

Information Literacy and the Changing Role of the Press

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reviews the development of the press and journalism and the purposes of these institutions in the light of technological advances in communication and the emergence of information literacy. The term information literacy refers to the capacity to access and evaluate information. While limited in scope, the study examines the implications of these changes for the practice of journalism and the relationship of the press with the public.

The discussion focuses on journalism as the communication of politics and power in democracy. It has to do with governance and the institutions established for people's participation in their own government. This paper uses the term press and journalism interchangeably and both refer to the practice in any of the established media: print, broadcast and the Internet.

In recent decades, we have moved through historic ages defined by advances in communication technology—from electronic to satellite to digital. These systems of mass communication have transformed the conduct of politics, business and human relations, although journalism media have adapted to technology at varying speeds. At the same time, journalism practice adjusts to the demands of different kinds of political systems. Democratization has changed the political landscape in different parts of the world, but it is not yet a universal reality.

Despite the uneven technological pace and the different political systems in which it operates, it is instructive to try and understand what these changes imply for the future of the press.

One way of examining the issue is through the public's prism. Sometime in the last century, technology evolved a mass audience for news. Mass media opened up for the public unprecedented levels of access to information. Newer technology has also empowered ordinary people to seek and to search out the knowledge and information that they need. As the mass audience has splintered into groups according to diverse needs and interests, information literate communities revise the importance of journalism in their lives. A public that can source its own information and news decentralizes the flow

of communication. This raises questions about the role of the press in society as the primary source of information and knowledge and as the collective forum of public debate and discussion.

Thus, this paper also looks through the internal prism of the press community and examines how journalism adjusts in the new environment. As people develop greater information literacy, now a necessary aspect of human development, the press needs to assess its ability to discharge its responsibilities and meet the challenge of new demands.

2. A REVIEW OF THE FUNCTIONS OF THE PRESS

Let's examine the functions of the press as exhibited through the history of democracy.

An autonomous system of shared information has always been part of democracy. The direct democracy in Athens generated a direct form of journalism in the marketplace. This created a common reference for the different members of its free society. In Rome, the accounts of the Senate and other public and social events were posted in public places.¹ In authoritarian societies, such communication disappeared, replaced by proclamations issued by monarchs and nobles who were in power

The American Founding Fathers saw the value of the newspapers of the day as a way by which members of society exchanged views and sustained a continuing dialogue about shared concerns. The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights was designed to protect a small press of partisan newspapers. The founders of American democracy saw the exchange of opposing ideas as essential to their desired system of government. Thus, the American Constitution enshrined the protection of freedom of expression and press freedom from laws that would abridge such autonomy.

James Carey describes journalism as reflecting an ongoing and continuing conversation, as "reflected speech"² which connects disparate communities. The earliest publications arose from the talk in public places where transients and local people gathered, "the coffeehouses in England, or in pubs, or 'publick houses,' in America" where "bar owners, called publicans, hosted spirited conversations about information from travelers who often recorded what they had seen and heard in log books kept at the end of the bar."³ As public conversation, dialogue or forum, the press provided an essential element for a free society to function, that common reference of ideas, insights, images, and information that allows its members to participate in public life, enabling them to be part of their own governance.

Studies trace the beginning of modern journalism to the 1830s when the daily newspapers gained mass circulation, supported by commercial advertising and operated for profit by their owners. These papers addressed themselves to human curiosity, the need to know and to reach out to the vast horizon of human realities beyond their own experience. The 'penny press' sold on the streets relied on stories which stood out of the ordinary even as these relied on a staple of sources, mostly about people who were already known and

events or incidents that were presumed to be interesting. These demonstrated the press' bias for conflict and for bad news, which are possessed of obvious popular appeal.

The first publications included political debates and arguments, tidbits of gossip and other useful information such as shipping news.⁴ Even in these earliest forms, the journalistic package was a mixed one, designed perhaps to appeal to different kinds of people and to address diverse needs. But its political character and importance was ingrained in the practice remained.

The 'news of the day' summed up the most significant events and developments, the issues of importance as well as selected stories of wide interest. In this way, the press educated the public as citizens, people with the freedom and capacity to establish the rules and principles that governed public life. The editorial decisions about what news to put out placed the press in a critical role of 'gatekeeper,' determining for the rest the information and news of the day.

The press' political dimension finds dramatic expression in the role of 'watchdog,' referring to the way journalism monitors the conduct of the rich and powerful, checking the exercise of power for possible betrayals of public trust. The press is referred to as the Fourth Estate to government's executive, legislative and judicial branches. But while the press has power in terms of its reach and influence, Michael Janeway says: "It is not the press' natural role to exercise power, but rather to call for or oppose its exercise by others, to investigate it, to witness it."⁵

In fact, this investigative impulse was developed only recently. It was only in 1964 that the Pulitzer Prize included investigative reporting as a new category. The award recognized journalism which uncovered hidden scandal and corruption in high places. The decision emphasized the importance of the role of the press as "activist, reformer, and exposé" and "as an independent monitor of power."⁶

The press can discharge these functions in the most recent media of the Internet, but with a difference. The Internet also allows not just the press but ordinary people to become their own information and news provider.

3. COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY, PRESS, AND POLITICS

The global trend toward democratization continues to place the institution of the press at the heart of critical social and political concerns. Democracy highlights the importance of information in a society and continued learning and education as a feature of public life. The press has been ideally positioned to provide information that citizens need to know in order to participate in public affairs. The news media are instruments of open debate and discussion in society, engaging citizens in a continuing exchange of ideas about the issues of the times. The independence of the media has been a paramount value in this context. Quite simply, a free press expands freedom and strengthens democracy.

In different parts of the world, technology has eased the political shift toward democratization. Indonesia opened up its society to satellite technology and the availability of news and programs from all over the world was slowly changing the public mind set in the country, even before the breakdown of Suharto's authoritarian regime. Later, the Internet quickened the pace of information dissemination among activists who challenged Suharto's long-standing rule. In the Philippines, the SMS or text-message system through cell phones enhanced the mobilization of mass rallies protesting the corruption of the Estrada government.

Communication technology has also dramatically recast the character of politics. In the US, studies have shown how television has changed the style of political campaigns and the manner by which the voter makes an electoral choice. The visual media in America politics has made possible a greater degree of manipulation of candidates' images. In a study of the impact of television on American presidential elections, Grossman notes that television allows people direct access to political figures and events. But it also emphasizes "personality, visual image and emotion rather than on ideas, issues, and reason."⁷

In less developed democracies like the Philippines, television has pressed political parties to field candidates from show business or the media. In these two different environments, the use of television media has less to do with journalism than with the manufacture of media images and impressions.

On another level, Grossman notes the development of the "electronic republic" forming in America: "a democratic system that is vastly increasing the people's day-to-day influence on the decisions of the state."⁸ The growth of telecommunications media involves citizens more directly in their own governance. This is true even in developing societies. In the Philippines, instant polls conducted by TV or radio programs engage their viewers by asking them to text or call in their votes on questions related to controversial policy issues.

There is little point to such communication without an educated and engaged citizenry. However, it can also be said that such communication makes it possible to form and sustain such a public. Otherwise, technology only facilitates the tyranny of the ignorant majority. Compared to developing democracies, relatively higher levels of information literacy may be found in the mainstream population of industrial societies. Citizens in these countries may have more education in general to make worthy interventions. However, where there is less development and less resources, the public may remain as the misguided and misdirected mass. By providing the means for continuing public information and education, the press helps society to achieve its goals.

4. COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE PRESS

Embedded in all democratic theory is the principle of the free market. Underlying the development of free press enterprise is the commercial drive that operates all kinds of

business. In search of a media audience, the press has been driven by the profit issue and the need to make money.

In this new age of communication, the practice and business of journalism involves the pursuit of an audience. News organizations and news outlets need to claim an audience share to attract advertisers. Advertising revenue provides media profits. Commercialization has shaped the news product, imposing certain criteria based on popular appeal. Although the concept of 'news-worthiness' has always included relevance and significance, the press often excludes important and compelling news.

Applied in different newsrooms, these values evolve news packages that are as different from each other in style and substance—the tabloids co-exist with high-minded broadsheets, the info-tainment segments hold their time against serious newscasting. But they all still adhere to certain traditional criteria of what makes 'news.' As such, news may become limited in scope and in subject and limited by space and time, conditions that in a way impose a certain predictability to the news.

How often have we heard people say that they are tired of reading about the same things? After a while, the scandals, the celebrities and controversies all seem the same, echoing elements from similar incidents in the past. Was it Thoreau who said he had no need to know about yet another fire, murder or accident? These days, can we also say that we have not yet seen all there is to know about scandal and scalawags, celebrities and the lives of the rich and famous?

The mandate of the mass markets has evolved a news culture more likely to entertain than educate, to distract rather than instruct the public. In highly productive economies in the West, popular demand for more and more entertainment and recreation presses on editorial policies. In the political field, political campaigns have made use of entertainment vehicles and advertising formats to get their message across or to attract the electorate.

In the US, studies have shown the impact of commerce on people's perceptions about candidates. A study of the role of political advertising and televised news showed that people responded more to the stimulus of advertising messages than they did to the message in the news.⁹

In emerging democracies as in established democracies, news organizations have adjusted to the reality and merged entertainment and information goals. Cases have shown how commercialization has marginalized news and information that is relevant to political discourse.

The situation confronts the press with a critical challenge to revise and reinvent news practice to address change. Its failure to address the challenge of change wastes historic opportunity and the unique resources unleashed in the information age to create a learning society. The same failure can lead to a press diminished in significance and relevance.

What kind of press should evolve in these new political environments?

5. THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION AND INFORMATION LITERACY

Toward the end of the 20th century, as technology revolutionized communication, the mass audience was also breaking up into special interest groups or market segments. Alvin Toffler saw the “crack-up of the industrial mass society” and the split of the “mass market” into “ever-multiplying, ever changing sets of mini-markets that demand a continually expanding range of options, models, types, sizes, colors and customizations.”¹⁰

The new communications media saw the rise of special publications; some taking the form of newsletters sent out to far-flung communities, catering to small groups bound by common issues and interests. When video recorders enabled on-demand programs and movies, television networks lost their power to dictate and synchronize viewing hours. Cable increased program choices for the viewing audience and citizen band radio promoted greater interaction among listeners. The computer allowed communication and information flows to cut through time zones and to undermine geography as an indicator of one’s location or address. The Internet has carried any material carried in traditional communication formats while creating original cyber news channels.

These advances have required the development of new skills and prodded the rise of a new form of literacy in the field of communication—knowing where to find what kind of information. As the sources of information have proliferated, access has involved special skills that the public has had to learn. These skills enable the individual to become his own gatekeeper of the news, seeking information as the need arises.

All of the above have wrenched primary control over the flow of news from the elite news organizations that have for so long determined the course of newsgathering and dissemination.

5.1. The New News Audience

Much has been said about the decline of the news audience in the US. In 1980, Toffler traced the statistics showing the circulation losses of leading newspapers across the nation. “Between 1970 and 1977, despite a 14 million rise in US population, the combined aggregate circulation of the remaining top twenty-five magazines dropped by 4 million.”¹¹ The decline in newspaper readership was matched by growth in radio and cable television, media that have traditionally rooted its function and purpose in entertainment. Neil Postman listed the elements of television news—“the good looks and amiability of the cast, their pleasant banter, the exciting music that opens and closes the show, the vivid film footage, the attractive commercials”¹², rendering news as a diversion and distraction, as what has been called ‘info-tainment.’

The decline of newspapers may be linked to the diminished public engagement and public interest in politics. William Greider noted the decrease of voting in presidential elections in the US since 1960, the narrow base of votes for representatives, and the minority votes that have decided election outcomes in the US Congress. Polls have also shown that after 1990, three in four Americans expressed dissatisfaction with the outcomes in congressional elections, even when their candidates won.¹³

James Fallows in his book *Breaking the News* lays the blame on the press for the growing malaise in American society and the public sense of alienation from politics and governance. He argues that a constant diet of catastrophe and violence and bad news fosters a negative attitude among the public. He notes the pressures exerted by the frenzy of 24-hour news TV on politicians and government officials whose policy deliberations must always consider how decisions will play in the press. The world pictured in much of the news suggests that citizen engagement won't make a difference in improving the state of things.¹⁴

At the same time, in many developed societies of the West, populations are becoming more educated than their predecessors, who presume post-graduate degrees as a requirement for most careers. This public constitutes a more discerning market and more critical users of the news.

It is not surprising then that individuals choose to connect with the outside world on their own, creating conversing communities as they enter chat rooms and click onto Web sites. Through the Internet and the global transmission of live television, the news comes to them real-time, enjoying virtually the same access available to experts, government leaders and journalists. Some consumers of news possess so much more expertise about a range of subjects—a background that equips them to analyze events and issues for themselves.

These people exist side by side the uncritical mass that are satisfied with pap and pulp in the media. The dual audience expects and demands opposing values in the news.

In a forum at the Kennedy School of Government in Harvard University in 1985, Ted Koppel spoke of the future “balkanization” of the news. In such a segmented market, where can citizens find the common frame of reference so that they can speak to one another about shared concerns in a coherent exchange? Where is the public forum that joins the disparate members so they can think and act in concert for their goals?

6. RE-ORIENTING JOURNALISM FOR A NEW AGE

The Report on the Third Annual Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society (2000) described the sense of crisis in the American news community:

The many transformations in the media marketplace are disrupting ingrained habits and traditions in the news business. The pace of technological change,

market competition, and pressures to be efficient and profitable are causing disorientation in many quarters of the news business.¹⁵

At this juncture, what should make the news? What should journalism provide? To echo Jay Rosen's question, "What is journalism for?"¹⁶

While it is difficult to generalize, complaints against journalism question the long-standing premise that journalism must popularize, make accessible to the greater numbers the important developments of the day. With the growth of competition, popularization has also resulted in a news style designed to attract more people, to pander to the public taste for the sensational and exciting. The tabloid culture has dominated and eroded news values. Editorial decisions so often ignore what is significant and relevant because these are more difficult to make interesting and appealing.

The late Tarzie Vitachi, columnist and former director of the Press Foundation for Asia said, "the greatest human stories are processes which aren't reported well. . ." ¹⁷ The narrow focus on events has allowed the process of environmental deterioration to go unreported. Not until the event of an environmental disaster does it make it as news, and by then it is too late. Events reporting can lead reporters to miss the context, the connections that make reality more understandable.

People complain that staple of bad news can be disheartening, building up a sense of helplessness that may disable a community from doing anything to address their problems. The press may exaggerate its adversarial stance in reporting on government, concentrating on failures and excluding the successes. This could engender continuing public frustration. This kind of outlook does not foster the community spirit that feeds democracy.

In 1997, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel led the Project for Excellence in Journalism to engage journalists and the public in clarifying what journalism is supposed to be. Calling themselves the Committee of Concerned Journalists, they joined efforts with academic researchers to interview journalists about their values. The results have been published in the book, *Elements of Journalism*, which this paper has cited liberally.

The project involved a review of the roots of the discipline and the core values of the practice, as articulated by journalists and the public. Their research found the agreement on the fundamental purpose of the press: "to provide the people with the information they need to be free and self-governing."¹⁸

The accomplishment of this task involves some core principles rooted in journalistic tradition. Journalism serves citizens. Journalism must draw citizen attention to that which is significant and meaningful, to information that they need to know, although they may not necessarily be conscious of the need. It has been easier to give the public what is easy for them to appreciate, such as distracting and entertaining news. It is much more difficult to hold their attention with the accounts that try to make sense of developments affecting their lives.

7. NEW ROLES FOR THE PRESS

Given a measure of information literacy for the greater numbers, the press must help this public find meaning in the mass of information that is at hand. An on-line discussion in June 1994 was conducted by the Nieman Center for two weeks to gather ideas about the topic—*Toward a New Journalists' Agenda: Responding to Emerging Technological and Economic Realities*.¹⁹

Professor William Lord of Boston University wrote, “We need to take a leading role in providing the same kind of creative and responsible ‘care’ for that technology-based content that we currently provide traditional forms of public communication.” The Internet allows the public direct access to so much government information. The public finds out, as they did during the investigation of the Clinton-Lewinsky case, about previously confidential material at the very same time that other government officials and other policymakers do. Lord thinks that direct access should not be the only form of communication but should be supplemented with the journalistic perspective and analysis.

Still on direct access, Roger C. Smith wrote:

The reason that journalists are necessary is that people do not have the time to sort through all the directly accessible info and extract what is meaningful to them. Even though the Internet will make it easier to get the information, the public will still face the same daunting challenge of sorting through it.

He pointed out that the advent of the Internet does not change this, although it will necessarily modify how it does the job.

Tom Boyer of the *Virginian-Pilot/Leger/Star* described another role that journalists will play with added importance and that is as “conversation starters and moderators.” While this is related to the old description of journalism as reflected conversation, the new technology and an information literate society draws journalists directly into the flow of conversation. He added with insight into learning possible on both sides, “This could be just the thing to help people understand why we ask these nasty questions, and help us understand what questions they really need us to ask.”

Participants in this discussion recognized the need for adjustment on the part of journalists if the press is to remain as the dominant source of news and information. Journalists need to be as literate in technology but at the same time, they must safeguard its strengths, retain their ability to get to the sources and to evaluate the information they are given, and maintain the facility to connect different kinds of knowledge so these can make larger sense for those who only see part of it.

Finally, journalists must continue to do what they have always done for the public, providing interesting accounts of the day's events, explaining and synthesizing different developments of significance, while observing the requirements of fairness and ethics.

Inherent in journalism—online or on traditional media—is the purpose of community; in this discussion, meaning a community of free men and women who have sovereign will. They need to be connected with a shared fund of information that serves for them a common reference with which to think on the issues of the day and to weigh their options as citizens.

Returning to the roots of journalism, the advocates of public or civic journalism urge the restoration of the community of citizens in the center of press concerns. The public dialogue and civic involvement of members a community forms “the civic capital” that is the basis of press enterprise. Without it, there is no real point to journalism. Rosen argues that journalism should replenish these civic resources and build up more public life.²⁰

A public is something more than a market for information, an audience for spectacle, or a pollster's random sample. Publics are formed when we turn from our private and separate affairs to face common problems, and to face each other in dialogue and discussion.²¹

Information technology could draw away community members from the public forum, making them feel self-sufficient in their cocoons of selected news and information. Journalists need to understand how these trends can be inimical to democratic society and craft practice that will re-build their connections with the community and to strengthen public life.

8. CONCLUSION

To conclude, journalists must assert the core values that focus on citizen needs as they their news organizations meet the demands of dramatic and revolutionary change in the world. Ken Auletta (communications columnist for the *New Yorker*) said at the Aspen Conference, “If we are professionals, the presumption is that we have certain standards and judgment – the qualities you bring to a story. Part of our mission is sometimes to be able to tell the viewer or the reader, ‘We think this is important.’”²² The news business must involve editorial evaluation of citizen needs to help them deal with the issues of the time.

In emerging and developing democracies where citizens have yet to gain resources that will equip them for information literacy or enjoy the benefits of IT, journalism must be assisted to grow into an institution that sees its role in the continuing education first, of their role as citizens, helping them to learn the parts they are assigned as participants in the creation of effective self-government. Unfortunately, the exuberant embrace of the free press has sometimes led to a quick overnight establishment of a news elite who has

little knowledge of the ethical requirements of the practice and little understanding of their role in a democratic society. In the Philippines, for example, the Filipino people toppled the tyranny of the dictatorship and found themselves quite helpless against the “tyranny of the market.”²³

In the established democracies, there must also be a greater awareness of the global reach of their media as there are dangers in the control and domination of the world news market by only a few powerful and elite news organizations. Their commitment then should be to facilitate a global conversation of many voices, mediate civic dialogue across nations and project the picture of a human family of many members.

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