Bigger, Better, Bolder: Some Unconventional Thoughts on the Future of Journalism

By Martin and Susan J. Tolchin

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The NBC Nightly News on October 29, 2011, broadcast videos of police brutality involving “Occupy Wall Street” protesters in three cities. In Washington, D.C., two police officers threw a disabled man out of his wheelchair. The protester had been taunting the police with verbal abuse. In Oakland, California, a tear gas canister fractured the skull of Scott Olsen, an Iraq war veteran, and in New York City, a police inspector fired tear gas on peaceful demonstrators.

All three videos were taken with cell phone cameras. The Oakland video was taken by a woman standing on her lawn. She was arrested and later discharged. The New York City police inspector was “reassigned,” but no action was taken against the other officers. But the net effect was a clear warning: a police officer who beats a handcuffed prisoner can expect to find himself on YouTube.

These videos reflect a global phenomenon, from Zuccotti Park to Tahrir Square: the democratization of journalism. Once the province of the very few—first the church, then kings and aristocrats, the landed gentry, captains of industry, and always the well-connected—now, anyone with a laptop is a potential journalist, and anyone with a cell phone is a potential photojournalist. No license required.

Each group had its own biases and perceptions and thought its successor would be the ruination of mankind. Thus we went from cave drawings to papyrus (one can almost hear the cave dwellers complaining that they were writing on stone for the ages, while these upstarts were writing on papyrus, which could easily be destroyed by a gust of wind). The invention of the printing press (1450) broke the Church’s monopoly on publishing meant you didn’t have to be a zillionaire to publish a small newspaper or newsletter. With the Internet and cell phones, anyone at all could write and photograph and reach an audience undreamed of by prior generations.

The democratization of journalism accompanied a steady increase in literacy from priests and aristocrats to the population at large, which enjoyed access to material closely held by those who governed them. Indeed, knowledge is power. Witness the very first action of dictators in trouble: closing newspapers and radio and television stations that have been critical of their regimes.

Reform movements throughout the world have used the social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, to mobilize, strategize, and inspire their troops. They played a key role in the Arab Spring, where articles and photographs of a Tunisian fruit vendor who set himself aflame to protest corruption circled the globe. He was angry at regularly paying bakshish to government ‘agents’ merely to keep his fruit stand open. Cell phone videos exposed the ballot stuffing in the Russian elections in the fall of 2011, sparking mass protests.

Newspapers also played a vital role. Al Ahram, the government-controlled newspaper, was eclipsed as Egypt’s leading newspaper by an insurgent publication, Liberation Square (Carr, 2011). Similarly, when thousands gathered on Wall Street, summoned by Facebook and Twitter to protest what they regarded as Wall Street’s greed, there appeared a newspaper, The Occupied Wall Street Journal. Christopher Guerra, a fan of the newspaper, said, “People say newspapers are dying, but there is something about its physical properties, the fact that when you hold it in your hands, you end up with ink on them, that serves as a reminder that all this is real” (Ibid.). In England, The Guardian, a traditional print publication, played a major role in exposing the hacking scandal that brought down Rupert Murdoch’s News of the World.

Nevertheless, there are real concerns about the Internet’s impact on the mainstream media, which lost nearly 50% of its revenue in the first decade of the 21st century because advertisers, especially classified advertis-
ers, have gone online. During that period, a third of all newsroom jobs vanished. More than $2 billion spent on news gathering annually disappeared (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010). With less to offer readers, circulation also eroded. The weakened newspapers attracted predatory publishers, including Sam Zell, who plundered the Tribune Company, which published The Chicago Tribune, The Los Angeles Times, and The Baltimore Sun. Some small local newspapers and chains were picked up by the big conglomerates, which have since been roundly criticized for not knowing the problems and concerns of these localities.

These technological revolutions have occurred before. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2010) explain:

Each new method of communication made the exchange of information easier, more textured, and more meaningful. Each advance in form and efficiency also had a democratizing influence: As more people became more knowledgeable, they also became better able to question their world and the behavior of people and institutions that directed their lives. (p. 12)

Has the quality of the mainstream media been a victim of the Internet? Sig Gissler, administrator of the Pulitzer Prizes, noted in a personal interview the decline in the number of entries in the decade since he was appointed.

“The volume is down, but the final choices are very strong,” he said. “The watchdog still barks, and still bites.”

In 1990, there were 1,770 Pulitzer Prize applicants, of which 94 were for investigative journalism and 177 for explanatory journalism. In 2,000, there were 1,516 entries, including 97 for investigative journalism and 164 for explanatory journalism. In 2010 there were 1,097 entries, with 81 entries for investigative journalism and 104 for explanatory journalism. In 2011, there were only 65 entries for investigative reporting and 104 for explanatory journalism, but there also were 155 entries for local reporting, which has become “largely devoted to local investigative work,” Mr. Gissler added.

Despite smaller staffs, some newspapers have reordered their priorities to focus on investigative journalism. These include The Milwaukee Journal, where Mr. Gissler previously served as editor. Other Pulitzer entries represented partnerships between the mainstream media and a number of independent news organizations including Pro Publica, a non-profit newsroom supported by philanthropies. Pro Publica already has won two Pulitzer prizes for investigative journalism, including an investigation of health care in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, written by Sherry Fink, a public policy fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

The mainstream media is also showing new signs of life. In 2011, The New York Times erected a pay wall and began charging those who read more than two dozen articles on the Internet per month. To avoid individual charges, the Times offered annual subscriptions. In six months, the Times had more than 386,000 paid subscribers to its Internet site, and also showed an operational profit. There also has been a modest increase in print circulation. Similar pay walls have been erected by The Wall Street Journal and the Times-owned Boston Globe, among other newspapers.

Investigative journalism has been augmented by the Internet and niche publications like The Hill and Politico. The Monica Lewinsky scandal, which led to the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, was first reported in the Drudge Report. The Hill newspaper, published online and in print, reported the attempted coup against then Speaker Newt Gingrich, while allegations of Herman Cain’s sexual abuse of women were first reported in Politico. The Internet played a key role in the investigation of the Penn State sex abuse scandal. “A critical break in the investigation of Jerry Sandusky came via a posting on the Internet: a random mention that a Penn State football coach, years before, might have seen something ugly but kept silent” (Becker, 2011, p. B11).

Critics of the new media decry the loss of professionalism, the fact checking, and experience that were the hallmark of the best of the mainstream media, as well as its role as “gatekeeper,” deciding what the public should know, and in what form. No fact-checkers exist to second-guess what could be serious errors floating about in the blogosphere, although the blogosphere is somewhat self-correcting—a torrent of comments quickly point out factual errors. But the mainstream media would be the first to admit serious lapses in professionalism—including articles about weapons of mass destruction, which proved non-existent but nevertheless led to the Iraq war. Similarly, not all gatekeepers were motivated by journalistic concerns, such as lack of corroboration of a fact. Some of their decisions were made for political and financial reasons, including protecting politicians who gave them tax breaks politicians and other benefits. Robert Moses, for example, an unelected state official whose power exceeded that of New York’s governors, amassed that power in part by cozying up to the media barons, thereby avoiding media scrutiny. Thus, the Manhattan entrance to the Triboro Bridge is at 125th Street, instead of 96th Street, as Mr. Moses accommodated William Randolph Hearst, who had huge real estate holdings between those two streets (Caro, 1974).

Romanticism of the mainstream media also overlooks the yellow journalism and sensationalism (“Headless Woman in Topless Bar”) that were the stock in trade, not just of tabloids, but also of some more respected publications. Some of those publications became captives of the government, warmongers, and worse. The New York Times falsely reported to its regret the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, thus becoming virtual partners in an unjustified war that claimed more than 4,000 American lives and the lives of tens of thousands of Iraqis.

The Internet has other flaws as well. It has given rise to “Cyber Utopianism,” in the words of Evgeny Morozov (2011), who contends that its use as a liberation tool has been greatly exaggerated. He notes that it has been a tool of repressive governments, who use the Internet to track dissidents and their strategies.

Indeed, every phase of journalism’s evolution has had its downside. The printing press allowed wide distribution of both the Bible and Mein Kampf. Early radio gave us both the inspiring voice of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the hate-filled rantings of Father Coughlin.”
the blogs that do their own reporting are *The Daily Beast*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Politics Daily*. In effect, readers must be their own editors. But this was also the obligation of readers of the mainstream media. Today’s readers must carry an even heavier burden than they did with newspapers, whose general biases they might have discounted. It’s sometimes more difficult to discern the viewpoint of a blogger, an aggregator, a photojournalist. Are they biased? Are they comprehensive? Are they analytical? And most important: what is their world view? Do they share your basic view of the world?

We are now witnessing the new journalism’s shakedown cruise, when both the mainstream media and the Internet are seeking to come to grips with a new dynamic. Will the Internet’s new journalists and photojournalists adhere to traditional journalistic standards? Will readers be able to discern quality from fakery, news from rumor and hoaxes? The stakes are enormously high, with democracy itself hanging in the balance. The march of history suggests that society is up to the challenge.

REFERENCES


