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Public Affairs Reporting

A Truer and More Complete Journalism in the Online World

For generations news gatekeeping was the exclusive duty and pleasure of traditional news outlets. Prestigious publications like *The Times* and *The Post* maintained they know what the news is, and they know best what information the public needs to be free and self-governing. This is no longer the case. Gatekeeping no longer exists in this sense we once understood it because traditional news is no longer the dominant means of obtaining information. In the digital age, news judgement – deciding what is and isn't news – has evolved into a much uglier beast. This paper points to three directions in which journalism is moving; there are three emerging authorities for deciding what stories to cover. The first is that the public have become the new gatekeepers for news – after all, if *The New York Times* doesn't cover it, then someone else certainly will. With the rise of "we media," internet users are finding information via Twitter, blogs and other crowd-contributed platforms like Wikipedia. Second, social media corporations are moving in as sentries for the content on their platforms. All social media brands aim to keep their users on their platforms, and pushing unpleasant views to the periphery is the way to maintain a content and uncontested userbase. The last perspective is less about a group or entity shifting what information gets published and more about journalism's transfer of political onus to the citizen. Journalists have become socialized to this widespread mythology and have accepted it as truth without question, which has major influence on how we decide to tell stories. At the end of the day, it is a blend of all three perspectives that offer a comprehensive discernment of the news in the digital era.

The masses are the new gatekeepers

Users have become a critical element in deciding what is and isn't news. In the past, journalists had special access to information, whether that be by having congress members on speed dial or by being paid to track down documents, all while operating under the same freedom of speech rights afforded by the first amendment of the Constitution. Now in 2021, where a vast majority of Americans have internet access and know how to track down information, it would seem that journalists may soon be out of a job. During an era where data has never been freer – where everything is just a Google away – how are journalists meant to compete with their amateur, terminally online counterparts? The public, it would seem, has moved past a need for journalism as an institution because they no longer need people who are paid to seek the truth and report it.

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, authors of *The Elements of Journalism*, frame the issue differently. They reason this information age offers journalists the room to invest more time in other crucial parts of their job. As the two have eloquently maintained on page 18 of their book, the free press plays a unique role in an electronic age where information has never been freer. "The notion of the press as a gatekeeper … no longer strictly defines journalism's role." In other words, the combination of internet access, citizen journalism and the democratization of broadband have shifted what American consumers need.

Americans now need journalists to organize the data that everyone has easy access to in order to illuminate greater meaning.

The duty of journalists in the digital era is to convey the importance, to add human interest and to provide context to enable readers to see the big picture. If the cornerstones of

intelligence are data and information – the stuff you're liable to find on websites like Wikipedia – then a truer and more complete form of journalism begins when a reporter can accurately and intentionally add meaning and insight to what's available to glean both knowledge and wisdom. By employing more than information and data, which are notoriously isolated or condensed, a journalist can truly provide the public with what they need to know to be free and self-governing.

Another cog in the gatekeeping machine is the blurred lines between production and consumption. Now that everyone's fingers are poised at the letters on their keyboards, users have become "pro-sumers." On page 19 of *Elements*, Kovach and Rosenstiel detail the phenomenon:

> *"Technology is transforming citizens from passive consumers of news produced by professionals into active participants who can assemble their own journalism from disparate elements … They are becoming their own editors, researchers, and even correspondents. What is called journalism is only one part of the mix, and its role as intermediary and verifier, like the roles of other civic institutions, is weakening. We are witnessing the rise of a new and more active kind of American citizenship – with new responsibilities that are only beginning to be considered. The journalism of the twenty-first century must recognize this and help arm the public with the tools it needs to perform this more active form of citizenship."*

For journalism of the twenty-first century, this means professionals must contend with citizens who have done their own research, and many of these citizens believe they are doing a better job as intermediaries and verifiers. We need to look no further than the man who

screamed "Get the fuck out of here" into the face of a *Washington Post* reporter on the day of the Capitol insurrection to see examples of this in action. He continued: "All the lies you've told all this time – that's what made this happen … Ever fucking consider telling the truth?"

This pro-Trump rioter colorfully summarized decades of feelings of mistrust that many people harbor against the press. He probably believes he'd done a better job as an intermediary and verifier of his own "news" and "facts" because of his perpetual access to a barrage of information and data online.

As people transform from passive consumers to active collectors, assemblers and producers of their own content to reflect their own versions of the world, it certainly seems society needs journalism more than ever. Through this perspective, society has *not* moved past the need for journalism. In an era where information is freer than ever, journalists ought to be rooting out disinformation and illuminating greater meaning more than ever.

K&R maintain "the audience becomes not consumers but 'pro-sumers'" and introduce the concept of "we media" to their readers, which describes the vastness of free information in the digital era and the citizen's ability to research and draw their own conclusions. In fact, Kovach and Rosenstiel take it a step farther, insisting journalism in the Information Age must "become a force in empowering citizens to shape their own communities based on verified information." Verified information is the key term here, especially in the digital world. Because misinformation and outright lies are plaguing internet back alleys and reputable outlets alike, journalists would do well to remember K&R's advice that the profession should highlight their efforts to empower through the discipline of verification.

One newer concept that journalists have enjoyed employing is directly interacting with users online. While it used to be that you must make a phone call or stand at the front steps of the White House to tell a reporter to "get the fuck out of here," now all you need is a Twitter handle. As Kovach and Rosenstiel put it, users now have two important affordances at their disposal: "the ability to interact with news itself as well as the professionals delivering it." This is to say that online comment sections, polls via email or social media and directly Tweeting are a few of many options the digital age and instant communication offers.

Citizens have much more direct and noticeable control over gatekeeping in an era of @'ing, commenting and retweeting. In this new comment culture the world has found itself in, journalists no longer have to wonder what their readership thinks of a story. They need to look no further than their mentions and comment sections to find out. This mediated communication can be a valuable outlet for finding sources, discovering new stories to pursue and to acquire a more holistic and sympathetic understanding of one's audiences.

On the other hand, comment sections are liable to become cesspools of some of the worst humanity has to offer. Anyone who's dived into the trenches of the comments section knows they're notorious for hate speech, mistruths and untruths, and outright stupidity. A wise digitally oriented journalist will bear in mind comment sections are a double-edged sword. While it's not likely that someone will solve the problem of comment sections any time soon, they still play a pivotal role in the news-making process.

Another crucial element of the public swaying the news-making process pertains to Kovach's and Rosenstiel's sixth item on the list of what they claim are the discipline's premier functions that it must fulfill in order for the American public to be free and self-governing: Journalism must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise. Above all else, Kovach

and Rosenstiel insist on page 166 of their book that this forum must exist for all facets of the public, not just the wealthy and powerful. The supply of public forum has a horse in the race in this "comment culture" as comment sections can regularly operate as forums for debate and criticism. Everyone with internet access has the same access to the same information.

Without the great equalizer that comes with widespread free information, we would not see citizens pooling their collective knowledge online to become a more informed public. The example Kovach and Rosenstiel employ is Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia that relies on user-edited content and enables citizens to watch over other citizen-produced content. K&R agree the journalist's duty to provide information may not be the sole purpose in the information era because user-sourced information hubs like Wikipedia are performing journalism in themselves by playing a role as "referee," to use Kovach's and Rosenstiel's terms, in public discussions. Now what should journalists do to add nuance, wisdom and organization to the information people may find on platforms like Wikipedia?

The answer comes with providing what Wikipedia can't: knowledge and wisdom that emerges from the careful consideration of information and data. Whereas Wikipedia entries function as stenographers – robotically offering individual facts that are structured and categorized but rarely illuminate greater meaning – reporters can imbue their work with meaning and insight to break away from the predictability and formulaic entries common on crowd-contributed platforms such as Wikipedia. The journalist can include real people as sources in their stories. The journalist can provide sustained coverage of a critical issue. They have the ability to create something larger than single-story journalism. A single pass of coverage, or an isolated Wikipedia entry, is rarely enough to portray the nuance and subtlety that reporters know is out there.

Kovach and Rosenstiel are right when they say on page 20 of their book that citizens as a group lack the skill, motivation and time to organize what they read on blogs, on Twitter and on Wikipedia. The journalist's job becomes organizing all of the confusing and sometimes overwhelming content, rooting out the unverified and the untruth and presenting it in a digestible and meaningful way.

Corporations are the new gatekeepers

After generations of Fords, Coca-Colas and Exxons, companies like Google, Facebook and Amazon have emerged as the twenty-first century's tyrants of this new online landscape. One reason they have become so powerful is their deliberate control of content on their platforms. Social media platforms in particular want to keep users on the platform for as long as possible, and they accomplish this by mandating we see that which we want to see. Facebook in particular is guilty of engaging in a sort of "algorithmic censorship" that keeps users from seeing what may be uninteresting, unpleasant or otherwise unaligned with their interests by pushing this kind of content to the periphery.

A picturesque example of what Turkish sociologist and professor Zeynep Tufekci calls "algorithmic censorship" comes with Facebook's systematic shadowing of content related to the 2014 Ferguson protests. As explained by Tufekci, author of the 2017 book *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, Facebook aims to keep its users on the platform by engaging an algorithmic feed as opposed to a chronological one. This algorithm can cause massive shifts in news traffic, Tufekci said on page 156 of her book, "making or breaking the success and promulgation of individual stories or affecting whole media outlets," which "may have decided that the Ferguson stories were lower priority to show to many users than

other, more algorithm-friendly ones." In other words, Facebook has helped to usher in a unique and puzzling challenge facing journalists by engaging in this sort of censorship. By shifting the news traffic in this way and oppressing content that is not conducive to their profit margins, corporations have certainly become a new-wave news gatekeeper.

Instead of seeing Ferguson-related news content on Facebook, Tufekci's research reports Facebook was dominated by another type of content: the viral ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. She explains her findings in chapter six:

> *"There is no publicly available detailed and exact information about how the news feed determines which stories are shown high up on a user's main Facebook page, and which ones are buried. If one searches for an explanation, the help pages do not provide any specifics beyond saying that the selection is 'influenced' by a user's connections and activity on Facebook, as well as the 'number of comments and likes a post receives and what kind of story it is.'"*

It's easy to shame Facebook for this censorship, but Tufekci maintains that the platform's algorithm, which was set to bias and prioritize videos like the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was not because of some "nefarious plot by Facebook's programmers or marketing department to bury the nascent social movement." It was simply a result, she said, of the combined signals developers allowed users on the platform to send. In the grander picture of networks as gatekeepers for news content, this means journalists will now have to contend with other mediated communication that billion-dollar platforms deem more attractive to their users.

There is tremendous amount of power in the hands of these networks, explained Tufekci in a 2017 PBS NewsHour interview, which can determine the failure and success of a movement. While Tufekci's expertise is in social movements and political activism, journalism's failures or successes hang in the balance of the same algorithms that make or break advocacy movements.

Journalism's democracy mythology alters gatekeeping

Herbert Gans is a professor of psychology at Columbia University and author of *Democracy and the News.* He is less than impressed with the issues facing journalism when it comes to gatekeeping and newsworthiness. Instead, he maintains journalism's theory of democracy does more harm than good. Gans' skeptical gaze upon journalism's theory of democracy is relevant for the parameters of this paper because *how* professionals decide what to report has rippling effects across if and how citizens are informed, how they use their newfound knowledge and how that does (or doesn't, as Gans claims) contribute to political power. He details in chapter three of his book the four parts he found make journalism's theory of democracy:

1) *The journalist's role is to inform citizens*
2) *Citizens are assumed to be informed if they regularly attend to the local, national and international news journalists supply them*
3) *The more informed citizens are, the more likely they are to participate politically*
4) *The more that informed citizens participate, the more democratic America is likely to be*

Gans maintains the journalist's goal is not actually to inform. Rather, he says on page 56 of *Democracy and the News,* their work regularly roots out injustice, unfairness and corruption and seeks to "warn and even anger people so that they will come together to fight the evils reported in the news." In other words, Gans is telling his readers that journalists aim to inform while forcing an agenda that will persuade citizens to become activists. He says the second part of his reported theory "assumes that the stories journalists consider newsworthy will turn people into informed citizens." The implication of this assertion is that news professionals have a bias for participation. Journalism's goal becomes, as Gans asserts, to stir the pot and foster a nation of activists.

"The people have to participate," Gans says, reflecting on the current state of journalism as it relates to his theory of democracy, which has major implications for which news gets covered. Additionally, Gans says journalism's founding mythology has not been adequately scrutinized. He claims the conception of participation on the part of the citizenry is unrealistic and that the news journalists supply cannot increase their political power. If we are to take Gans' assertions as fact, then the question becomes: Ought journalists persuade the public that they aver to serve to become activists?

Whether or not the discipline should be coercing its readers to become politically active, and regardless of whether they've been successful in increasing the political power of the citizenry, it is important to conceptualize how this mythology, independently of its implications, impacts the news judgement process. Journalists, through socialization to Gans' theory, have determined conflict as one of the primary news elements. If two forces are in opposition – and particularly if these forces are angry or point to the "evils" Gans warned us about, then it's bound to make the front page. You know what they say: If it bleeds, it leads.

Gans is right to assert that the profession has a bias for conflict. However, he is wrong to claim journalists "are automatically assumed to be capable of informing citizens and thus to be informed themselves." Journalists are not themselves categorically informed, nor do they claim to be. The chief goal of the journalist is to seek the truth and report it, which does not claim they are informed. Rather, it means they are looking to become informed. A reporter can receive a story assignment about a topic they don't know a single thing about, and through diligently seeking the truth, they can become informed through the reporting process.

Three peculiar circumstances are facing journalists of the twenty-first century when it comes to a shifting gatekeeping landscape. For generations news gatekeeping was in the hands of reputable news outlets, but now the citizenry, corporations and the institution's own shortcomings play roles in prescribing what is and isn't news. Gatekeeping as the exclusive liberty of journalists is no longer the case because the digital age has offered many new ways of getting information while at the same time building new challenges for journalists to overcome. By exploring the push and pull of the masses, businesses and journalism's own mythologies, it's become clear that all three conditions have developed into a turbulent yet exciting, chilling yet invigorating news atmosphere.