, manipulation, bias, political correctness, and even lies. Lippmann’s theory about the manufacture of consent got turned inside-out: journalists were part of the problem, not of the solution.

There are two basic views of how democracy is supposed to work, and establishment journalism wound up allied with the less democratic of them. The first, more democratic, view is that people’s politics simply arise out of their personal interests and biases. Your dam might be good for the county, but it is going to put my cornfield underwater, and that is an end to the discussion. The second view is that one’s political opinions are a deliberative response to arguments, and that voters can be coaxed into thinking about the larger public good, and not just themselves.

This second, “deliberative” view sounds more virtuous, but it is susceptible to hijacking by the economic, financial, and political elites that Lippmann warned about. It is also the view that most aggrandizes the role of journalists. The late philosopher of communications James Carey described journalists who wound up in the tank while believing fervently that they were guarding their independence. “They warred against the machines if only because the machines did not need the press to govern,” Carey wrote. “They did quite well with

patronage and ward organization whereas reform movements were dependent upon the publicity only the press could give.”<sup>16</sup>

The rise of the Internet has coincided with a rise of inequality. As power, economic and political, has come to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, journalists have been torn. They are of the people in theory, and of the powerful in practice. In this the media resembles organized labor, another institution that results from the impulse toward freedom of assembly but that can come to possess an unjustified privilege of assembly. Even when unions were gaining great benefits for working people, even when journalists were revealing tons of information to an ever more enlightened public, it was unclear how privileges resting on a union card or access resting on a press pass squared with citizens’ rights.

While there is a right to freedom of assembly, there is no “right to organize” for labor unless government strips the right to freedom of association from nonunion workers. While there is a right to freedom of speech, there is no “freedom of the press” unless the government or the Supreme Court gives one occupational class of people more access to the workings of government than other citizens.

## The Internet Age

The period of technological transition we have entered has created a host of fresh problems. The beat system that arose in the 20th century has died. Government has continued to grow more complex, and it is not growing more honest; but our ability to gather information on it has weakened.

The traditional role of the journalist disappeared because the business model that underpinned it collapsed. Advertising was once the source of most newspaper revenue and the Internet today provides a more precise and cost-effective way to aim advertisements at people. As was the case with closing factories in the 1980s, there is much criticism of newspapers for their complacency, their laziness, their privilege, and their tendency to cling to old models. Like yesterday’s criticism, today’s is mostly unjustified.

In 2012, a blogger who had previously worked at the *Washington Post* released a memo that the paper’s managing

editor, Robert Kaiser, wrote in 1992 after attending a high-tech conference to which he had been invited by then-Apple CEO John Sculley.<sup>17</sup> Kaiser saw almost every threat to newspapers that would emerge in the next 20 years. He urged getting into electronic news “not for the adventure, but for important defensive purposes.”<sup>18</sup> On the business side, he suggested that the *Post* set to work designing electronic classified ads—a prescient suggestion because it was the establishment of the online classified alternative Craigslist that sounded the death knell for the revenue model of newspapers like the *Post*. Good for Kaiser. But had the *Post* been able to invent something like Craigslist, it would have made no difference to the news industry at all—other than that the *Post*, rather than Craigslist, would have been the beneficiary of all the advertising revenue that was draining out of other newspapers.

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Kaiser did miss a few things. “Imagine a world,” he began, using a phrase that was on almost everyone’s lips in the early 1990s, “in which we could sell a [Thomas] Boswell column to, say, 1.5 million baseball fanatics for a nickel per column. That’s \$75,000 in new revenue!”<sup>19</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, that is the model newspapers have tried—and so far mostly failed—to introduce. What Kaiser did not see was that the ability to disaggregate was a double-edged sword. It worked at the level of news content as well as at the level of advertising. Sure, a few nonsubscribers would send a nickel the *Post*’s way just to read a Tom Boswell column. But even more people, who had been paying \$2.75 a week for a subscription only to get their fill of Boswell, could now cancel their subscriptions and get all they really wanted out of the paper for 5 or 10 cents.

It was a mistake for Kaiser to use Boswell—one of the most beloved sports columnists in the country—as an example of how the *Post*’s operations could be carried intact into the digital age. His articles were among the

few commodities at the *Post* that could be profitably sold around the country for a premium. By contrast, how do you price “City Council Schedules Debate on Sewage Route”? The answer is that you do not. Covering such matters may be the “responsible” thing for a newspaper to do. Once newspapers became better able to measure what their readership was willing to pay for, they came to the surprising conclusion that the stories they had considered to be the key to their business model were actually a subsidized public service.

A lot of effort has gone into coming up with a new model of journalism. A rather Panglossian report called *Post-Industrial Journalism*, published in 2012 by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, is eager not just to describe but also to promote the forms of journalism that are replacing newspapers and networks. As the authors see it, post-industrial journalism has a number of novelties that give it potential for unheard-of dynamism.<sup>20</sup> Each of them is indeed an advance in its own way, but each carries the possibility of making journalism worse.

## The Internet flattens a once-varied media landscape into a single model of magazines that peddle food, celebrity, and soft-core pornography.

One of these is what the authors call “hackable workflow.” The *new* news story is no longer a “single finished product” but a work in progress. It should be “endlessly reusable and should be designed for perpetual levels of iteration.”<sup>21</sup> If politician Joe Blow reconsiders his position on a tax increase between a Tuesday and a Wednesday, say, a reporter can go into the article online and bring it up to date. But this is not the advance it appears to be. The old news product provided—for the very short time it was out—a hard, robust, internally coherent, and actionable kind of truth. And it did honor to democracy by presuming readers were in need of such truth. Hackability may take away from that ideal. For all this talk of perpetual iteration to be meaningful, the public must be interested enough in stories from the news

viewpoint to return to it day after day. Of what stories is that true? Certainly not “City Council Schedules Debate on Sewage Route.”

A second novelty of the new media that the Tow Center authors identify is “quantifiability.” In theory, by measuring clicks and hits, newspapers can decide what their readers “really like.” “The web creates a huge increase in diversity over a world dominated by broadcast and print media,” write the Tow Center authors.<sup>22</sup> But in saying this, they are wrong. All websites can really measure is that readers are less likely to open a story about Senator Charles Schumer’s plan for municipal bond markets than a story about how Senator Schumer’s plan resembles J-Lo’s skimpiest string bikini.

Quantifiability has led to a fallacy of aggregation: at the level of individual newspapers, counting clicks may tweak sales. But at the level of the news market, it gives readers ever less of what they want. Counting is (as it is in most walks of life) the enemy of diversity. The Internet flattens a once-varied media landscape into a single model of magazines that peddle food, celebrity, and soft-core pornography. You get 500 iterations of *Parade* magazine, differentiated only by the heritage of the publication in question: this one used to be a magazine about politics, this other one a magazine about gardening.

## The Shift to Opinion

Another element of the new journalism gets less attention from the Tow Center authors. This is the shift away from news and toward opinion and editorializing. Lippmann, viewing such a shift, would say that journalism was drifting dangerously away from its core competencies: “The more cocksure he is,” Lippmann wrote of a certain kind of opinionated journalist, “the more certainly is he the victim of some propaganda.”<sup>23</sup>

This is a natural path of least resistance. Readers have a bias toward conflict, upheaval, and partisanship. They like opinions. Everyone, after all, has one. So even if papers can no longer afford to do rigorous duty reporting on politics, there is a certain kind of reader who will not miss it. Newspapers will no longer be able to do all the work of accountability journalism. But what they can do they may be able to do in a more entertaining way. The hit-job profile is still alive and well. So is the investigative

revelation. Even complex policy matters have become more palatable now that newspapers offer heaping table-spoons of ideological venom as the sugar to make the medicine go down. Paul Krugman at the *New York Times* and Ezra Klein, the young policy writer for the *Washington Post*, have shown that even quite detailed policy writing can sell when it is about heroes and villains.

Arthur Brisbane, the former public editor of the *New York Times*, wrote a farewell column in 2012 in which he expressed some misgivings about the ideologization of day-to-day news:

Across the paper's many departments, though, so many share a kind of political and cultural progressivism—for lack of a better term—that this worldview virtually bleeds through the fabric of The Times. As a result, developments like the Occupy movement and gay marriage seem almost to erupt in The Times, overloved and undermanaged, more like causes than news subjects.<sup>24</sup>

While Brisbane did not cite specifics, regular readers of the *Times* can easily recall headlines they would never have expected to see on a news story a decade ago. An article on South Korean President Park Geun-Hye, daughter of the late military dictator, read: “Steely Leader of South Korea Is Battle-Ready.” Its subhead: “Dispelling Any Doubts on Female President.”<sup>25</sup> When President Obama made women eligible for frontline combat, the headline ran:

Equality at the Front Line:  
 Pentagon is Set to Lift Ban  
 On Women in Combat Roles<sup>26</sup>

Lines two and three make a perfectly good headline, but the first line is pure pro-government advocacy, the sort of thing one would expect to read in a different country in a darker time. Whatever the sympathies of its newsroom, measured sociologically, the tug of the *Times*'s reputation as a paper of record always used to be stronger than the tug of rallying like-minded readers. That is no longer the case. While he was disturbed by this slant and warned that it carried risks, Brisbane was also impressed by the way “a kind of Times Nation has formed around the paper's political-cultural worldview” and called it “a huge success story.”<sup>27</sup>

If newspapers cannot generate reporting resources the way they used to but still want to do a good deal of reporting, one solution is to cooperate with institutions willing to offer up such resources. Alan Rusbridger, editor of the *Guardian*, calls this the dawn of the “mutual newspaper.” Such cooperation, or mutuality, could take many forms. Downie and Schudson believe the area reports of Human Rights Watch are a new kind of journalism. The journalistic consortium ProPublica provides a model of a “nonprofit newsroom,” and it has already won two Pulitzer Prizes. (Whether it will thrive in an era when there are no longer large pools of well-trained professional journalists made redundant by the major dailies is another question.) Downie and Schudson also want reporters to make more use of public databases.<sup>28</sup> The Tow Center authors look forward to an era of increased specialization in which “the police blotter will come from the police. Environmental data will be presented via interactive tools hosted by the Sierra Club.”<sup>29</sup>

But wait. The original problem that brought the “objective” reporter into being was the ability of powerful interests to “manufacture consent.” To the extent that any institution has enough resources to help with reporting, it is likely to have enough resources to throw its weight around politically. It is stunning how untroubled the Tow Center authors are by the thought that the police might have a biased view of what the police are doing, and that this might compromise what appears on the newspaper's police blotter, or that the Sierra Club, whether you like it or not, is a lobby, and its assessments are not neutral.

In general, a blindness to the replacement of disinterested parties by interested parties in the news business is almost constant in the Tow Center report. The authors are enthusiastic, for instance, that “the ejection of the Occupy Wall Street movement from New York's Zuccotti Park in November 2011 was broken not by the traditional press, but by the occupiers themselves, who sent word of the police action via SMS, Twitter and Facebook.”<sup>30</sup> Again, wait: those new-media-using occupiers were engaged in public relations, not journalism. They replaced the flaks who, in the old days, would have contacted beat reporters at the *New York Times* rather than the *New York Times* itself.

When the Tow Center authors talk about journalists' need to find “more secure sources of funding,” they are talking about patronage, and sources of patronage bring the risk of corruption of one kind or another. For

instance, it is not encouraging, even though the authors think it is, to see “an increasing number of individuals contribute to the information ecosystem for free.”<sup>31</sup> The authors believe, wrongly, that the main problem with unpaid journalism is that it brings forth a lot of unvetted information. The main problem, rather, is that there is no such thing as “for free.” If someone is contributing to the “information ecosystem,” it is because that individual expects to get something out of it.

The Tow authors’ list of “what social media does better” includes the blogger who recorded President Obama’s remark at a San Francisco fundraiser about how America’s yokels “cling to guns and religion.” Certainly it was useful to citizens to have this fact made public. But this seems a decidedly nonjournalistic development, more properly described as an advance in surveillance technology than an advance in journalism. It is less likely to increase transparency than to decrease candor.

The idea that the public must, not to put too fine a point on it, wiretap gatherings of the powerful is the sign of a troubling development that is contrary to most folklore of the Internet age. Amidst all the talk we hear about “the networked organization,” there has in many ways been a consolidation of class privilege. As the shibboleth spreads that distance matters less, decision making in the United States gets more and more concentrated in Washington, New York, Los Angeles, and Silicon Valley.

In important industries and in government, the Internet seems to be rehierarchizing, not dehierarchizing, power. Journalism certainly shows symptoms of this consolidation. If any big metropolitan daily had collapsed 10 years ago, including the *New York Times*, the effect would have been close to nil. It would have been a blow to subscribers. But reporters, columnists, and cartoonists would move to other papers. Today, the collapse of the *New York Times*, on which so much of the blogosphere is parasitic, would lay waste to the entire ecology of the US media.

## The Future of Journalism and Citizenship

A milestone in the transformation of journalism came in 2011, when journalist James Fallows threw in the towel and mounted a qualified defense of the click-oriented journalism practice by various websites that surround the

gossip site Gawker. It was a significant moment because Fallows had been the country’s most dogged, indignant, and vocal defender of the accountability journalism model. If Lippmann’s teachings were a religion of American journalism, then Fallows was a modern ultramontane. In the 1990s, as editor of *US News and World Report*, he sought to fill the weekly magazine with “News You Can Use.” His critics did not understand what he was talking about. They looked on News You Can Use as the kind of philistinism that first-generation college graduates associated with their uncredentialed parents, asking questions like, “What are you going to do with that philosophy degree?”

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Fallows was no philistine. His idea was that journalism needed to emerge from the muck of scandal-mongering and ranting into which it had descended. For a while he was optimistic that information technology might actually aid this rejuvenation. Fallows would later remember having seen the explosion of new news technologies as, in some ways, “revolutionarily positive. For the first time in human history, people could see events taking place beyond their immediate line of sight. They could therefore envision and, perhaps, understand the world with a richness never possible before.”<sup>32</sup>

Eliminating the tyranny of distance has been an almost constant theme in a country that spans a continent, and American journalism has always been obsessed with it. In Fallows’s view, the great revelation of Henry Luce and Britton Haddon in starting *Time* and *Life* magazines was that “people who lived far from the big East Coast cities wanted to know more about national and world affairs than they could learn from their local papers.”<sup>33</sup>

He is almost certainly right. This has been the big marketing insight of National Public Radio (NPR), which draws a disproportionate share of its listeners not

from the liberal cities of the Northeast—which, if you think about it for a moment, have plenty of alternatives to what NPR offers—but from the residents of provincial places, for whom NPR is a taste of the wider world. It is for similar reasons that the founding fathers made plans for a post office in the Constitution. The post office allowed one living in a backward village to participate as an equal in the urban cultural and political life of one’s country. It announced that there were no parts of the country that the center could not “afford” to remain engaged with.

The American journalistic project has always been to some extent a frontier project, delivering cosmopolitan news to a noncosmopolitan people. Solving the puzzle of distance through communication is what turned US culture, at its height in the 20th century, into such a beguiling mix of country virtue and city sophistication.

Fallows was not the only journalist thinking this way. The conservative futurist George Gilder promised that people’s televisions were about to turn into conduits of culture. A *Time* magazine television ad of the early 1980s ran: “*Time* flies, and you are there. *Time* cries, and makes you care.”

The quest for immediacy—the “you are there” impulse—prefigured the culture of the Internet. It helped elicit a certain “bleeding heart” generosity toward the world, which was suddenly on your laptop at the dinner table. Perhaps the “We Are the World” concerts of the 1980s were the great harbinger of the politics of the digital age. But at the same time, the Internet lowered the stakes of caring. It allowed readers to inhabit the world as if it were a ride or video game. Abstraction—the great vice of elites that allows them to hold “humanity” in higher regard than the individual specimens of it that cross their path—has become a vice of the common man, too. Journalism at the dawn of the Internet age, rather like “reformed” religion in the 1960s, tried to make itself less challenging to the public, and wound up only giving away its family jewels. The difficult, challenging parts of it, the parts that seemed out of step with an age based on convenience, were the only things that people could get nowhere else.

Gilder’s prediction about television was close, but wrong. Television did not become a vehicle of culture—culture got swallowed up by television. Infotainment, Fallows now believes, is the journalism of the future, the

“model toward which the news business is trending.”<sup>34</sup> Nick Denton, the founder and boss of the Gawker chain of Internet publications, admitted to Fallows in 2011 that the Internet provides a solution to the business problems of journalism, but only “a certain kind of journalism.”<sup>35</sup>

What of the rest of it? Carey saw communications as part “transmission” (across space) and part “ritual” (across time). The ritual side is always undervalued. It is what calls up our responsibilities, not just our prurience and acquisitiveness. Where communication is the product, innovation is not necessarily a plus. Internet journalism claims to have captured the reality of what newsreaders want by measuring it in clicks—but we are too quick to call that reality. What people want when they are convinced civilization is not watching them is not what they “really” want—unless you believe that what they really want is an escape from civilization altogether.

### Author Biography

*Christopher Caldwell is a senior editor at The Weekly Standard and a columnist for the Financial Times.*

### Notes

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2. Marci Shore, *The Taste of Ashes: The Afterlife of Totalitarianism in Eastern Europe* (New York: Crown, 2013), 303.
3. Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 4.
4. *Ibid.*, 89.
5. *Ibid.*, 5.
6. George Packer, *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 3.
7. Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 9.
8. *Ibid.*, 80.
9. *Ibid.*, 72; 81.
10. The term appears throughout Downie-Schudson.
11. Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 35.
12. The story is recounted in James Fallows, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 11–14.

13. Jay Rosen, “We’ll Have that Conversation,” in *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, eds. Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 195.

14. Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (University of Texas Press, 1980), 143.

15. Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 43.

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18. To read the original Kaiser memo, see <http://recoveringjournalist.typepad.com/files/kaiser-memo.pdf>.

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20. C. W. Anderson, Emily Bell, and Clay Shirky, *Post-Industrial Journalism: Adapting to the Present* (New York: Tow Center for Digital Journalism, 2012), <http://towcenter.org/>

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21. *Ibid.*, 71.

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23. Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, 52.

24. Arthur Brisbane, “Success and Risk as the Times Transforms,” *New York Times*, August 26, 2012, Sunday Review Section, 12.

25. *New York Times*, April 13, 2013, A1.

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28. Downie and Schudson, “The Reconstruction of American Journalism.”

29. Anderson, Bell, and Shirky, *Post Industrial Journalism*, 109.

30. *Ibid.*, 86.

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32. James Fallows, “Learning to Love the (Shallow, Divisive, Unreliable) New Media,” *The Atlantic*, April 2011.

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