The Catto Report on Journalism and Society

Media Madness: The Revolution So Far

Max Frankel

with a report of the Second Annual Catto Conference on Journalism and Society by David Bollier

The Aspen Institute

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Can Serious Journalism Survive in the New Media Marketplace?

A Report of
The Second Annual Catto Conference
on Journalism and Society

David Bollier

Communications and Society Program
Charles M. Firestone
Executive Director
Washington, DC
1999

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Foreword

Jessica Catto

I grew up in the newspaper business and later in the broadcast business. My playground was often in the warehouse where giant rolls of paper created turretted castles that provided for hours of exploration and made wonderful ramparts from which to jump. The noisy, gritty pressroom fascinated me and the switchboard operators were my babysitters. Newspaper people and journalists were my family. So I care about this craft, this profession, this business of journalism on an intellectual, as well as a compelling, life experience level.

The objective of the Aspen Institute's Catto Conference on Journalism and Society is to examine the role of the press and the media in our political process and in our lives. In a way, this is an extension of the mission of the ***Washington Journalism Review***, which I published for eight years with the incomparable Katherine Evans as editor. The first conference in 1997 was fortunate to have distinguished journalist Robert MacNeil as the Catto Fellow. His brilliant and thoughtful scrutiny of the condition of the news business launched us into candid and productive debate.

In 1998, The Aspen Institute was again fortunate to welcome a distinguished journalist, Max Frankel, former executive editor of ***The New York Times***, as the Catto Fellow. His keynote address to the 1998 conference, held in Aspen, Colorado on July 16-18, 1998, forms the centerpiece of this report. Max's reduction to elements and historical overview of the world of journalism is essential reading for anyone with interest in and commitment to this business. His essay is followed by a report of the conference prepared by conference rapporteur David Bollier.

The issues of quality news, privacy, and profits are issues of supreme importance to all facets of our lives. With the Internet as a new player and media ownership increasingly positioned in the hands of a few, what can we expect and what can we require? If this conference has no definitive answers, at least we have framed the inquiry and stirred the pot. Questions, when asked long enough and wisely enough, at the very least can open minds, stir consciences, and point us toward magnetic north.

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Media Madness: The Revolution So Far

Max Frankel

Keynote Address delivered at
The Second Annual Catto Conference
on Journalism and Society

Thank you, Henry, for that generous introduction. I am proud to bear the title of Catto Fellow and if I were allowed to recite your biography as you have recited mine, you would know the source of my great pride. But like Harry Evans in a similar recent situation, (and now also his wife, Tina Brown), I am reminded of the ***New Yorker*** cartoon showing a partygoer being introduced at a cocktail party while enduring the urgent plea of a spouse: "Tell them who you WERE, dear. Tell them who you WERE!" I have to emphasize who I once was not only because I have retired from executive duties but also because the Revolution that I have come to discuss often regards me as passé, out of date, an expiring person of print—you know, that dying industry. That may be so. But the revolutionary "new" media are exhausting themselves parading their newness while actually betraying highly familiar symptoms of a very old media disease. We are all mad: just not newly mad.

And the same must be said of media critics who pretend to give new names to the old ailments. As H.L. Mencken wrote long ago: "Every time a disabled journalist is retired . . . and so gets time to give sober thought to the state of his craft, he seems to be impelled to write a book upon its ethics, full of sour and uremic stuff."

Until just a few days ago, I did not think I had to belabor the evidence of uremia. The Media Madness that suggested my title had been universally recognized when in otherwise sober newspapers we read descriptions of the Presidential penis and also the testimony of anonymous sources who were said to have watched that organ in action. We witnessed the sickening sanctification of a far from remarkable Englishwoman, whose accidental death eclipsed all other news for endless weeks. We watched the hordes of the

media defame and hound an innocent man and his mother because of vague intimations that he planted a bomb during the Atlanta Olympics. We watched our government being recklessly accused of hooking its own citizens on crack and pursuing them into the jungle with nerve gas.

It was that last escapade by CNN and ***Time*** that was truly insane in ways that no one has yet noted. Just weeks after poor Ed Bradley played the shrink and led Mrs. Willey to a uremic climax on ***60 Minutes***, there was Peter Arnett—also a former journalist—lipreading an assault on our military with charges about which he knew nothing and cared even less. Why? Because CNN and Time, Inc. thought they could produce a new media sensation by claiming to have unearthed a war crime in a remote Laotian jungle just 28 years ago! Now that Seymour Hersh had shifted his energies to the Cuban missile crisis and mafia molls, his My Lai beat obviously needed new attention. In my view, CNN's news judgment was crazier than its investigation. On the face of it, the story was not just hard to believe but hardly important or interesting.

And as CNN's sources collapsed in full view, there appeared two further signs of journalistic breakdown. ***Time*** proved that with just a few days of its own reporting, it could have discredited the whole yarn but it had unforgivably yielded editorial control over its own pages to a corporate cousin and to TV producers it barely knew. And CNN, having claimed the moral authority to hurl such weighty charges, now confessed that not a single one of its executives or editors could be trusted to doublecheck the investigation. It needed a lawyer to do a journalistic task.

What can we make of the information revolution so far? Our air, quite literally, is full of foul language and sordid imagery and competitive nastiness. And far worse than the stench of any of our national media scandals is the nightly production everywhere of what is euphemistically called the local news. Local television is where that industry displays its wholly cynical disregard for the sensibilities of our people, a numbing disrespect for the agencies of government, from the White House to the schoolhouse and nothing short of contempt for the public interest that broadcasters are pledged to serve. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that our remarkable, convulsive revolution in the technologies of communication

has debased our standards of journalism and eroded our capacity for civil discourse. We are wallowing in information—but we are starved for understanding.

The only available solace—and it isn't much, I know—is the commonly overlooked fact that our news media have always been driven by technology and that every technological revolution has pushed them down a very slippery slope in the direction of mass manipulation rather than class communication.

News in America began as a sideline for printers who were sustained in the 18th Century by government contracts, which they supplemented with the printing of commercial forms, almanacs, transportation schedules and weather reports. While thus serving the elites of government and commerce, many printers also produced small newspapers. They thought of themselves as educators serving the literary classes. It's the self-image that most journalists still carry in their heads, if not always in their hearts.

The first information revolution occurred with the invention of the rotary press and cheap pulp paper. They produced our first mass media, the truly Penny Press, in the middle of the 19th century. Benjamin Day's ***New York Sun*** was the first, quickly imitated by James Gordon Bennett's ***New York Herald,*** Horace Greeley's ***New York Tribune*** and dailies in most major cities. These editor-owners thought of themselves as leading citizens; many harbored ambitions for high political office. So they added serious political and even much foreign news coverage to their bread and butter news, which was a generous dose of crime and violence, fictional romance and other circulation building features.

Then came the telegraph, which delivered news so fresh it could make readers feel present at important events, which soon meant the big battles of the Civil War. But the telegraph also led to a pooling of newspaper resources in the Associated Press and other wire services, whose clients and audiences were so diverse that the news prepared for them had to be delivered in a new, nonpartisan, objective style, which planted yet another seed in journalistic heads.

Two styles—the objective and the fervent—then developed side by side as newspapers acquired the Linotype, color presses, telephones and teletypes. The uses they made of them were amply

summarized in 1890 by Louis Brandeis and Samuel Warren in a famous ***Harvard Law Review*** essay. They complained about "new mechanical devices" and "instantaneous photographs" that allowed the media to overstep "the obvious bounds of propriety and decency." Just think of it: poor Brandeis objected in 1890 to reading "the details of sexual relations" in his morning paper!

Brandeis notwithstanding, the big winners in the first half of the 20th century were the Hearst and Pulitzer papers, which served up sexual dramas and political sensations plus sports, drawings and the comics, one of which, The Yellow Kid, gave them the eventually pejorative name of the Yellow Press.

The yellows feasted on scandals and celebrities, on Al Capone and John Dillinger, Mae West and Greta Garbo, the Lindbergh baby, the Dionne Quintuplets. As Stephen Bates recently wrote, the era of the editor had yielded to the era of the owner—especially owners like Hearst, who once ordered his editors to "disregard, or cover perfunctorily, subjects which are merely important but not interesting." And the yellows' agitation for war against Spain was not the worst of it. Wilbur Storey used his ***Chicago Times*** to portray that city's great fire of 1871 as "the fiendish work of Communist incendiaries." Garry Wills recently recalled that Storey headlined the hanging of a repentant criminal with the words, "Jerked to Jesus," and his headline on a meeting of the City Council read: "Chicago's Prize Rummers Hold Their Weekly Carnival at the City Hall and, As Usual, Disgrace the City Over Which They Should Exercise All Care."

I recite this history so as to keynote our discussions with this essential reminder: the golden age of American journalism was not very golden. It was bright yellow.

The print media, which began as vehicles for the Federalist papers and other debates of moment, were driven by technology and market economics to become the handmaidens of Walter Winchells, Hildy Johnsons, Westbrook Peglers; the print revolution found its purest expression in ***The New York Graphic*** and the ***Police Gazette*** ("Hitler Alive in Argentina!"). The more sensational, colorful and entertaining the "news," the greater a paper's circulation, profits and longevity.

Technology marched on: At mid-century, radio and soon television became our main source of news as well as entertainment.

Broadcasters thoroughly demolished the evening paper, which had amused Norman Rockwell's dozing daddy beside the fireplace. And the surviving morning papers in most major cities dwindled to a monopolistic one—or two legally joined at the hip. Microphones, cameras, and recording devices took us directly to wars, riots, conventions, and assassinations and allowed us to experience them as a single, national community. Newspapers ceased to be first with the big news and had to retreat to explaining and reflecting upon it, but the broadcasters initially covered it with great skill and intelligence, heeding the demand of Congress that they justify their licensed use of the spectrum by operating in the "public interest."

We should not have been surprised, however, that technology soon pushed broadcasting onto the same descending slope as print. Television outgrew service to its originally affluent and elite audience. Its pursuit of advertising profits required masses of listeners. So TV, too, felt driven to feature the news of crime, scandal, sex, and celebrity. It practiced a residual serious journalism only so long as the founding fathers—Paley, Sarnoff, and company—were willing to shield their news departments from market pressures.

The danger for serious journalism should have been evident long ago. Television took hundreds of millions of dollars in ad revenues away from print but it reinvested only a tiny portion of those sums in news. And still the revolution in communications was far from over.

Next came satellites, tape cassettes, cable, portable cameras, and remote controls. They enlarged the reach of local stations, diminished the networks and splintered the audience. Thousands instead of dozens of reporters now buzzed around every major event and pseudo event. Allegedly "live" but woefully ill informed reporters and producers were turned loose to display their ignorance and inexperience before the cameras. Their trivial local "news" became the cheapest way to fill all those hours on all those channels, so giggling anchors came to dominate the screen for three or four hours a day, eclipsing what was left of network news. And the networks, struggling to hold prime time audiences, abandoned reflective documentaries and took to producing "news magazine" stories that are only slicker versions of the scandal, crime and celebrity peddled by the local news. As Robert MacNeil predicts in a wicked

new novel, called ***Breaking News,*** the network anchors will soon find themselves shunted to cable outlets to serve the remnant of serious listeners. They will lose not only most of their audience but also most of the resources needed to cover the news intelligently. And the already diminished influence of the news divisions at Disney, GE, and other corporate headquarters will dwindle toward zero.

So now we stand at the dawn of the Internet revolution, once again hearing the promise of technological redemption. We hear echoes of George Gallup's greeting for television a half century ago when he welcomed "the arrival of a town meeting on a national scale." We read again the words the ***Scientific American*** used in welcoming TV's capacity to "knit together the peoples of the world in bonds of mutual respect." Whatever may have been television's opportunity to relieve ignorance and improve democracy, it has for the most part impoverished civic life. It has unwittingly destroyed the cohesion of our political parties and turned ideas and candidates into consumer goods, which are sold with what Russell Baker called "floods of insincerity" at enormous and corrupting cost. After a half century of televised political discourse, voter turnouts and opinions of both politics and journalism have sunk to historic lows.

My college classmate, Roone Arledge of ABC, once proposed an escape: exempting network news programs and documentaries from the ratings competition, but no one in the industry wanted to give up an hour or two of profitable prime time. So as Don Hewitt has since said, when ***60 Minutes*** showed that news can make money, it became the rule that you could not do news on television unless you made money. Or, in Fred Friendly's version of this truth: "Television makes so much money doing its worst, it can't afford to do its best." That is why our most persistent portraits of the President and other public figures come now not from Brokaw, Rather, Jennings, Koppel, or Lehrer, but from Leno, Letterman, Larry King, and Bill Maher.

The TV Revolution, in other words, was lost. Now, in what another of my classmates, Larry Grossman, the former head of PBS and NBC News, has called the potential of "The Electronic Republic," we are getting yet another chance to enlist technology in the service of uplifting news and education. The Web offers direct, two-way com-

munication between the rulers and the ruled. It facilitates not only computer chats but also the connecting of communities of like-minded citizens and interest groups anywhere in the world. It can give us instant referendums on public tastes and attitudes and the power to tutor every American anywhere for such civic participation. On the Web, anyone can become a journalist—a Walter Winchell or a Walter Lippmann, a Matt Drudge or Jim Lehrer. And by charging a modest fee for the commercial use of the spectrum, Grossman argues, our government could underwrite a vast telecommunications network to distribute the riches of our research universities, public libraries, museums, and science academies to every laptop anywhere.

But individual hackers, no matter how brilliant and well equipped, cannot gather news and critically analyze complex events. The same technology that drives our computers is drowning us in information and confusing our understanding of politics, science, medicine, the arts, and industry. The cheaper the medium, the costlier the message—the expertise needed to comprehend and deliver our news.

So alas, on present evidence, the Internet will not improve the way most Americans are informed. Even before the majority of our citizens have acquired Internet skills, the most energetic uses of the Web are becoming centralized and commercialized. The Web is being turned into a vast merchandise mart, a catalogue and vending machine for the push-button sale of everything from homes to cars to books to stocks and real estate—anything that can be described, pictured, recorded, and explored without having to be touched. Even serious news organizations that set out to display their wares on the Web are rapidly turning their Internet attentions to ways of selling on the Web—books with their book reviews, airplane seats with their travel articles, compact discs and tapes with their music features.

There is nothing sinister about this explosion in electronic commerce, from a modest $20 billion this year to estimates of more than $300 billion in just five years. But it is already clear that besides commerce, the other lively growth in Web activity will be in various forms of entertainment, notably gambling and pornography. It will

not be in low-profit enterprises devoted to news, culture, and education.

For the third time in three centuries, the technology of communications has brought us a revolutionary chance to enrich the education of the citizenry and to improve our democracy. But the signs are that—as before—we will use the new toys mainly for commerce and amusement. We will, to be sure, further enlarge our economy. But we will not significantly harvest the Web for social value. Thanks to bursts of enlightenment and much private philanthropy, we have in the past overcome market pressures to create great universities, museums, laboratories, and libraries, but there is something, deep within our culture, that has kept us, repeatedly, from sustaining excellence in the collection, interpretation and dissemination of news.

Given the terrifying cost of sophisticated news gathering, it is miraculous that we get as much good, comprehensive coverage as we do, from a few nationally recognized newspapers, from NPR, PBS and C-SPAN and a few broadcasters who have learned to use the better papers and magazines as tipsheets. But the number of reporters and editors who are actually adding to the sum of national knowledge and understanding remains pitifully small—woefully inadequate for the complexity of the subjects about which good citizens ought to be informed.

Jessica and Henry Catto have called some of us news hounds together not just to survey this sad scene but to consider why it is that the mainstream media permit this drift and fail to use their "agenda-setting" power to elevate the tone and content of our public discourse. My first response is not encouraging: It is that news organizations are not now, if indeed they ever were, the agenda setters they think they are. To cite the most obvious current example, consider the subject of campaign finance reform. Our leading media have proved beyond all doubt that our two parties have conspired to thoroughly destroy the Watergate reforms and they have invented truly corrupt means to raise the billions their candidates need to pay for ever more expensive television commercials. Our leaders use government offices and Congressional committee seats to demand contributions from those seeking legislative and bureaucratic favor. And they pay them off at odds of better than 100–1.

The votes and interests of Americans are thus significantly devalued, manipulated, or ignored. Yet no amount of publicity on a subject so central to our democracy seems to move the public to punish the perpetrators or to change the system. The media have used skywriting from coast to coast to post this agenda item, but bribery rules.

Why? Well, because there has also been a revolution in our lives. The fear of war and economic depression have practically disappeared. Times are good. Business is booming. Jobs are plentiful and our savings seem secure. Voting doesn't seem to matter much. Editors should not need polls to feel the shifting interest of our public, away not only from foreign affairs but all public affairs. We are not so much isolationists as insulationists now, concerned about our personal, internal well being. Even print journalists are behaving like X-ray cameras to focus on the anecdotal lives of people instead of on the issues of state.

Not everything about this trend is negative. Concern about well being has produced some exemplary journalism about medicine and nutrition, business products and services, economics and the environment. And it could produce much more. But by and large, the political, social and economic forces that shape our lives are much less expertly covered even as they have become vastly more complex and global in scope. We are simply not well enough staffed and equipped to cover most important news or to make important news interesting to mass audiences.

CNN's poor judgment and experience will surely revive the criticism that all our media are run by elitists who have long since forgotten how to touch the lives of ordinary people. This critique flies the banner of what is called "civic journalism," which is sometimes well intentioned boosterim and sometimes mere promotion to raise ratings and circulation. Where sincere, it is little more than the use of polling and other modern techniques to lead newspapers and newscasters to perform some public service—to campaign against overcrowded schools or for more traffic lights or faster ambulance responses. But most metropolitan newspapers and television stations cover too large an area to focus consistently on people's truly local concerns. So even the 11 o'clock news and the tabloid press favor national scandal and national gossip and national celebrities.

In New York, where our TV stations and tabloids do try daily to shout out some new local sensation, it is nonetheless the mayor, not the media, who dominates the agenda, just as in Washington it is the president who can divert the cameras and change the subject by discerning a military crisis in Iraq or picking a fight with Big Tobacco.

Even when our news media and politicians manage to collaborate to arouse the public, they no longer function as our foremost agenda setters. The dominant media that set our cultural table don't do news. The resignation of Jerry Seinfeld from NBC is a much more powerful cultural fact than the resignation of Suharto in Indonesia or Hashimoto in Japan. Oliver Stone's conspiracy theories, as peddled in cynical movies like ***JFK*** and ***Nixon***, have overpowered both journalism and history in the political education of several generations. And the sexual come-ons of massive advertising campaigns will resonate much longer in the American psyche than any chaste newspaper rendering of contemporary life. Most mornings, on what are still quaintly called network "news programs," you can barely find social issues among the promotional interviews of movie stars, TV performers, pop singers, and sports heroes. And what, pray tell, is the "agenda" of a network that closes down foreign news bureaus so that it can afford Geraldo Rivera at $6 million a year?

Many of us were seriously misled during our half century of hot and cold wars, when the news of alien ideologies like fascism and communism or of politics in the Congo and Vietnam actually impinged on our personal lives and posed threats to our society. The fear of nuclear war forced us to confer domestic celebrity on strangers like Nehru, Adenauer, Tito and Ngo Dinh Diem. In our current peacetime culture, by contrast, news has survived largely as a form of nonfiction entertainment. News in our lives is little more than the Movietone newsreels that we watched in the old days at the movie house while awaiting the start of a double feature.

You have to be in your last decades of life to understand that the news as popcorn is not a new phenomenon. Our news diet back in the 1920s, before Hitler and Tojo awakened our sensibilities, closely resembled the agenda being set today by our entertainment and athletic industries. If you think I exaggerate, let me cite for your

three banner headlines in ***The New York Times*** of 1921—large type headlines that stretched over the full width of the paper's eight columns. The big one on April 28 outlined the reparations to be demanded of a defeated Germany. The big one on July 9 heralded a truce in Ireland as deValera agrees to meet Lloyd George. But the biggest, on July 3, read: DEMPSEY KNOCKS OUT CARPENTIER IN THE FOURTH ROUND; CHALLENGER BREAKS HIS THUMB AGAINST CHAMPION'S JAW; RECORD CROWD OF 90,000 ORDERLY AND WELL HANDLED.

Six—not three or five but six—front page stories were then employed to describe that combat: DEMPSEY PROVES PROWESS; CROWD EARLY AT GATES; REFORMERS DEMAND ARREST OF DEMPSEY FOR ASSAULT; CARPENTIER BROKE HIS THUMB; BLOW TO THE JAW ENDS THE CONTEST. There were also two Page One "shorts": "Dempsey Thought He'd Win" and "Dempsey's First Thought Is Telegram to His Mother."

This was no isolated aberration of a holiday weekend. ***The Times*** gave Tunney the same size banner headline and six frontpage stories when he won the championship five years later. Entertaining women did only half as well. Gertrude Ederle got only a three-column banner for swimming the English Channel, and so did Mrs. Frances Hall when she was arrested for having killed her husband, an Episcopal pastor, and Mrs. Mills, a choir singer in his New York church.

My second response to the Cattos' question about agenda setting is that the human psyche itself is a much more powerful and persistent force in shaping our news interests than we like to acknowledge. And that is why the news that does arouse public curiosities and energies is so often negative, scary, and pessimistic.

Critics of the media are perfectly right to wonder why it is that sex, violence and even trivial conflict dominate our reporting and overwhelm all encouraging and "positive" news about human cooperation, good works and love. The critics are wrong only in thinking that this emphasis is the result of some deep character flaw among journalists and television producers and their depraved owners.

The most profound and persuasive explanation of this phenomenon appeared recently in a wonderful book by Steven Pinker,

called ***How the Mind Works.*** Pinker, a professor of psychology and director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at M.I.T., is a post-Darwinist, a distinguished scientist but also a witty writer who has labored to understand how natural selection over eons of history shaped the human mind and human nature.

I cannot here do justice to his books, one about our language instinct and one about the workings of the mind. But his discussion of the nature of news surely belongs in a conference about the media.

Pinker points out that what we have come to call negativism dominates not just the modern American news media but the vast majority of literary tales in all human societies. He points out that more than 80 percent of the plots in all of fiction and drama “are defined by adversaries—often murderous—and by tragedies of kinship or love or both. Our life stories are largely stories of conflict: the hurts, guilts and rivalries inflicted by parents, siblings, children, spouses, loves, friends, and competitors.”

“Why is this so?,” Pinker asks. His answer is that the fear of loss is more worthy of the human mind’s attention than the promise of gain. In his words:

> There are twice as many negative emotions (fear, grief, anxiety and so on) as positive ones and losses are more keenly felt than equivalent gains. . . . The asymmetry has been confirmed in the lab by showings that people will take a bigger gamble to avoid a sure loss than to improve on a sure gain . . . [and] mood plummets more when imagining a loss . . . than it rises when imagining an equivalent gain. [It was confirmed again recently on the eve of the World Cup soccer final, when Brazil’s leading player asserted: “If we win, I don’t expect them to build a statue for me. But if we lose, they’ll kill me.”]

Pinker maintains that plots of love and death, of sex and violence, are basic to all stories because they are fundamental to the goals—the evolutionary purpose—of all organisms: to survive and to reproduce, to avoid death, and to have sex.

Like every editor accused of favoring negative news, Pinker is quick to add that “bad news can be a positive force.” To dramatize

victimhood and people's humanity can slowly make us all more civil and less violent, he says. It can drag "niceness" from a human nature that natural selection and evolution did not really prepare for civility, for law, for compromise, monogamy, and charity.

Human nature, in other words, is a far more powerful agenda setter than any editor or producer. The media can speak, but someone has to listen and, besides listening, want to hear. And bad news is what best gets our attention. Communication, you see, was "interactive" long before the age of computers.

Journalism and entertainment respond to these interactive stimuli. So do the most effective artists and politicians. At a crucial moment 50 years ago, when Harry Truman adopted the far-sighted strategy to contain Soviet communism with massive financial aid to the democracies of Europe, he knew he could not count on the altruism or even enlightened self-interest of Americans and their representatives in Congress. To gain support for such massive foreign aid, he felt he would have to "scare hell" out of the American people, and so he did.

We vote our fears, not our hopes. We'll pay without limit for a war on drugs, but not to heal the addicted. We lavish money on the Pentagon, but parse it out to our schools. The true author of our common agenda is in the air around us or, if your prefer, in the Heavens above.

I do not cite the power of the audience over our agenda to excuse the media's failures. It is not our job simply to give the public what it most wants. But I do think our critics have to stop pretending that the news media are simply free to pursue any agenda of their own inspired choosing. News that is a step behind the culture is old hat. But get two steps ahead, and you're just wasting your genius.

Are we then forever condemned to producing only what the mass audience is ready to hear? Not if we belong to the elites that can afford ***The Economist*** or ***The New York Times*** or the more probing news on NPR and ***NewsHour***—the handful of news organizations that manage despite minority audiences to afford the expensive staffs needed to penetrate complex contemporary issues.

Peace is infinitely harder to cover than war. Presidents in ordinary times write a much duller script than imperial leaders in crisis.

The old spy stories will never be matched by tales of housing and HMO inspectors. Earthquakes are more exciting than soil erosion. It takes extraordinary talent to dramatize the undercurrents in human affairs, and much more money than our market economy will naturally provide.

The market gravitates to the mass and the mass, except at extraordinary moments of peril, is content with superficial news. And two anti-market forces that used to moderate this condition no longer exist.

The first such force was the willful leadership of private entrepreneurs—philanthropists of information, if you will, who believed that the practice of journalism, like also medicine or law, ought to have a higher goal than profit. Family entrepreneurs like the Ochses and Sulzbergers and Reids in New York, the Taylors in Boston, the Meyer-Grahams in Washington, the Cowleses in Minneapolis, the Binghams in Louisville, the Hobbys in Houston, and some others, decided consciously and at considerable expense to serve the loftier interests of their communities even if that defied the logic of the market. They were in business to practice journalism, not the other way around. But they were always the minority among the media and most of them gradually lost control through dilution of the family genes or the claims of estate taxes and the pressures of the stock market. I doubt that many could have survived to the end of this century in any case once broadcasting became their fully mature competitor. The family force is largely spent.

The second great force that used to restrain the market's drive toward sensationalism was government. Just as politicians once held printers in check by parceling out public notice ads and printing contracts, our federal laws placed a restraining hand on the young radio and television industries by insisting that broadcasters earn their spectrum licenses by operating "in the public interest." Vague as it was, that standard posed a constant threat that government would shift a broadcast license to those who promised more and better news, children's programs, documentaries, and the like.

But technology has undermined the rationale for abridging the rights of broadcasters. Space on the spectrum is no longer so scarce and cable and satellites have hugely expanded the ranges of choice

for radio and television audiences. They now produce such an abundance of “news” and “discussion” that no one can afford to staff them intelligently.

Ideally, instead of rationing the spectrum, government should now be charging fees for its commercial use and investing some of that income in foundations that would underwrite public interest television and internet services. But the subsidy of journalistic quality cannot, must not, in our present culture depend upon government. For in those rare moments of great stress, crisis, or scandal, when the public will inevitably turn to the media for guidance and enlightenment, the agenda must never be controlled by the very government that may be the cause of our distress.

I am left with only one practical hope: that for our media, as for other American maladies, the best response to bad speech is more speech. We are seeing some of that happening now and the trend needs reinforcement. The media are no more eager than other businesses to reveal their systemic failures, but fortunately their product stands naked in public for all to examine and rail against. Many more people now hear about the fakers, hustlers, and other media miscreants when they are caught than ever hear their misinformation in the first place. Our technology can be to some degree self-correcting if criticism of the media and their arrogance and their confessions of error are broadcast and published even more widely than their original sins.

But no amount of technological change will make the mass media automatically more responsible or mature. Their quest for novelty and popularity will always seduce most of them into competitive glibness, hype, and superficiality. They deserve our constant skepticism and criticism—but not our indifference, for there are times in every generation when we need free media as we need oxygen.

Even if they do not bring us truth, the media are essential for exposing falsehood. Although they roil our emotions, they can sustain the public’s morale during disasters. They can rescue us from demagogues and false prophets and help wise leaders to dispel fear and grief in times of tragedy. Freedom for the media to behave sloppily, even irresponsibly, is the price we have to pay for their independence when we most need them.

As Karl Popper wrote in his defense of democracy in the darkest days of World War II, we can always prove false ideas to be false—so long as debate and the information needed for debate are allowed to surface. A process of constant experiment and self-correction is the only way to build a humane society—especially if our Constitution is right in its fundamentally pessimistic view of human nature and about the corruptibility of power. Since we must not trust our rulers with power over information, we need even imperfect media to keep alive the channels of dissent.

Our media may be more scruffy and irksome than we desire, but so long as they are free they will continue to attract enough conscientious reporters, editors, managers, and even some owners to keep alive the values of civil discourse. We must always respect what the media can sometimes become—even as we deplore what they usually are.

Can Serious Journalism Survive In The New Media Marketplace?

David Bollier

The first spate of titanic news spectacles—the O.J. Simpson trials, the death of Princess Diana, the Menendez brothers' murder trial-were seen as fascinating aberrations in contemporary journalism. Now, as serious journalism struggles to maintain its audience and as sensational stories mixing scandal, sex, crime, and hype become a familiar staple of the news, a disquieting suspicion is beginning to settle over many quarters in journalism: Perhaps there are deeper structural reasons for the tabloidization of mainstream news, over and above any episodic failings of news organizations.

Perhaps the financial and marketplace arrangements that once supported thoughtful, probing journalism have forever changed, due in no small part to the growth of new media technologies. As the competitive landscape of the media industries has changed, serious journalism must now compete with other sorts of "content." Many, especially television entertainment and "soft news" magazines, are far cheaper to produce and more profitable than news. The resulting clash between journalistic standards and marketplace pressures has never been more intense or complex.

The Aspen Institute's 1998 Catto Conference on Journalism and Society was convened to identify and explore some of the key forces in what Max Frankel, former executive editor of ***The New York Times***, calls "media madness." The conference, moderated by Juan Williams, national correspondent on the staff of ***The Washington Post,*** brought together 25 of the nation's most prominent journalists, editors, and others, to explore journalistic performance and its role in sustaining a healthy democratic society. (A complete list of participants is included in the appendix.) The

report that follows is based upon discussions at the conference, as redacted and synthesized by the rapporteur and supplemented by other source materials. The 1998 conference was made possible by the Catto Charitable Foundation.

Participants at the conference agreed that it may be premature to fully understand the changes under way. What is clear is that the "agenda-setting" function that the mainstream press once played, and which gave the public sphere a more intelligent, stable focus, is being radically reshaped. If the front page of ***The New York Times*** was once the high mass of daily journalism, agenda-setting powers have now been seized by a teeming mass of exotic sects. The sovereignty of news judgment is being elbowed aside by upstarts in cable television, broadcast TV, and web sites, which may or may not care a whit about rigorous journalism. At the same time, journalists at reputable news organizations such as CNN, ***The Boston Globe, The New Republic***, and others have in the past year committed embarrassingly basic lapses in accuracy and ethics.

Such developments have raised worrisome fears about the decline of traditional journalistic standards and its impact on American society. Can our democratic polity function properly, let alone survive, if daily journalism shirks thoughtful, well-reported stories about public issues for soft, entertainment-oriented "news"? Or if it caters to narrow demographic segments of the public, and not everyone? Or if it sensationalizes or misrepresents stories, fueling cynicism and distrust among the public?

Confronting these issues is made more difficult by the suspicion that these intensifying trends seem to be driven less by editors' free choices or individual mistakes than by larger economic forces. Celebrity-driven entertainment and soft news are easier to produce and more lucrative than serious journalism. News that is tailored for niche audiences is more economically viable, on the whole, than general-audience journalism. Notwithstanding many fine examples of journalistic excellence, the competitive rewards for producing in-depth, serious news coverage have never seemed more problematic.

Since the economic underpinnings of journalism seem to be a primary influence, it is worth examining how the media marketplace has changed dramatically over the past several years.

The Changing Structure of the Media Marketplace

The predominant theme in the media marketplace of the 1990s is competition. As never before, traditional news organizations are facing unprecedented competition from the proliferation of media outlets: independent broadcast stations (more than 1,600), broadcast networks (six); cable TV networks (more than 220); round-the-clock television news networks (four); numerous regional cable TV news programs; and, of course, the vastness of the World Wide Web (more than 36 million registered hosts, according to Network Wizards' July 1998 Internet Domain Survey). Consumers have never had so many options.

One of the chief consequences of this robust expansion of media outlets has been the fragmentation of large, heterogeneous markets. "The universal media market is gone," said Michael Barone, senior staff editor of ***Reader's Digest***. "Nobody reads ***Collier's*** or ***Look*** any more, because they don't exist." While there remains a significant market for large, heterogeneous audiences—the kind sought by the broadcast networks and metropolitan newspapers— the market share of such media outlets has declined, sometimes dramatically, in recent years.

Five years ago, 60 percent of American adults "regularly" watched a nightly news program. By 1998, that viewership had plunged to 38 percent. Newspaper readership has declined as well, particularly among young people. In 1965, a Gallup poll found that 67 percent of those surveyed in the 21-to-35 age group had read a daily newspaper the day before. By spring 1998, according to a survey sponsored by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, daily newspaper readership had declined to 31 percent.[1]

Why has the "universal" media market eroded so much? The answers are complicated, but clearly one important factor has been the novel market niches made possible by new media technologies. Over the past 20 years cable television has pioneered "narrowcasting," gearing programming toward specific demographic audiences that are as broad as teenagers, young adults, and women or as narrow as country music fans, science fiction buffs, and amateur cooks.

In the print media, too, publications that once focused on broad, general readership have deliberately reinvented their

product to service more defined, market-defensible niches. ***Reader's Digest***, once a more universal, general-audience magazine, is now marketed more specifically to "middle America." The ***Des Moines Register*** no longer distributes to the entire state of Iowa, but instead focuses coverage on its immediate metropolitan region. ***The New York Times*** may be one of the nation's most preeminent general-audience publications, but it, too, focuses on a distinct demographic— the upscale, educated reader who, as one wag put it, lives "anywhere in the U.S. within 75 miles of a Saks Fifth Avenue."

When even highly respected general-interest magazines perform poorly, the future of the universal market does not seem promising. ***The New Yorker*** has reportedly lost $175 million over the 13 years since it was acquired by S.I. Newhouse, and lost $11 million in 1997 for Condé Nast. ***The Atlantic Monthly*** and ***Harper's*** are both money-losers, subsidized by outside sources. ***Texas Monthly*** is one of the few surviving regional magazines to still publish serious journalism for a general readership. But some observers fear that its recent sale to a media corporation and new budget cuts may usher in the superficial consumerist/lifestyle format that characterizes most regional magazines. Dismal stories such as these prompt industry analysts to wonder if a diverse mass readership is indeed a sustainable market.

A Fractured Public Agenda

The fragmentation of the news business has some profound implications for the ability of the mainstream press to set a common agenda for national life. With the erosion of a unitary market dominated by a few major news outlets, it has become more difficult for a consensus to emerge on journalistic standards and the most appropriate news agenda. There may be discernible economic reasons for this fact. Competition is now oriented to a more diverse, segmented media marketplace; naturally, news agendas and standards will vary widely. In fact, down-market publications and TV shows may have strong competitive reasons for ***not*** adhering to high-minded journalistic norms. Good taste and seriousness might undercut their market franchises.

The balkanization of the national news agenda and standards of performance is fostered, or at least reinforced, by far-reaching

changes in American culture over the past generation. "Today there are many public spheres, and not just one," said Michael Barone of ***Reader's Digest***. "In the early 1970s, there were only three networks. You could cover the presidential election [by reporting developments] in five rooms; then there would be three network story conferences in the afternoon. It was all manufactured right there." Today, Barone continued, there is more cultural variety. People have more diverse affiliations, and often have smaller, more private spheres of concern—a product, perhaps, of post-cold war peace and prosperity. "The good news," said Barone, "is that you can get your news from wherever you'd like. The bad news is that you don't have a common public square where all sides can get together."

The fragmentation of American cultural and political life makes it inherently harder—and more costly—to formulate a common news agenda and report on it. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was commonplace to rely upon official handouts from federal agencies in Washington as part of beat coverage. Now it is well recognized that quotable expertise can be found in many nongovernmental realms—and that the range of credible opinion is diverse and complex. The shared cultural deference to official expertise, whether it be "Washington" or elite institutions, no longer holds.

New Economic Forces Shaping the Character of Journalism

It is not generally appreciated how deep economic forces are reshaping the character of daily journalism. Within the newspaper business, one significant change is the shrinking cross-subsidies for good journalism. Traditionally, the more lucrative components of a newspaper, such as its classified advertising, have helped subsidize types of journalism that can easily be seen as too expensive or offering few competitive business benefits. Foreign news reporting, news coverage of regions with low subscriber or advertising bases, investigative journalism, in-depth coverage of complex topics—these types of journalism often do not enhance revenues in obvious, directly demonstrable ways, at least in the short term. As the diverse features of a newspaper operation are picked off by niche-market competitors, and as

media executives force editors to justify their journalistic endeavors in strict financial terms, the cross-subsidies that have historically supported quality journalism are disappearing.

The Internet is aggravating this trend, says Jodie Allen, former Washington editor of ***Slate***, by "disengaging advertising from content." She cited a search engine on the Internet that allows people to easily locate apartments that meet highly specific preferences (neighborhood, number of rooms, amount of rent, etc.). "While the classified ads in ***The Washington Post*** are supporting the news bureau in Beijing," said Allen, "a web site with classified advertising isn't supporting anything but itself."

This leads Allen to conclude that content providers will have to develop innovative revenue sources if they are to survive. One possibility: persuading Internet service providers (ISPs) to set up "micro-accounts" that can bill users for transactions of a few cents or even fractions of cents.

Not only are market fragmentation and Internet-based commerce knocking out the props of cross-subsidization for journalism, the expanding scope of competition is privileging that content which is most marketable. This dynamic is especially pronounced in television. If viewers have dozens of choices, it becomes harder for a network to get people to sample programming and build market share. Celebrities, familiar TV hosts, and high-profile sporting events offer ready solutions. They offer a "brand identification" that can cut through an undifferentiated mass of program offerings to capture viewers' attention. Hence the willingness of CBS to spend $18 billion for the rights to NFL football and NBC to spend a reported $6 million for Geraldo Rivera's talents. Critics may question the size of these premiums, but the alternative means for building a market franchise are arguably riskier, more expensive, and too time-consuming.

This explains a perverse economic logic in today's media market: that it "makes sense" to spend lavishly for things perceived to have marketing value—which can thereby yield a competitive advantage—rather than plow money into basic news gathering, which may or may not make a discernible difference in a news operation's economic performance.

USA Today columnist Walter Shapiro, remembers how, at ***Newsweek*** and ***Time***, editors often spent tens of thousands of dollars finding the "perfect" image for the magazine cover—going to enormous lengths to find just the right photo of President Clinton shaking hands—even as basic reporting functions scratched for funds. This attention to marketing over journalism is not uncommon. It is said that Tina Brown, as editor of ***The New Yorker***, paid photographer Richard Avedon $1 million a year for his photo-features, a sum that approximates the entire annual editorial budget of the ***Atlantic Monthly***.

At metro dailies and network news, the business case for replacing foreign bureaus or experienced older journalists with cheaper substitutes (wire services, stringers, young reporters) seems compelling, at least in the short term. But over the long term, of course, such moves can diminish the intellectual capital and credibility of a news franchise.

Few areas of journalism have suffered from this dynamic more than coverage of state government. As Charles Layton and Mary Walton describe in the ***American Journalism Review (AJR)***, "Bureaus are shrinking, reporters are younger and less experienced, stories get less space and poorer play, and all too frequently editors just don't care. At the same time, state governments have more power and more money than ever before."[2] The lengthy ***AJR*** examination of statehouse coverage shows that 27 states have seen a decline in the number of reporters covering state government full-time, with only 14 states seeing increases (the remaining nine states were unchanged). Of the top eight newspaper companies based on circulation, six have slashed their reporting presence in state capitals in recent years.

The implications of these cutbacks for democratic accountability and public well-being are sobering. Layton and Walton describe how many dubious special-interest deals and fiscal scandals in state governments have nearly escaped public scrutiny because of a scarcity of enterprising statehouse reporters. But this is not likely to change soon. Out-of-state media corporations see their newspaper holdings as money machines, the authors explain, and not as vital civic resources for ensuring integrity in government and generating valuable information about prison systems, tax policy, or health care.

Television news can be particularly averse to statehouse coverage. None of California's TV news stations, for example, now have bureaus in Sacramento despite the obvious impact of state government on people's lives. Most television coverage of the 1998 gubernatorial primary in California came from candidates' paid TV ads, not from TV news programs.

The Corrupting Influence of Television Entertainment on Journalism

Perhaps the most potent market force reshaping mainstream journalism has been television entertainment. Much of journalism has been annexed by the entertainment marketplace. A generation ago, network news was more insulated from competitive market pressures. As pioneered by Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite, Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, and others, broadcast news was considered a domain for public service that enhanced a network's reputation. Certainly the networks expected news to more or less pay its way through advertising, but its performance was not subjected to the cutthroat rigors of entertainment ratings and forced to yield maximum revenues.

Today, by contrast, network news and even newspapers to a lesser degree have been conscripted into a competition with TV entertainment. The once-discrete domain of journalism has been incorporated into a vast, roiling media marketplace dominated by television, which, of course, is chiefly an entertainment medium. "Television is where the real competition is now, in journalism," said Robert MacNeil, the journalist and author. "TV is a great vortex of competition, with journalists clinging to the edge, trying not to get sucked down.

"I read in one study," said MacNeil, "that men click the remote control [for TV sets] every five seconds. Anyone running a television program on the front lines of competition knows that ***something*** must happen on the screen within that five seconds that is diverting or visually stimulating, or viewers will go away. . . .The expectation of entertainment [on television] drives this crazed competition now, so that it is considered ***reasonable*** to measure the audience minute-by-minute. Not only reasonable, but vital!

This isn't just affecting ***Inside Edition***. It's affecting Tom Brokaw and the nightly news, and the other nightly news-magazines, including ***60 Minutes***. Because everybody is terribly afraid of losing market share, they're doing everything possible—some of it scurrilous, some of it admirable—to try to hold onto a piece of that market share."

What this means is that the competitive criteria that drive TV entertainment—fast pace, visual excitement, shocking simplicities, promotable storylines—are starting to warp traditional news judgment, not just on television but in other media as well.

A 1998 report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, a non-profit research center sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts, studied 3,760 stories on the three nightly network news programs and in major newspapers and newsweeklies in March 1977, 1987, and 1997.[3] The report found that features on celebrities, human interest stories, and scandals increased from 15.4 percent of the stories in 1977 to 43 percent in 1997. ***Time*** and ***Newsweek*** were seven times as likely to have the same cover as People magazine in 1997 than in 1977, even though the amount of straight news stories increased slightly. The report concluded: "While content studies have their limits and the question of what is entertainment and what is news is open to question, the data clearly indicate that there have been major shifts in how the news media define news."

Joyce Purnick, the metropolitan editor of ***The New York Times***, gave a specific example of how the norms of television entertainment end up driving the news agenda. A New York City television news program aired a news story about expired shelf dates on food supplies in storerooms of the board of education's food suppliers. No one ever found dangerous bacteria in the food, and no one was known to have gotten sick. But the TV station nonetheless aggressively promoted the story as a "scandal," essentially forcing other news media to cover it too or be seen as deficient. "It was all about very, very little," said Purnick. "But all of us [in other news outlets] wound up having to write about the 'story.'"

The Economic Logic of "Event Journalism"

Competitive stampedes of this sort, fueled by the economic imperatives of television in a hypercompetitive media environ-

ment, are becoming increasingly common. John Cassidy, writing in ***The New Yorker***, describes how "mega-event" journalism has a distinct economic logic in today's media environment.[4] Once huge investments have been made in a large production and distribution system—e.g., news media operations—the most efficient financial returns can be had through programming that can be produced and extended at little cost. The idea is to increase output (news programming) while reducing the incremental costs of that output, reaping a benefit known in complexity theory as "increasing returns to scale." A product that succeeds at a certain large scale (a book, movie, news story) begins to enjoy "network effects" that accelerate its success. A product that succeeds in a networked environment tends to gain hugely disproportionate market share even as incremental costs decline.

The O.J. Simpson trials, the Gulf War, the movie ***Titanic***, and the Monica Lewinsky affair are preeminent examples of the economic dynamic of "event" journalism in a networked environment. As Cassidy explains: "Once a news story generates network effects, it enjoys a 'positive feedback' process, in which the fact that some people are already talking about it persuades others to show an interest. In due course, a story may 'lock in,' and rival events will be starved of public attention. People who have invested enough time to learn the minute details of a journalistic 'event'—Where was the bloody glove found? What did Kato hear thumping outside his wall? What happened to the golf bag?—are understandably reluctant to move on to another one, where they will have to start all over."

Even though event journalism may offend traditional news judgment, it can generate some irresistible ratings and revenue gains. MSNBC's ratings nearly doubled between the third quarter of 1997 and the second quarter of 1998, reports Cassidy. CNN enjoyed its highest viewership since the Simpson trial on August 17, when President Clinton made his statement about the Lewinsky scandal; Fox News Channel had its highest viewership ever. Talk radio, news magazines, comedy shows, and Internet chat sites have all found similar benefits from focusing on every twist and turn in the Clinton-Lewinsky matter. The economic imperatives of a networked media environment offer one intrigu-

ing explanation for this unprecedented shift in news coverage.

"The national press," said conference participant Robert MacNeil, "has metastasized into an industry which has co-opted the consciousness of this nation through all its functions ***other*** than journalism—chiefly entertainment and advertising—and has produced at the national level a kind of hysteria in the national coverage of events." Citing "Hurricane Monica," the death of Princess Diana, and other splenetic cataracts of coverage, MacNeil argues that these frenzies are "corrupting the programs that used to be responsible vehicles of responsible journalism—and everything beneath them. That is what really worries me."

The new lows in broadcast journalism have become such rich fodder for mordant humor that MacNeil recently turned it into a roman-à-clef, ***Breaking News***. The novel depicts an upright, aging news anchor trying to do his best in a news business whose standards are becoming increasingly shabby and swinish. MacNeil's characters include a beautiful, shallow, and conniving TV journalist who threatens to replace him; an Internet sleaze-meister known as "the First Electronic Black Drag Queen Gossip Columnist"; and three network anchors referred to as Grecian Formula, Lone Ranger, and Gregory Peck, who work for the networks Beige, Taupe and Bisque.

At the conference, MacNeil stressed that many segments of mainstream journalism still struggle mightily "to do a good job and approach the ideal. But they, too, fear losing market share to those who have found ways of being more seductive and entertaining to the American public at a time when the public doesn't care that much about most things. . . . People are willing to be entertained and diverted, and not address the real heavy issues of our time." The residual market for serious journalism is a narrow stratum of society, chiefly elites, who have their own self-interested reasons for tracking a given news realm, such as finance, foreign policy, etc.

But this readership, said MacNeil, is "a cloud of consumers who sit above the rest." The "next stratum down," said MacNeil, is "the journalism of high earnestness that began sometime during the New Deal and flourished through the end of the Cold War. This journalism seems to have evaporated and become quite content

to erase itself. That is what we're really deploring."

Indeed, the real battleground for quality journalism may be the "great middle" of the news chain: regional newspapers, metro dailies, network and local TV news and other purveyors of mass-market news. Two kinds of journalism seem to be succeeding quite well—elite journalism and unabashedly "bad" journalism. The former, characterized by such organs as ***The New York Times***, ***Nightline***, ***The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer***, ***Slate***, and others, tends to be financially successful and journalistically impressive. The latter, also financially successful, consist of such bottom-feeders as supermarket tabloids, syndicated talk and news-feature shows, and unorthodox sources of sensation-laced "news." George Orwell may have had such journalism in mind when he coined the term "prole-feed."

The real question may be whether the great mass of "reputable" news outlets will gradually absorb the standards of entertainment-oriented, lifestyle publications and programming—or whether they will somehow find new economic footings to remain vehicles of rigorous reporting and analysis.

Is the TV News-Magazine Debasing Serious Journalism?

Perhaps the most questionable trend in this regard is the television news-magazine. This growing genre has supplanted traditional broadcast news with a hybrid journalism that is acutely mindful of entertainment values and competitive ratings. While often featuring serious news topics, the news-magazines also have a penchant for diverting fluff: segments on overweight pets, interviews with notorious criminals, and half-contrived "scandals" that are misleading or erroneous.

Two examples: the rigged "explosion" of allegedly defective gas tanks on Ford trucks ***(NBC's Dateline)***, and the allegation of defects in Audi brakes ***(60 Minutes)***. More recently, ***Brill's Content*** charged that news-magazines frequently overstate the actual dangers of escalators, leisure-helicopter rides, sports supplements, and other products. Of an arbitrary sampling of 20 news-magazine episodes in 1995 and 1996, ***Brill's Content*** judged that eight of the episodes, or 40 percent, were unfair because of distorted or omitted facts or interviews.[5]

Such episodes point up the real crisis in America, said Jodie

Allen: the "scandal shortage." There are simply too many news outlets chasing too few scandals of sufficient marketability. As journalism standards are diluted, the genre of crusading journalism veers closer to self-parody. But the economic incentives for producing lightweight news-magazines are strong. As ***Brill's Content*** explains: "According to ad rates compiled by ***Advertising Age***, the average one-hour newsmagazine can expect to gross roughly $2.7 million. That's for a program that costs up to $700,000 to produce—compared to $1 million in production costs for a standard hour-long drama, according to Tom Wolzien, a media analyst at Sanford C. Bernstein & Co. Inc." In September 1998, there were 12 hours of news magazines on the air each week.[6]

But consider this paradox: The same megamedia marketplace that fuels a boom of news-magazines and Jerry Springer-style talk shows also generates greater absolute quantities of useful news and information than ever before. A short list includes CNN, two C-SPAN channels, several business news programs, local cable access programming, and Interact access to Congress, the White House, and dozens of government agencies. "An American citizen who has a strong sense of citizenship and wants to be informed can probably have a better chance of being informed than ever before," observed journalist Robert MacNeil. "He's got all sorts of sources to go to, if he has the motivation."

One nagging problem, however, as news sources proliferate and genres blur, is determining the credibility of information. What is serious journalism and what is entertainment? How trustworthy is a given TV news-magazine or Internet site? The news-magazine boom has resulted in slacker editorial standards for journalism while conferring unwarranted credibility on many entertainment programs as news sources. Some 35 to 40 percent of the NBC and ABC prime-time programming is now devoted to "news," according to Christopher Dixon, managing director of Paine Webber Inc. Yet many of these programs clearly stretch the definition of "journalism." Deborah Norville, the anchor of ***Inside Edition***, strives to meet journalistic standards, but concedes that her program, like most of her competitors', must ultimately satisfy entertainment criteria, including minute-by-minute ratings.

The editorial sovereignty of journalism is also being eroded as

the public turns to nontraditional outlets for "news." Even though they work at the periphery of mainstream news outlets, Internet sites such as ***The Drudge Report*** and advertising by candidates and special interests can exert considerable influence on public opinion. Famous examples include the "Harry and Louise" ads that helped scuttle the Clinton health care plan in 1994, and tobacco industry ads that helped derail a proposed tobacco liability settlement in 1998.

As more people eschew newspapers and the evening news, late-night comedians such as Jay Leno, David Letterman and Bill Maher are actually becoming important sources of news for millions of politically disengaged Americans. Suffice it to say that neither accuracy, depth and analysis, nor the education of a democratic citizenry are foremost concerns.

The Ratings War Mandate: "If It Bleeds, It Leads"

Fierce competition and the enormous influence of entertainment values and ratings have produced a particularly nasty spectacle in broadcast news: body bag news coverage. Numerous studies in recent years have documented the pervasiveness of the "If it bleeds, it leads" standard of news judgment on local broadcast news. Lurid coverage of violent crimes, disasters, and personal tragedies are seen as the most effective way to win the unrelenting ratings competitions.

One reason that local newscasts have become major purveyors of crime stories is the changing economics of broadcast news. The network news organizations have scaled back their programming, in response to declining revenue, allowing local news programming to increase. The cost of a local newscast is a fraction of the national counterpart, and station owners get to keep the lion's share of the advertising revenues. If ratings and revenues can be more readily boosted through sensational news approaches, it can be an irresistible business strategy. Yet is also means that local news has become the preeminent source of "public affairs" information.

A survey conducted by the ***Detroit News*** in May 1997 found that an average of 43 percent of the news on Detroit's late-evening newscasts was devoted to crime and disaster stories.[7]

Very little coverage was given to education, the environment, government or other significant topics. In a survey of late-evening newscasts on 100 stations in 34 states in 1997, Rocky Mountain Media Watch, a nonprofit advocacy group, found that the "median Mayhem Index"—time spent on crime and violence—was 42.6 percent. The "median Fluff Index" —time spent on trivia, celebrities, previews, promos and chitchat-was 32.6 percent.[8]

Violent crime is, of course, given greater coverage than lesser crimes. In Los Angeles, for example, 20 percent of all local crime reports focus on murders, writes political science professor Shanto Iyengar, even though murder accounts for less than 1 percent of all crime in Los Angeles County.[9]

The constant emphasis on crime in local TV news not only crowds out other important stories, it sows exaggerated fears and distrust among a city's population. "Viewers are not invited to tune in to find out about those things that could give them a sense of community," said Robert MacNeil. "To an extreme degree, they are invited to tune in to hear things that ***distort*** the community and which are probably, statistically, unrepresentative of the community."

A different conclusion comes from a study of public opinion of Baltimore-area residents sponsored by the Public Agenda, a nonprofit organization that facilitates citizen discussion about public policy. Public Agenda's report, "Crime, Fears and Videotape," concurs with other studies that most people get their information about crime from the media, especially television, and that the bad news about crime (specific incidents) resonates with people while the good news (declining crime rates) has yet to penetrate.[10] The report also confirmed that viewers dislike the abrasive style of crime coverage, especially its incessant replays of dramatic crime video and reporters who are insensitive to the feelings of crime victims.

But the Public Agenda report also contends that few viewers believe that broadcast news gives too much emphasis to crime:

> ***The media—and television in particular—get good marks from Baltimore-area residents. Most are satisfied with the amount of local TV news***

coverage of crime and describe local news broadcasts as accurate and fair. People are interested in hearing about crime—they would not want TV news to curtail its crime reporting, even if doing so would improve Baltimore City's image.[11]

One explanation for these results, suggested Deborah Wadsworth, executive vice president of Public Agenda, is that 53 percent of respondents to the survey had either themselves been victims of either violent crime or theft or had friends or family who were victims, over the preceding 12 months.

The Public Agenda study does not dispute a widely shared conclusion, however, that local TV news profoundly influences people's perceptions of crime and public safety. People who watch TV news every day, said the report, "are far more likely to think that crime and drugs are the biggest problems facing a city than people who rarely watch the news," by a margin of 67 percent to 42 percent.

Professor Iyengar goes a step further, and says that his experimental research at UCLA shows that people who receive a steady diet of crime news "are more apt to advocate prison expansion, increased funding for law enforcement and similar harsh 'treatments' for the problem. This evidence helps explain the paradox of continued high levels of concern for crime in the face of declining rates of criminal activity. Crime may be declining overall," Iyengar noted, but "information about specific acts of crime is all too visible, and the public has become highly sensitized to the issue."

One of the more pernicious aspects to local TV crime coverage, said Professor Iyengar, is the subtle racial coding often embedded in news accounts. In one of Iyengar's studies, a systematic compilation was made of every single news story that had been aired on Los Angeles television news programs over a two-year period. Then, in a controlled experiment that used computer-based editing techniques to change the race of the suspect depicted in local TV news, viewers were shown crime coverage showing the "same" suspect as either a white or African-American male."

The experimental data reveal that when people are given the exact same story with a white perpetrator, instead of an African-

American or Hispanic perpetrator, they reach very different conclusions about the nature of crime and the criminal justice system. They are significantly less likely to support punitive policies, for example." The UCLA experiments suggest that "local news has 'racialized' the public's understanding of crime," said Iyengar.

The relentless coverage of violent crime on local TV news is provoking a backlash among some viewers. In Denver, a new citizen group, Rocky Mountain Media Watch, was founded to document the content of local newscasts. Based on their findings, which present a scathing critique of television crime coverage, the organization in February 1998 filed a petition with the Federal Communications Commission to deny the relicensing of Denver's four commercial TV stations. It is an extreme action that is not likely to succeed, but the effort has nonetheless prompted news directors in that city to reassess how they cover crime.

Another effort to buck prevailing journalistic practices was instigated by a station itself, KVUE in Austin, Texas. Responding to viewers' distaste for coverage of violent crime, KVUE adopted specific guidelines to help its news producers and reporters curb sensationalistic coverage. News staff must now be able to answer yes to at least one of the following five questions before airing a prospective crime story:

1. Is there an immediate threat to public safety?
2. Is there a threat to children?
3. Do viewers need to take action?
4. Is there a significant community impact?
5. Is the story part of a crime-prevention effort?

It is unclear whether such high-minded efforts can succeed in competitive news markets, however. While KVUE has succeeded in garnering good ratings, another station that sought to reduce its blood-and-guts news coverage, WESH in Orlando, Florida, dropped into last place in the ratings when it eschewed sensationalism.

How Marketing and Short-term Business Priorities Are Changing Journalism

It is either a sign of the new competitive pressures or the chang-

ing role of editors, or both, that business judgments are assuming a much greater role in shaping journalistic norms. Editors who aspire to become media executives more readily embrace the economic values that prevail in the executive suite over the journalistic standards of the newsroom. While any news operation must balance its books and turn a profit, business priorities are increasingly intruding upon the editorial integrity of journalism.

This trend was examined recently in a ***Columbia Journalism Review*** story by Joseph S. Coyle, which documents how a publication's business opportunities are increasingly dictating the content of journalism.[12] Editors routinely collaborate with management in coming up with story ideas and special sections in order to exploit new marketing opportunities and maximize advertising appeal. Magazines that were once known for their great journalism and moral authority, such as ***The New Yorker***, have entered into "co-branding" arrangements that market publications in conjunction with other businesses to improve the revenues of both. As Coyle reports, even though such practices violate the standards of the American Society of Magazine Editors, it is happening with greater frequency.

Given the fierce competitive pressures facing media companies, it is not surprising that more new publishers and producers are exploring ways to capitalize on their intangible assets, such as their brand-name recognition and credibility. It is a seemingly cost-free way to eke out new revenues. A good test case of the wisdom of this strategy will be seen in coming months as ***60 Minutes*** seeks to expand its market franchise from Sunday evening to two and possibly additional evenings throughout the week. The pivotal question is whether the program can maintain the same editorial quality while stretching the brand-name franchise over several more hours.

Similar commercial exploitation of journalistic brand names is occurring elsewhere as well. Veteran news anchor David Brinkley recently appeared in image ads promoting Archer Daniels Midlands, the agribusiness concern, much to the disappointment of some of his peers. Other newscasters have appeared as themselves in Hollywood movies, blurring the lines that once separated trustworthy reportage from entertaining make-believe. On

more than 200 occasions, ***USA Today*** has allowed advertisers to create their own special advertising sections that mimic the distinctive front-page design of ***USA Today***. The pseudo-newspapers are then distributed as free "special editions" to conference attendees and other groups.[13]

One of the more visible, aggressive experiments in marrying marketing goals with journalism is occurring at the ***Los Angeles Times***. Led by a new publisher, Mark Willes, the ***Times*** has instigated wide-ranging changes in how the newspaper is organized and stories conceptualized. The paper now has six special subsections that cater to distinct market niches (personal finance, small business, commercial real estate, etc.), each of which emphasizes "service journalism": stories that have some practical value to the reader, or "news you can use." At the ***Los Angeles Times***, each section editor is now paired with a manager from the business side, a practice that violates the "church/state separation" tradition that keeps the business and journalistic sides utterly separate. As at many publications today, editors at the ***Times*** are encouraged to think like executives. They receive pay bonuses if profit and readership goals are met, for example, a practice that obviously encourages stories that will have the broadest commercial appeal. Under the circumstances, it can be personally expensive for an editor to exercise more critical, independent editorial judgment.

All of these trends are sparking growing concern among professional journalists. How much ***should*** marketing concerns dictate journalistic practice?

Paul Tash, executive editor of the ***St. Petersburg Times***, believes that pandering to consumers is not good for the long-term health of journalism. "The way that television news judgments are made may be corrupting news judgments generally," said Tash. "Editors have a lack of confidence in their own judgments on behalf of their audiences. . . . We often end up in trouble when we lose that confidence."

Allowing a marketing mentality to run rampant in the newsroom is a dangerous proposition, agrees Joyce Purnick, metropolitan editor at ***The New York Times***. It introduces a conflict "between what we should be doing-good journalism-and what the public wants. Audience research is a slippery slope," Purnick

continued, "first of all, because the public is fickle. Journalism must be impelled by a sense of sovereign values. What is the right thing to be doing? The idea that we're here to cater to the public gets us in trouble."

A fixation on marketing over journalism is what leads to astronomical salaries for celebrity—journalists and huge sums for "perfect" cover photos while the meat-and-potatoes of good journalism-foreign bureaus, beat reporters, investigative reporting—suffer from too few resources. The inescapable fact, said Purnick, is that "good journalism costs money." Investigative reporting can result in months chasing down blind alleys for stories that don't materialize. In-depth reporting and analysis can consume months of a reporter's time. Purnick says that two ***Times*** reporters spent a full year preparing a four-part series on immigration.

Not only do many media executives see marketing as a more effective business strategy than solid journalism, they tend to make business judgments based on quantifiable, short-term paybacks rather than intangible long-term benefits. This means that the more enduring assets of a news franchise—its reputation and credibility, the quality and independence of its journalism—are more susceptible to being cashiered for quick-fix boosts in profits or audience.

This ethic has become so pervasive that the financial status of the corporate parent is now closely watched in the newsroom. "At the ***Dallas Morning News***, when we were fighting the ***Dallas Times Herald*** for our very survival," said George Rodrigue, "we never talked about profit. We sometimes talked about circulation, but profits never entered into newsroom conversations. Now they post the trading price of our stock on the New York Stock Exchange every day." (Rodrigue is now managing editor of the ***Press-Enterprise*** in Riverside, CA.)

Pressures to cut costs and boost profits are not only eroding journalistic quality, however. They are affecting how broadly newspapers are distributed in a region and thus their status as agenda-setters for a community. "Falling circulation has been ***good*** for newspaper profits in the short term," according to Paul Tash of the ***St. Petersburg Times***. "That sounds like it can't be true, but it is. Newspaper publishers are raising their prices, reducing boundaries

in which they're selling newspapers, and reducing sales efforts. This saves money in circulation costs, distribution costs and paper costs—and, in the meantime, advertising rates stay the same or go up. That strategy makes sense, but only in a short term way."

Over the long term, this strategy is likely to erode a newspaper's overall market leadership as a medium that trades in vital news and diverse ideas, several conference participants suggested. Over time, the value-added that newspapers enjoy as aggregators of heterogeneous readers will diminish. Newspapers may become less and less widely read, by less diverse groups of people, and in time become more expendable to a community. Call it the be-careful-what-you-wish-for scenario: A niche-driven market strategy may actually achieve its goals by cannibalizing a newspaper's core market, its broad, cross-niche readership.

This trend may be driven by newspapers' viewing their readers as niche consumers rather than as citizens with general, diverse interests, says Paul Tash. "Does a reader have value in his or her own right, even if he or she isn't going to shop at Dillard's Department Store? Or does that reader have value to the newspaper only because he or she is a potential customer for the advertiser who's placing those full-page ads?" Publishing a newspaper for the citizen-generalist produces a different sort of journalism (and business plan) than publishing for the niche-consumer.

The trend to craft journalism for niche readership is so advanced, however, that it may be impossible to resurrect the mass-audience journalism of seriousness and rigor. Walter Shapiro, the ***USA Today*** columnist, fears that "serious news may well become the province of baby boomers, older people and those in the upper 20 percent of income brackets. I really worry about all the people who say they don't need a daily newspaper, and who don't watch any TV news except Princess Di and the O.J. Simpson trial."

The fragmentation of the media marketplace and the repositioning of serious journalism as an upscale niche have serious implications for any democratic society. Information is said to be the lifeblood of a democracy; what happens when its circulation constricts, and only reaches a select few? It is a timely challenge to explore what strategies might be used to bolster good journalism when market forces seem to favor diminishing standards of

performance and reach.

Strategies for Sustaining Serious Journalism

Market Niches and Synergies

Fueling so many of the changes in journalism is a new economic and technological paradigm. Not only are there many more competitors of different media vying for the attention of the same information-consumers, the sources of revenue for news (or what passes for news) are expanding. Existing media businesses can be linked to other news organs and to new media in innovative ways, creating the fabled "synergy" that is inspiring so many mergers and acquisitions in the communications industry.

"There is a tectonic shift occurring in the traditional media business model," asserts Christopher Dixon, managing director of communications equity research at Paine Webber, the investment banker. "For the last 60 years, the basic media model said you've got revenue from two sources, advertisers and circulation. That was the basic premise of newspaper journalism, broadcast television, and cable television. What's happened only in the past fifteen months is the emergence of two new sources of revenue: electronic commerce and licensing."

The most innovative media executives, said Dixon, are seeking to leverage revenues from these new sources and in the process produce new forms of journalism. The most intriguing new example may be Tina Brown's new magazine venture, backed by Disney-owned Miramax studio. Her basic idea is to produce journalism that can capture revenues from licensing, electronic commerce, and other ancillary sources. Story ideas that serve as the basis for associated movies, television projects and/or merchandise (toys, clothing, etc.) can thereby generate significant new revenues.

Dixon sees advantages in such arrangements because they enable the costs of journalism to be amortized across a broader array of corporate assets than previously existed. If ***ABC News*** is suffering financially, for example, Disney's "Simba" movie can provide a cross-subsidy, said Dixon. He also cited CNNfn, the cable financial news service. "CNNfn, as a standalone television

entity, loses money," said Dixon. "But CNNfn, with its website, actually makes money." It is only natural that media companies begin to exploit new revenue streams in a more systematic way, said Dixon.

That is all well and good, said Max Frankel, the former executive editor of ***The New York Times***, "provided you stay in journalism. But Tina Brown is not going to finance new journalism," said Frankel. "She is ***leaving*** journalism. In leaving ***The New Yorker***, she is saying, 'This market will not support the quality of magazine that I said I would publish.'"

Other journalists remain skeptical of cross-media synergies of the sort described by Dixon. Robert MacNeil facetiously suggested product placements in journalism: "Why not get Coke to pay you for mentioning Coke in your story instead of mentioning Pepsi?" It is an idea that would certainly tap a new revenue stream, but doing so would also expose what most journalists find objectionable about cross-media synergies: their potential for degrading journalistic integrity.

That is precisely why "synergy" isn't all it's cracked up to be, warned Joyce Purnick of ***The New York Times***. It can lead to lapses of judgment and ethics that can harm the editorial franchise itself. She cited the infamous CNN-***Time*** story that alleged in June 1998 that the U.S. military used lethal sarin nerve gas in Laos in 1970 in an attempt to kill American defectors. CNN and ***Time*** were later forced to retract the story and apologize for it. The story had been highly promoted as the first story of a new newsmagazine, ***Newsstand: CNN & Time***, which would combine the newsgathering resources of both companies.[14] ***Time*** magazine thought it was reaping synergies by letting CNN do the story, Purnick said, but "without accountability, synergy won't work."

Christopher Dixon defended the idea of synergy, saying that any media company "needs to amass an audience before it can take on critical journalism." But Max Frankel remained unconvinced: "Where is the pressure for low-grade entertainment/journalism to improve itself, especially if it might require greater investments of money?" New sources of revenues are always attractive to any company, of course, but the real question is whether media executives will actually invest new revenues in

serious journalism when the financial returns from flogging low-grade facsimiles seem to be so much more rewarding.

Needed: A New Conversation Between Capital Providers and Journalism

Even as mainstream journalism faces new pressures in maintaining its traditional standards, the financial sponsors of the news business are doing quite well indeed. "The newspaper business is a huge, huge generator of free cash," said Christopher Dixon of Paine Webber. "It's one of the most profitable industries per se on the planet. Typical operating margins in television stations are more than 50 percent. That's extraordinary profit. . . . For newspapers, profit margins are about 25 percent."

Furthermore, Dixon continued, "These are businesses that don't require large levels of capital once they've been established. . . .We're not having to reinvent our business every six months. The three basic costs for most media companies are staff, production facilities, and distribution infrastructure, and those aren't going to change dramatically."

Despite such competitive advantages relative to other industries, leaders of television and newspaper businesses do not seem eager to find a more constructive rapprochement with the journalism profession. Many CEOs of top media companies were invited to attend this conference, but all declined. The Poynter Institute has reportedly suffered the same problem in trying to get media executives to sit down with journalists.

On those occasions when media business leaders do discuss journalistic performance, said Cynthia Tucker, editorial page editor of ***The Atlanta Constitution*** and a member of the advisory board of the Poynter Institute, "they mouth all the right words and say they share all the same values. But I have never been satisfied that they are actually as committed as their words suggest they are." Journalism reviews have always sought to be a voice of conscience, but their influence is chiefly within the profession; their critiques rarely affect the financial decisions of the investment community.

What can be done? An initial gambit suggested by some participants might be called, "Take a media mogul to lunch." The

idea is to confront top media executives in a friendly, informal way with the facts about how financial decisions within media corporations are affecting journalistic quality.

"When we look at the great leaders in serious journalism," said Walter Shapiro of ***USA Today***, "whether it is the Paleys and Sarnoffs in the early days of television, or the Sulzbergers and Grahams and the Nelson Poynters, all of them were rich people who were convinced that there was a value to serious journalism." Shapiro suggested finding ways to convince the Michael Eisners and Michael Bloombergs of the media world that "the best way to achieve social respect, after you have money, is to try to put out a quasi-serious journalistic product."

Max Frankel of ***The New York Times*** had an inspiration when a Florida television station owned by the Washington Post Company adopted the call letters WKMG, based on Katharine Graham's initials. "I suddenly realized that we have to hang out the shingle of those people who are ***really*** responsible for the news on local stations. If the station in Memphis were 'W-Sulzberger'," said Frankel, "maybe the local news would acquire some of the standards of the owners. In many cases, the major networks just milk the stations for every cent they can get, with no thought to journalistic visions or standards."

"Tactics must be found," said Frankel, to "somehow badger business into a different accounting system than just profits. Yes, you have to be profitable, because it is a very expensive business. But if you really want to be in the business of journalism, and not just practice journalism as a way of building business," said Frankel, "then you have to account to [the journalism profession] by more than the bottom line. In the end, the test is: What are you adding to the sum of human understanding?"

For those who fail this test, who are not really practicing journalism, said Frankel, "we're going to banish you from our fraternity and say, 'We don't think you should be invoking the First Amendment; you're doing something else—you're doing entertainment, you're doing Hollywood.'" When so confronted, the smarter media executives may be sufficiently embarrassed as to at least pay obeisance to the ethics of the profession, if not actually improve their support for serious journalism.

But first, journalists may have to formulate their own agenda to present to media executives and investors. Major communications companies appreciate the profound shifts in technologies and markets that are affecting their businesses, and are adapting accordingly. But have journalists identified their own professional needs and proposed ways to sustain them economically in the new media environment?

"A lot of thinking [in journalism circles] is sentimental, naïve, and old-fashioned," claims Rem Rieder, editor and senior vice president of the ***American Journalism Review***. "A lot of tough-minded people running these companies think we're kidding ourselves, that we're living in the past-that we have a romantic notion of what the media business is about, that we're out of step with the times, that we're asking for subsidies and ignoring the realities of the media marketplace."

If "church" and "state" (journalists and capital providers/managers) are going to have a fruitful conversation, both sides must begin to clarify their respective interests and suggest new ways to integrate them with the others' fundamental needs.

One imaginative idea is to develop alternative capital structures that can yield better sorts of journalism. Christopher Dixon of Paine Webber cited the ***St. Petersburg Times*** and ***Reader's Digest***, which both are structured in ways to assure that a certain amount of reinvestment in the business occurs and that a long-term business vision is pursued.

Although ***the St. Petersburg Times*** is operated as a for-profit entity that pays corporate taxes, sales taxes, and property taxes, it is owned by a nonprofit charity, the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, which is a school for professional and student journalists. The Institute also owns several other media properties, including ***Congressional Quarterly*** and ***Governing*** magazine.

This unusual ownership structure makes the ***St. Petersburg Times***, with annual revenues of more than $200 million, one of the largest private companies in Florida. More significantly, it has allowed the ***Times*** to remain under local control, independent of large national newspaper chains and absentee owners.

Paul Tash, executive editor of the ***St. Petersburg Times***, credits Nelson Poynter, the former owner of the paper, with "a remarkable gift of philanthropy to the west coast of Florida by creating a unique architecture for ownership which is both independent and private, and therefore allows us to focus on the long term instead of the short term."

Tash noted that some recent business decisions "vastly reduced the newspaper's profitability in the short term, but they have now positioned it as the largest newspaper on the west coast of Florida and, for the last six months, as the largest daily newspaper in the state. It would have been impossible to take those actions if ours were a public company trying to meet the demands of analysts in New York quarter by quarter."

The ownership structure of the ***St. Petersburg Times*** is certainly unusual, but its role in generating a robust, independent, locally responsive kind of journalism warrants greater scrutiny. They may be other ways, suggested Christopher Dixon, to find more salutary capital structures to support journalism. Perhaps tax policy could be used to make media properties more attractive to support better journalism, he said, or perhaps ways could be found to attract classes of investors comfortable with lesser returns or longer-term returns on investment.

Improving the Practice of Journalism

There are other, more familiar ways to encourage the practice of serious journalism. Conference participants enumerated some of the more promising strategies and suggested a renewed commitment to making them work.

Journalism reviews remain one of the best vehicles for highlighting the "best practices" within the profession and lambasting the more egregious practices. Many journalists at the conference agreed that there is a hunger among editors and reporters for concrete examples of good journalism. Others believe that publicizing good and bad journalism can strengthen the hand of journalists in dealing with publishers. "The more that the journalism leadership crowd gets behind these efforts, the more that little

fish like me will be able to go to our publishers [seeking support for good journalism]," said George Rodrigue, managing editor of ***The Press-Enterprise*** in Riverside, CA.

Other strategies for improving journalism were suggested: to cultivate greater consumer demand for serious reportage and analysis, by donating newspapers to schools, for example. Others urged that new attention be paid to training new journalists and giving them effective mentoring. Diversifying the age, ethnicity, political viewpoints, and cultural sensibilities of a newsroom would also help to make a news organization more responsive to their communities or the general public. Journalism could also be improved by investments in more editors, the middle management of the profession whose growing burden of responsibilities is making them less capable of exercising strict quality control and seasoned judgment.

An invigorated localism is another way that newspapers and TV news can fortify their business franchise while serving the public better, conference participants agreed. Metropolitan dailies in Chicago and Los Angeles are responding to competition in the outlying suburbs by beefing up their local coverage, said Michael Barone of ***Reader's Digest***. While some editors feel that metro markets are too large to cover local news well, Christopher Dixon disagreed, citing serious local news programs on cable television in New York, Chicago, and Long Island. He also cited Barry Diller's ambitious plans to develop local news programming through his cable stations owned by USA Networks, Inc. Whether the quality of journalism on these new ventures will be creditable or superficial remains to be seen.

Maintaining journalistic standards, suggests Steve Padilla, managing editor of the Valley edition of the ***Los Angeles Times***, may simply require a new resolve by journalists. "Those of us who are editors must instill in our writers, photographers and artists—by our words and our example—the desire to maintain standards for fairness and accuracy. If we are mentors, we must set young journalists on the right path and admonish those who stray from it." Padilla concedes that this focus on the individual, in the face of larger economic forces molding journalism, is "perhaps naive." But he insists that "if we are to make any progress at all, reform

and redemption must begin with personal resolve, integrity, and some serious soul-searching about our roles as journalists."

Conclusion

There seems no easy way out of the "media madness" described by Max Frankel in his opening address to this conference. The pace and intensity of media competition are here to stay, particularly as the Internet becomes a force in its own right. This leaves conscientious journalists in an increasingly uneasy position: uncomfortable and resentful about the decline of journalistic standards, but unable to propose strong, practical means to arrest it. There is a distinct sense, after several generations of journalism mixing high aspiration with popular appeal, that some fundamental definitions of "the news" may be changing. Journalism as we have known it, or sought to actualize it in mainstream venues, may be on the wane. The news business, once a world unto itself, has become a satrapy of a much larger media empire whose primary interests are not civic education and democratic discourse, but entertainment and commerce.

The future of journalism in this vast and volatile media marketplace of dizzying variety will belong to defensible niches. That, at least, is the powerful message being sent by investors and media conglomerates. The general audience of yore is gone. To be sure, there will always be a secure market for mass-audience publications and television programs. But their day as the preeminent arbiters of news judgment and taste seems to be over. Their role in setting the national agenda has been commandeered by a new, broader, and more complex constellation of news organizations and market forces. A richer array of media technologies and a pluralistic culture have facilitated this transmogrification as well. One size no longer fits all. For better and worse, the media ecology has irreversibly changed.

The formidable challenge that remains is to find new, sustainable economic footings for serious journalism without turning it into a commodity for elites. The vitality of American democracy requires no less. Journalism is not commensurable with other products in the marketplace; television is not "a toaster with pictures," as an FCC chairman once described it. Journalism is an

indispensable civic resource, arguably one of the most important tools by which Americans come to know themselves as a people and formulate common goals as a nation. It is one of the few means by which strangers in a highly diverse society can carry on dialogues, learn about each other, and carry on the work of a democracy.

But serious journalism does not go of itself. It is, ultimately, a business. Unfortunately, there seem to be few ways to reconcile the current demands of the investment community with journalistic norms as we have come to know them. Something has got to give (profitability or journalistic quality) unless an imaginative new integration of divergent interests can be achieved.

If the most effective strategies for rejuvenating serious journalism remain obscure, certainly this is a time for the most searching inquiries. In particular, the providers of capital and media executives must begin a more candid dialogue with leaders of the journalism profession to explore how everyone's respective needs can be jointly met or new accommodations made. Within the journalism profession itself there are many steps that can be taken to make news organizations more responsible and responsive. These, too, need to be vigorously encouraged. The trends delineated at the 1998 Catto Conference on Journalism and Society argue for a prompt and serious engagement with these issues.

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APPENDIX

The Second Annual Catto Conference
on Journalism and Society

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

July 16-18, 1998
Aspen, Colorado

Jodie Allen
Senior Writer
U.S. News and World Report
and, *former Washington Editor*
Slate

Michael Barone
Senior Staff Editor
Reader's Digest

David Bollier
Independent Journalist
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Henry Catto
Vice Chairman
National Public Radio

Jessica Catto
Contributing Editor
American Journalism Review

Christopher P. Dixon
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Communications Equity
Research
PaineWebber, Inc.

Charles M. Firestone
Executive Director
Communications and
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The Aspen Institute

Max Frankel
Magazine Columnist
The New York Times

Shanto Iyengar
Professor
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Robert MacNeil
Author/Journalist

Ancel Martinez
Reporter,
KQED-San Francisco

Deborah Norville
Anchor
Inside Edition

Steve Padilla
Managing Editor, Valley Edition
Los Angeles Times

Joyce Purnick
Metropolitan Editor
The New York Times

Rem Rieder
Editor
American Journalism Review

George Rodrigue
Managing Editor
The Press-Enterprise

Jan Jarboe Russell
Contributing Editor
Texas Monthly Magazine

Walter Shapiro
Columnist
USA Today

Paul Tash
Executive Editor and Deputy Chairman
St. Petersburg Times

Cynthia Tucker
Editorial Page Editor
The Atlanta Constitution

Deborah Wadsworth
Executive Vice President
Public Agenda

Jodi Wilgoren
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The New York Times

Juan Williams
National Correspondent and Political Analyst
The Washington Post

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Patricia Kirsch
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The Aspen Institute

About the Authors

David Bollier is an independent journalist and consultant with extensive expertise in electronic media, consumer advocacy, public policy, and law. A long-time collaborator with television writer and producer Norman Lear, Bollier works closely with People for the American Way and The Business Enterprise Trust, and writes about the civic and social implications of emerging electronic media. The author of five books, including ***Aiming Higher*** (1996), Bollier is a graduate of Amherst College and Yale Law School.

Jessica Hobby Catto is the former Vice Chairman of H & C Communications, a former broadcast group of network-affiliated television stations across the country, and a contributing editor of ***The Washington Journalism Review (WJR)***, a magazine for which she served as publisher from 1980-1987. She has written articles for ***WJR, The Washington Post, The Correspondent, Sunday Times,*** and ***The Guardian***. In addition, Ms. Catto serves as the general manager of the Castle Peak Ranch at Brush Creek, Wyoming and president of the Elk Mountain Builders, a Colorado construction company with emphasis on environmental considerations. She is an active trustee of the Environmental Defense Fund and The Conservation Fund, under whose auspices she has established the annual American Land Preservation Prize. From 1975 to 1977 she was a member of the Society for a More Beautiful National Capitol, Inc. and was appointed to the Kennedy Center's Presidential Advisory Committee on the Arts. In 1993, she was appointed to the National Parks Board.

Ms. Catto attended Chatham Hall and Barnard College. She was born in Houston, Texas and currently, lives in San Antonio, Texas and Woody Creek, Colorado.

Max Frankel writes a bi-weekly column on communications for ***The New York Times Magazine***. He is a former executive editor of ***The New York Times*** and has also been editor of the paper's editorial pages. Frankel began his tenure at ***The Times*** in 1952 as a reporter and, prior to his appointment as executive editor, held

several key positions including correspondent in Moscow, chief Washington correspondent, Washington bureau chief and Sunday editor. During his career, Frankel covered the 1956 Polish and Hungarian rebellions, the United Nations and the Caribbean region. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for his reporting of President Nixon's visit to China the previous year.

Born in Gera, Germany, Frankel came to the United States in 1940. He attended Columbia College, where he was editor in chief of ***The Columbia Daily Spectator***, the student newspaper, and also served for three years as Columbia correspondent for ***The Times***. He received his B.A. degree in 1952, was admitted to Phi Beta Kappa and earned his M.A. degree in American government at Columbia in 1953.

The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program

The overall goal of the Communications and Society Program is to promote integrated, thoughtful, values-based decision making in the fields of communications, media, and information policy. In particular, the Program focuses on the implications of communications and information technologies on democratic institutions, individual behavior, instruments of commerce, and community life.

The Communications and Society Program accomplishes this goal through two main types of activities. First, it brings together leaders of industry, government, the nonprofit sector, media organizations, the academic world, and others for roundtable meetings to assess the impact of modern communications and information systems on the ideas and practices of a democratic society. Second, the Program promotes research and distributes conference reports to decision makers in the communications and information fields, both within the United States and internationally, and to the public at large.

Topics addressed by the Program vary as issues and the policy environment evolve, but each project seeks to achieve a better understanding of the societal impact of the communications and information infrastructures, to foster a more informed and participatory environment for communications policymaking, or to promote the use of communications for global understanding. In recent years, the Communications and Society Program has chosen to focus with special interest on the issues of electronic democracy, lifelong learning and technology, electronic commerce, the future of advertising, and the role of the media in democratic society.

The Program also coordinates all of the activities of the Institute for Information Studies, a joint program with Nortel Networks, and engages in other domestic and international Aspen Institute initiatives related to communications and information technologies.

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