What's Next in the Media
Edited by Christopher Harper

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What’s Next in the Media

Edited by
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In a sense I technically started my career as a multimedia journalist at the *Idaho Statesman* in Boise, Idaho, where I worked as an intern in 1972. The newspaper wanted a reporter who could take photographs. That may sound rather antiquated in today’s media world, but that combination of writing and photography provided me with the ability to seek out other types of media jobs during my career. For the next 23 years, I traveled through a multimedia career in newspapers, magazines, radio and television with the *Miami Herald*, the Associated Press, *Newsweek*, ABC News and ABC 20/20.

I can still recall the first computer I used in 1974 when the Associated Press introduced video display terminals without any built-in memory. The files went to a bank of computers in a nearby room that buzzed, whirred and often crashed. The panic that set in when a red light appeared near the computer room—an indication that a crash was imminent—still creates anxiety when I write about it. If you hadn’t saved your files, you simply had to start again. I used the World Wide Web in 1995 for a segment on the Oklahoma City bombings for ABC 20/20, one of the first times the Web was used at the network to obtain insights into how the bombers built the device that killed 168 people.

I taught one of the first classes in multimedia journalism at New York University in 1996, which included manually coding with hypertext markup language. Since then, I have taught multimedia classes at three universities, including my current position as co-director of the Multimedia Urban Reporting Lab at Temple University in Philadelphia. The point of the Temple classes, which with 160 reporters each year rival in size most of the media outlets in Philadelphia, is to cover neighborhoods that are underreported and underserved by the mainstream media. Each community through the United States has similar locales—an opportunity that should not be missed by any media outlet. The Temple reports can be seen at www.philadelphianeighborhoods.com.

Given my background, it is hardly surprising that I became a proponent of multimedia journalism as a means to enliven the daily news and to provide more involvement of readers and viewers in the process. Many news organizations, however, failed to embrace these new technologies until it was too late. As a result, many mainstream, or legacy, news institutions find
themselves with decreasing numbers of readers and viewers, resulting in media bankruptcies and layoffs. At the same time, however, a variety of professional and citizen journalists seized the technologies and opportunities to create different and distinct means to communicate with the public. Bloggers, vloggers, backpack journalists and tweeters may not dominate communications today, but they certainly have provided insights in information throughout the world from the halls of Washington to the streets of Tehran.

Despite the gloomy pronouncements about the future of the media, I believe that many opportunities exist at this crossroads toward a new and perhaps better form of communications. This book collects the work of some of the finest minds who want to make the media better rather than focus on the “good old days” of the editors and reporters telling the public what it should know and what it should do.

The media remain important in today’s society, although the media are changing rapidly—driven by a desire for readers and viewers to play a more significant role in the information they receive. This collection looks at the historical and theoretical nature of online media, but it also looks ahead at the new map others, and, I believe, the media must follow to thrive.

The book contains five sections. The first section centers on communication and how it should work, including the role of journalism in society, a look at how communications should change, an analysis of the way in which digital technology has shaped communication in North America and an assessment of the changing definition of communications. The second section assesses the impact of digital technology on the print and broadcast media in both positive and negative ways. The readings also provide information about the roles of streaming technology and cellular telephones. The third section analyzes the specific role of online media in covering politics, sports, blogs and investigative journalism, and media criticism. The fourth sections focuses on social media: YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. The fifth and final section provides information about online journalism in small communities and neighborhoods. Also, the final article provides an excellent overview of the role of the ethnic press in today’s society.

It is my hope that these readings provide the opportunity for a discussion among the next generation of media professionals who have an opportunity to fundamentally change how we provide information to the public and how we engage that public in a conversation about what affects our communities, our nation and our world.
Section One
Even though most of us use online services for a variety of communications and information, what exactly do we know about what changes have occurred and what changes continue to occur in a digital world? What do these changes mean to our communities, our government and the media themselves? This first section traces the importance of the media in democracies and the changing role of journalism and journalists. In the first article, author and educator Jeffrey Scheuer traces the media’s role with respect to good government. In the second article, Mitchell Stephens of New York University proposes a new way to think about what the media do and what they should concentrate on—a paradigm he describes as *wisdom journalism*. Two articles trace the history of online media and the state of online media today. Ross Perigoe of Concordia University in Montreal traces the changes in online media from 1997 to 2007 in North America. The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism provides a wide-ranging analysis of where online media stand today from content to ownership. Finally, Joshua Braun, a doctoral student at Cornell University, analyzes the traditional definition of news and information and how that also faces change in the future.
News and Democracy

By Jeffrey Scheuer

It is thanks to its claim of being able to offer the citizenry important and reliable knowledge that journalism justifies its position as a constitutive institution in a democratic society.

—Mats Ekström

I. POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

Democracy, as we have noted, consists of both constitutive laws and instrumental institutions, both formal (government) and informal (civil society). Some such institutions are educational and journalistic; but anything that enables people to learn, communicate, or act politically, enriches democratic culture. Popular government is not just a design but a social force field; a kind of energy in continuous use and motion, the energy of human actions and decisions.

What kinds of codified ideals make a society democratic—or at least, relatively more democratic than another? The rule of law and the legal establishment of certain formal rights are clearly foundational. Democracies must secure equal rights for all their citizens, and reasonable bases for citizenship itself. But in practice it is the ability to actively exercise those rights that expands the highly elastic democratic envelope; and the exercise of such rights requires the availability to citizens of the current information we loosely call “news.”

Communication is central to all knowledge and action, and democracy is a quintessentially communicative process; it is about reaching decisions through conversation, as an alternative to shooting or pointing guns. The requisite knowledge may come from any source: personal

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WHAT'S NEXT IN THE MEDIA

conversation, rumor, gossip, e-mail, newsletters, or blogging. But ultimately it is institutional, based on education and journalism. Transportation is another important factor, facilitating not just economic production but face-to-face communication, meetings and conferences, rallies, demonstrations, and other forms of public assembly.

Power is a limited resource, of which most democratic citizens retain only a small amount. But knowledge and information are at least theoretically limitless and shareable. Knowing something doesn’t normally prevent anyone else from knowing the same thing, or using such knowledge. And knowledge is also more difficult than power to define and categorize.

Even if we limit ourselves to knowledge that is important to democratic citizenship—call it civic knowledge—we are talking about something essentially vague and in constant flux. As events flow, issues, ideas, and personalities change, and over broader reaches of time, values evolve. Facts change—and which facts are important or relevant change as well. However much we may think we know, the ways in which knowledge is formed, distributed, and retained remain for the most part vague, complex, and even mysterious—and knowledge must be continually renewed by more, better, or fresher knowledge.

Multiple free agents can never be absolutely free. Citizens may be equally powerful in formal terms, such as in the right to vote; but if they are human they will also have different talents, capacities, drives, interests, values, thresholds of risk, etc. They will tend to conflict, as well as cooperate; to hurt as well as to help one another. Unequally shared knowledge translates to inequalities of power.

We aren’t omniscient or omnipotent, and we cannot be “isocratically” (absolutely equally) informed in the same way as we are isocratic in our entitlement to vote or to enjoy other legal rights. We are naturally unequal and different in almost every conceivable way other than in our rights as citizens—including our appetites for, and abilities to process, knowledge of the world, whether it come from conversation, schooling, or the news media. Indeed, except in terms of our formal rights, we can never all be citizens in the same ways or degrees, just as we cannot know all of the same things or the same number of things.

Even the knowledge necessary for citizenship, or civic knowledge, can be specified only vaguely. Ideally, all citizens should have at least rudimentary understanding of how a democratic political system works, the principles on which it is based, how they may potentially function within it and be affected by it, what the important issues are, and how those issues change over time. Because most knowledge of events and issues is filtered through the media, citizens should have a sense of how the media report and affect—and to a great extent, select—those issues and events for public attention.

Representative government also entails the delegation of knowledge and power to elected and appointed officials. Democracies, like all societies, include many who are too young, too old, too sick, too apathetic or cynical, or too impaired to be active citizens. Nevertheless,
functional citizens need enough good information to make informed judgments (if and as they so choose); as Col. Rainborough said in the Putney Debates in seventeenth-century England, “The smallest he that live in England hath a life to live as the biggest he.” For this reason if no other, it behooves the democratic citizen to know not only how the political system works, but how the media reflect and explain it. And the higher the quality of news, the better for democracy.

2. DEMOCRACY AND MEDIA: SEPARATED AT BIRTH?

How then do the media—in narrower terms, the news media, but more broadly, all forms of public information and entertainment—figure within the foundations of democracy? In what sense do democratic discourse and institutions involve those media? We can identify several obvious ways.

Most obviously, popular government depends on the flow of information to and among the public, much as the human body depends on the circulation of blood to carry oxygen to its organs. That is why freedom of speech and expression are predicates of any democracy, and are thus privileged in the First Amendment.

Second, the media are also in most cases in business, and as such are subject to the same debates about private enterprise and government regulation for the public good as are other industries. Media organizations exist in the economic as well as in the legal and political realms; they pay taxes, file documents with government agencies, hold broadcast licenses or have joint operating agreements, hire and fire employees, often issue stock for sale to the public, and otherwise function as for-profit corporations. Like any such commercial enterprise, they are subject to the rule of law, including laws specifically governing the media.

If democracies require free and uncensored media, it is not quite as clear that commercial media depend reciprocally on democracy. Private media enterprises survive under most non-totalitarian dictatorships as long as they don’t offend the powers that be and are willing to submit to censorship. But at the very least they depend on freedom to disseminate information; and ordinary citizens and public officials alike depend on the information they sell.

Third, the media collectively enjoy, almost by definition, a near monopoly on current public information. With certain exceptions, such as town meetings, most important political debates require the media as a venue for publication or broadcast. Media companies are not the only conduits of information or loci of debate; as private individuals we can still get up on a soap box and speak to whoever will remain within earshot, or maintain our own Web sites (with the help of corporate service providers). But for better or worse, without institutional media there would be a huge vacuum where our debates take place, and a far narrower information stream.
Fourth, just as we delegate powers to elected officials in a democracy, we delegate to the news media the function of deciding what information is important enough to be disseminated—what should count as civic knowledge, among other things. They—not the government or elected officials or ordinary citizens—are the primary gatekeepers of what is discussed and debated.

Fifth (a subfunction of the gate-keeping role), the media are also watchdogs, democracy’s trip wire for abuse or misbehavior. The watchdog function is partly a check on the natural, and sometimes corrupt, penchant of public officials and institutions for secrecy. Supplanting the government’s limited ability to check itself through the separation of powers, and the public’s similarly limited ability to check the powers of government without publicly shared knowledge, the watchdog function is a critical part of the media’s general role as conduit of information—the part that tends to lead to more immediate change. Robert W. McChesney puts it concisely:

Within democratic theory, there are two indispensable functions that journalism must serve in a self-governing society. First, the media system must provide a rigorous accounting of people in power and people who want to be in power, in both the public and private sector. This is known as the watchdog role. Second, the media system must provide reliable information and a wide range of informed opinions on the important social and political issues of the day. No single medium can or should be expected to provide all of this; but the media system as a whole should provide easy access to this for all citizens. Unless a society has journalism that approaches these goals, it can scarcely be a self-governing society of political equals.⁴

In sum, the general democratic responsibilities of news media include: informing people on factual matters relevant to their civic duties; explaining and clarifying those facts by putting them in context; providing a check against abuses of power by probing behind the curtains of government, commerce, and other public enterprise; and providing a venue for discussion and debate.

The news does not just report about Washington or our neighborhood block association. It also informs us in other ways, as economic and cultural citizens, entertainment audiences, sports fans, puzzle enthusiasts, and as victims of the same weather. Journalism may help us to decide where to eat, what movies to see, what books to read, where to shop, how to invest our money, or how to fritter it away playing the lottery. At its best it provides deeper insights, alerts us to problems, prepares us for change, or poses alternatives for such change. There may even be useful information in the advertisements—at least in the classifieds. Here, however, we
are mainly interested in its democratic functions. We are not looking at democracy through journalism's lens, but at journalism through democracy's lens.

3. THE NEED TO KNOW, AND THE WORLD WITHOUT NEWS

Democracy is based on input by citizens. It does not generate power without fuel; simply having a constitution in a vacuum-sealed case is not enough. Such a system of government will not flow all over us, endowing us equally with the blessings of liberty; nor will it function as well if some participate and others do not. We need the news in order to be full citizens, and because we are naturally curious about, and often affected by, all sorts of forces beyond our immediate control: political, economic, cultural, technological, natural.

Why do democratic societies need good information? And what is good information? The first question is much easier to answer than the second; the reason, perhaps, is that while both democracy and information (language, images, symbols) are human systems, democracy is a relatively closed system, based on a finite, if changeable, set of rules, whereas communication is more open and indeterminate.

So while we are not ready to say what constitutes good or bad journalism, we can say that democracies need the best journalism they can get (or at least, the best that citizens are capable of consuming). Better information, *ipso facto*, makes for better citizenship. This is not a truism, and it can be understood in two ways. First, good journalism promotes citizenship, other things being equal; and second, we must define and measure the quality of journalism mainly in terms of its civic utility.

Better journalism, along with its long-lost twin, better education, is no panacea. Democracy still depends on people, including nonjournalists. But quality journalism is pivotal to the quality of democratic culture. It would be just as necessary even if all of the worst flaws of the legal-constitutional system were corrected.

Fully engaged citizens need not engorge themselves with the best news they can find on a daily or hourly basis. There is more to life than that. So why couldn't one be an attentive citizen simply by catching up once in a while, however one pleased—say, by reading books or watching documentaries? To some extent, of course, one can. No recipe for citizenship calls for a fixed amount of civic knowledge (if we can even speak of knowledge as coming in “amounts”) or a particular news diet. There is no one path to civic knowledge, much less to citizenship. The extent of one's daily appetite for the stuff is not the ultimate measure of civic wisdom or commitment.

Let's qualify that just a bit. News doesn't break when we feel like hearing about it; and its importance is not limited to its personal importance to us. Human events on a larger scale have their own rhythm, and following that rhythm is not without its benefits. The sheer attention
to events is a form of citizenship in itself, keeping us civically alert. Even if the news is not always enriching, and *War and Peace* beckons from the bookshelf, there is always some new information to be learned.

Furthermore, news does not simply fill gaps in our knowledge or satisfy our curiosity. We also need good daily journalism to choke off the competing forms of information, such as rumor or propaganda, which would fill the information vacuum. News keeps those lesser alternatives at bay. It chokes off some of the weeds that grow between our foundational knowledge and our daily awareness of the here and now. In its continuity, especially with the advent of cable TV and the Internet, news has the potential to seal the lining of public opinion against misinformation, manipulation, and fliamfam.

It is not a stretch to say that the need for news has a spiritual quality, like democracy itself: a desire to connect with others and with society, to be “in the know” on particular subjects or to satisfy general curiosity, to be conversant with one’s peers, to connect. Spirituality is about connection and integration of the self into larger wholes, as is information. Sometimes they converge.

Looking at the darker side, imagine what might happen if a democracy were to decline into ignorance and apathy. It would still function on some level—all the outward trappings, the “hardware,” would remain—and it might even function happily for some of its citizens (or quasi-citizens). Would the nation run off the rails? Not entirely, or right away; it would first experience a kind of spiritual decay and a general erosion of democratic values; a loss of cohesion among its citizens, and a loss of faith and interest in democratic life as such.

Such a democratic culture could well become lazy, immature, fearful, and over-commercialized. This could lead to disputed elections, or blooms of corruption and venality in high places; its elected leaders might fight reckless wars, and mistreat enemies in captivity in defiance of its own traditions and international law; use foreign threats to scare the public for political gain; encroach on civil liberties; behave callously toward citizens in distress after natural disasters. Almost certainly, such a lapsed democratic society would be marked by increasing bitterness and division at home, and severe erosion of its reputation abroad. So let’s not go there.

As for the role of journalism, one can imagine a world without news altogether, or at least without news as we know it. It does not conjure up a happy picture. Under communism, party oligarchies dispensed a limited, controlled, and monopolized flow of information pertaining to actual events—propaganda mixed with the odd fact. Propaganda is likewise dispensed as a means of social control in Orwell’s *1984*. Statist regimes are never indifferent to information; they are compelled either to produce propaganda, or to tolerate and censor something approximating journalism or propaganda in the guise of journalism.

Information supplied by the state in such real and imagined societies hardly qualifies as what we care to call news—a regular flow of topical information, describing and explaining
actual events, and intended chiefly to inform rather than to intimidate, control, influence, or persuade. (Bingo! News is a moral category, a type of information superior to those others; how could news be integral to democracy and not have some moral cast?) Even in freer early societies there was not a lot of what we call news until the eighteenth century, long after the invention of the printing press; news evolved along with those societies.

We might also wonder, in passing, what sort of democracy there could be without public schools or universities. Our own began with none of the former and a mere handful of the latter. Places of learning are not foreordained or inscribed in the Constitution. Yet few would deny that they have vastly strengthened American democracy, increasing both the number of functional citizens and the level of their functioning.

The provision of news, like education, is a quintessentially democratic aspiration. In the absence of independent news, there is not some innocent, prelapsarian state of nature, but rather a void filled by rumor and opinion. The theorist of that state is not Thomas Hobbes but Joseph Goebbels.

This is not to say that news is limited to democratic societies; since the advent of mass journalism in the nineteenth century, all sorts of nasty regimes have felt compelled to produce, tolerate, or censor but not wholly suppress, something approximating journalism. Any society requires a flow of information or propaganda, brokered by mediating institutions within or beyond the state's control. So a world without news is possible, but not a world without public communication of some kind.

It is harder to imagine a society in which there is no public demand for news; here we are edging closer to science fiction, perhaps along the lines of *The Stepford Wives*. Most people are curious about the world outside their immediate experience; we are curious by nature, in a slightly prurient way, about other people’s lives. If nothing else, their troubles and foibles confirm that we are not alone in our imperfection.

To be sure, some people are more interested in the news than others. Some consume news for more civic-minded reasons; some have more ability to process news or better access to it. We are not talking about a human need on a par with food or shelter. But mankind is for the most part naturally social and inquisitive, driven at once toward community and toward knowledge of that community (as well as toward isolation of the self and one's own communities from contaminating others). Knowledge is, among other things, a survival strategy, whether in the desert or rainforest or in the boardroom or union hall. Sometimes we are curious even about other communities and societies.

In a dictatorship, we wouldn't need news for political action and choice. But there still might be vestigial curiosity about the world: human interest stories, weather, sports, and the like. If there were no citizenship, we might still want to know what policies were being pursued by our rulers. Even if we didn't need to know these things, we would think up other things to
be curious about. So it is hard to hypothesize our way out of a need for news. Hermits may
neither want nor need news, but to the extent that we are not hermits, we tend to want some
form of it. And a democracy of hermits is not a pretty picture.

What is hardest of all to imagine is a democracy without news—indeed, it is a contradic-
tion in terms. Democracies cannot function without citizens, and citizens cannot function
without civic knowledge. Even if democracy meant respect only for certain basic human rights
and civil liberties, it would require the ability to communicate freely. But if democracy means
representative government and political equality among active citizens, it cannot subsist in any
meaningful form without journalism.

A democracy without news is thus an impossibility. If there were an alternative route to
civic knowledge, such as by injection or implant, so much the better. But thus far at least, the
conduct of democracy still requires journalism. And therein lies the central paradox alluded to
in Chapter 1:

Democracies need news, but cannot guarantee news.

In the United States, only the marketplace (with which our democratic system is loath to
interfere) guarantees that we have any news at all, let alone good news. We are at the mercy of
the market for journalistic excellence, as well as being limited by the availability of talent, the
cultural consensus and market determination of how such talent should be used, and so forth.
At the very least, this is a troubling paradox for those who recognize moral values in journalism
and democracy that transcend concerns for wealth, fame, or power.

4. THE WATCHDOG’S BARK

Investigative journalism, insofar as it is a discrete genre of reporting, plays a special role in
democratic life. It is democracy’s alarm system, variously revealing what urgently needs to
be known, what is harder to know, what someone in power doesn’t want known, and what
should have been known all along. Investigative journalism is thus essentially revelatory—a
combination of digging and barking to show what has been dug up—bringing to light facts
that were hitherto concealed at a cost to the public interest.

If anyone is paying attention, the revelation typically triggers a democratic change or ad-
justment: policy or personnel changes, criminal prosecution, legislation, or heightened public
consciousness leading to altered public behavior as citizens or consumers. It is essentially a
rearguard action against the breach of public trust, intended to correct flaws in the demo-
cratic fabric. Thus, while ordinary journalism is democracy’s informational fuel, investigative
journalism and its overlapping watchdog function are not just propulsive but also reparative,
restoring public accountability about public matters. (What is a public matter? It’s a matter
that affects the public, and often we know it when we see it, but that still leaves open to debate the definitions of matter, affect, and public).

Investigative journalism requires the construction of narratives not unlike those of daily hard news, but on a larger scale of time and significance—the revelation of trends or patterns over a longer span. It also involves greater factual detail, such as that emerging from the close examination of public records:

The epistemology of the investigative journalist [write J. S. Ettema and T. L. Glasser] … distinguishes itself from that of the daily journalist in three important ways. First, the investigative reporter accommodates a variety of types of fact, including facts dismissed by the daily reporter as bureaucratically incredible. Second, the investigative reporter assesses the relative quality of facts, an essentially rational—even if imprecise—process from which facts emerge as more credible or less credible. And third, the investigative reporter seeks to justify the larger truth of the story, a truth often greater than the sum of the story’s facts.7

Investigative journalism does not require a license; all solid, independent public-affairs reporting is in some sense investigative. It may mitigate the failures of public figures, law enforcement, and routine or mediocre journalism alike, by bringing to light facts that should have been exposed routinely—or that good journalism might have prevented from becoming fact in the first place. Solid reporting, investigative or otherwise, is always on the lookout for such revelations. It thus fills a critical watchdog function—to “find out what the bastards are up to and tell the world.”8

In revealing flaws in the legal-political system, the market, or other aspects of civic life, the investigative journalist is less like a teacher than a pathologist, looking for cancer cells in biopsies of the body politic.9 The analogy falters in cases where public knowledge of the condition is a sufficient cure; where public opinion is the main thing that needs adjustment. Mere knowledge of the presence of cancer is not a cure, but it is a first step.

Investigative journalism often involves verifying suggested facts or tips, public knowledge of which would have political or legal consequences. That knowledge, once established and publicized, may directly influence public opinion or political behavior; in the extreme, the result might be a public figure’s resignation, a criminal prosecution or indictment, policy change, new laws or regulations, embarrassment or damaged reputations, or, in the case of a company, a change in management, loss of market share, or a decline in stock price. Above all, changes in law, leadership, or consumer knowledge and behavior are the outcomes of true investigative reporting.
How good is a news organization? Find out how many investigative series it has featured that questioned powers that be or led to change. It is the role of news organizations and journalists to be skeptical and contrarian, but not cynical, on the public’s behalf; to question authority, but not to applaud or indict at every turn; and to report in ways that lead to constructive change, but as a catalyst and not a change agent. How do we identify journalistic excellence? Show me the courage.

In an ideal world, perhaps, there would be no need for investigative journalism; the transparency of public life would obviate the need for exposés because there would be nothing to expose. Any public malfeasance would be deterred by media vigilance, alert civil servants, or law enforcement. With everything so on the up-and-up, journalists would have nothing to investigate.

For that matter, in a perfect world we wouldn’t need ordinary journalism either, or government of any kind, including police, firefighters, meter maids, or tax collectors. But on this planet they are useful. More than that, investigative journalists, like teachers, are true guardians of democracy, unlike elected officials who are easily replaceable, and who prattle about “public service” as if getting elected to office were a noble sacrifice.

5. THE NECESSITY AND CONTINGENCY OF NEWS

If journalism, investigative or otherwise, is so important, where does it come from? What ensures that there is even a trickle of news—much less that it be of high quality? Nothing in the U.S. Constitution guarantees that there be news, let alone high-quality news. The First Amendment aims to ensure that laws limiting freedom of the press are not passed, and that voices are not peremptorily censored or silenced, but it does not say that news must be gathered and disseminated, or that a full, truthful, and diverse flow of information be provided to the people. Nor is it written anywhere that journalists should view their jobs as relevant—much less crucial—to the democratic process. Thomas Jefferson might have lost some sleep over it, but the brutal fact is: You cannot legislate journalism or excellence, let alone journalistic excellence.

Of course, an economic (as well as a political) demand for news exists, which is one reason why we have it; there are people who know that we want news and are willing to take our money. But that doesn’t answer the hypothetical question: what if all journalists just packed up and went home? What if they all abandoned the pretense of serving democracy, and confined their labors to documenting the love lives and love children of celebrities?

There are two basic answers to that question, and they comprise two of the main themes of this book. First the easy one: nothing stops democracies from overdosing on mediocrity, commercial or otherwise—nothing at all. Various forms of human enterprise, in the extreme, become inimical to democratic life: market orthodoxy, religious or moral orthodoxy, ignorance,
poverty, militarism. Democracies, for better or worse, are capable of tolerating all such excesses, and deteriorating, without either reforming or yielding to authoritarian alternatives. We can survive a lot of mediocrity without finding (or even looking for) a fix.

The second answer is that such a fix, while difficult, is not impossible. Sick or dysfunctional democratic systems can self-medicate, so to speak, if their citizen-patients are sufficiently informed and motivated. Democracies are frameworks for change; the democratic spirit is always willing, even when the body politic is not. How many engaged citizens does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Maybe quite a few. As unlikely as it may be that a democratic society should end up having no news, or no high-quality news, the fact remains that this crucial democratic function is mostly outsourced. It is left by default to the private sector, and the energy, talent, and integrity of the people and institutions within it. Children are required by law to attend school, but no one is required to read newspapers or watch TV news or check out news Web sites on the Internet. If every journalist—good, bad or indifferent—suddenly gave up journalism in order to stay home or sell Tupperware, no laws would be broken. But when was the last time you relied on the United States Information Agency for your news? (And it is hardly the worst source available.) This outsourcing of one of democracy’s most basic needs is a central democratic paradox.

6. THE CONTINGENCY OF EXCELLENCE

If journalism is contingent in democratic regimes, rather than foreordained, then journalistic excellence is contingent in an even stronger sense, because it is even harder to secure, and more dependent on forces that are largely independent of those regimes.\(^\text{10}\) Good reporting, however we define it, cannot be taken for granted unless we relativize (and thus severely limit) the very notion of excellence, in effect grading on a curve.

It is not legal or natural necessity that prevents news organizations from going out of business, focusing on fluff or fiction, or filling their editorial ranks with illiterates or mental patients. It is the marketplace, along with the values of journalism: traditions, canons of professionalism, devotion to civic ideals. The same is true for other professions, of course; dentists exist only because of the public need for them, which seems reason enough, even if defined in economic terms; but then, democracy as such does not require dentists either.

The point isn’t trivial, however. Whatever it is that prevents journalism from disappearing, and whatever prevents mediocrity from blooming like algae in a stagnant pond, it is culturally determined. And this tells us something very basic about democracies, which applies beyond the media but is signally important in the media context; democracies depend for their overall health on factors that are beyond the reach of law or economics, and are determined by a much broader and more complex culture.
If democracies didn’t need informed citizens—or if there were some better form of government requiring no human input whatsoever—we wouldn’t need journalism either (at least not for citizenship—the crossword puzzles might stay), and politics would look very different than it does now. But, given that democracies are flawed, and based on popular input, journalism is needed to inform decisions and catalyze change.

There are practical limits, of course, to what we can expect in the way of journalistic excellence; it can’t all be great. But that doesn’t exempt us from the responsibility of asking how it might be made better, what constitutes “better” (or good enough), and what the relation of such quality is to democracy. The whole business of identifying excellence (for example, by awarding prizes or allotting praise) is based on the implicit hope of raising the overall level, and the possibility of coming marginally closer to ideals.

In similar fashion, I have suggested that part of the business of any democracy is to improve itself, to become more democratic. It is a system that naturally seeks to perfect itself, in constant struggle with competing forces, whether ideological, religious, military, or economic. (While circumstances may dictate which struggle is more important, it is also the business of democracies to avoid becoming less democratic.) And the quality of a democracy is partly a function of the quality of its journalism. It is therefore the business of democratic citizens to try to improve the quality of their journalism. Excellence in journalism, as in democracy generally, can be neither wholly relative nor absolute. It is an envelope that we must continually push.

ENDNOTES

2. The differences between news and education as rubrics of communication are fairly obvious. Education is essentially foundational, formal, involuntary (in the lower grades) and more strictly knowledge- and skill-oriented. News is more immediate, voluntary, and adult-oriented, and less formal in the sense of combining commercial and civic functions, and thus blending information and entertainment, the balance varying according to the medium, intended audience, economic structure, etc.
3. Although unquantifiable, the post-World War II achievements furthering American democracy include not only the GI Bill and the Civil Rights Movement, and for those with access to the Internet, but also the interstate highway system and the national air transport system, like the rail system before it.
5. There is a lively debate among political scientists and others about the importance of higher levels of citizen engagement in the smooth functioning of a democracy. Arguably, higher levels of participation and information are not instrumental to greater democracy, but rather constitute greater democracy.

6. In the American case, two such flaws seem to me glaring: the lack of insularity of the democratic process from the corruption of private wealth, through lobbying and campaign finance; and the lack of a general Constitutional right to privacy.


9. In this context, the market may be considered a subset of the democratic system, insofar as it is regulated by the state or insofar as market failures or undesirable effects (e.g., on consumers, workers, communities, etc.) may be grounds for regulation. One of the first principles of democracy is that markets must serve democratic states, not vice versa.

10. In a sense this is logically true, insofar as all journalism cannot be deemed “excellent” or the term loses its semantic utility. Excellence must always be applied to a subset of the field of reference. (We may deem all baseball players “excellent” only by widening that field and comparing them to, say, minor league or semi-pro players.) In an equally trivial logical sense, there is always some excellence in any particular field of human evaluation, because that is how we differentiate the best from everything else. But we are talking here about the practical problem of maximizing excellence.