

EDITORS—

The Best Is Yet to Come?

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The Best Is Yet to Come?

Editors have been taking a relentless pummeling. As newspapers crumble, the owners have been buying out and laying off hordes of them.¹ Now that Rupert Murdoch has bought the *Wall Street Journal*, he's decided that the most artfully edited paper in America has too many.^{2,3} As the ratio of punditry to reporting worsens and 24-hour news channels struggle to fill all that airtime, more and more television journalism goes entirely unedited—how do you edit live jabbering? As participatory media proliferate on the Web, some bloggers and citizen journalism advocates dismiss editors as irrelevant or—worse—as gatekeepers or top-down control freaks who play God by arrogantly determining what information other people get.^{4,5} Online journalism sites brag about their “publish first, edit later” approach, counting on their readers to serve as volunteer error-flaggers.⁶ Digg and similar tools automate the editorial function of sifting. Disintermediation rocks!

Knowing all of this to be true, I nonetheless come before you to stick my neck out and predict that we editors are about to enter a new golden era for our craft.

How can this be? Who needs editors, anyway? Bloggers and automated aggregators may not, but institutions that gather and distribute the news most certainly do. The new golden era for editors will dawn as evolved, Web-based institutions germinate in the ashes of the newspapers that are dying such excruciating deaths as we watch.

The operative word in the previous sentence is *evolved*. Evolution proceeds both gradually and in occasional leaps,⁷ and right now technological advances have sent journalism soaring through the air—and editors with it. Until now technology has equipped editors with megaphone mouths but only tiny, underdeveloped ears. Fortunately, the leap of Web technology is repairing this deformity. Newsgathering institutions that evolve to harness 2.0 Web tools will thus equip editors with bigger and better ears to hear voluminous, immediate, and synergistic feedback that brings them into a rich new kind of engaged relationship with reader/users that extends to collaborating with them to create better stories. This radical rebalancing and enrichment of the editor/audience relationship should do a lot to make editors accountable and clean up their reputation of not listening to readers—and, in the process, usher in a new age of editing.

With journalism evolving dramatically, the narrative about its future has focused largely on sole proprietors like bloggers and on sites that aggregate user-generated material with little or no editorial engagement. There has been precious

little discussion about how to replace the kinds of journalism that are most threatened as newspapers wither, the kinds that rely deeply on journalistic institutions that can manage their complexities: (1) on-the-ground storytelling from remote places, (2) the search for meaningful local, national, and global patterns and trends, which yield stories that that are often made better by crowdsourcing, and (3) exposing secrets that the powerful love to hide. Perhaps it's a failure of my imagination, but though I heartily cheer for the bloggers and placebloggers and videobloggers and other citizen journalists who are breaking new paths and finding fresh ways to enrich the national discourse, I am unable to envision more than a modest role for them in this level of reporting as they are currently organized. This kind of reporting requires coordination, continuity, and skill—in short, it requires editors. Until now, those editors have worked with experienced professional reporters and within the institutions that employ them both. I believe that it may be possible to mobilize not only professionals but also reporters of very different profiles to build media institutions that are radically different than the ones we know now, but that the role of the editor will be as important as ever—perhaps more so.

The future-of-journalism narrative so far has had even less space for discussion of ways to heal the terrible wound that democracy suffers as existing news institutions fade and fewer and fewer Americans have easy access to serious journalism.⁸ So the point of this essay is to elevate two topics in the narrative—democracy's need for new Web-based journalistic institutions to replace those that are going extinct, and what it will mean to be an editor as new news institutions emerge and evolve.

Before we take a deeper look into the future, let me offer a caveat: My prediction of a new golden age of editing hinges on the outcome of a rather scary test. Does a broad enough swath of the American people care enough about democracy to demand the quality journalism that they need to be informed citizens? If the demand isn't there, new journalistic institutions won't sprout from the ash heap of the old ones. Without the new institutions, there can be no new golden era of editing. More important, without the new institutions to do the challenging and complex work that yields the enterprising journalism that matters most, the future of American democracy will all but certainly be not gold, but dross.

THE CASE FOR INSTITUTIONS

Mine is an admittedly contrarian voice among the passionate people struggling to reinvent journalism. To my mind blogosphere vs. institutional journalism is not an either/or matter, it is both/and; each form is important and together they are synergistic. The blogosphere is growing nicely without my help, so my deep commitment to a healthy democracy focuses my energy where too little is happening: working to invent new, robust, Web-based journalistic institutions.

New institutions matter because size matters. As the crucial if imperfect democratic institutions of print journalism shrink before our eyes, antidemocratic institutions—especially transnational corporations—grow ever more huge; so huge that we have trouble comprehending their scale.

How huge are they? In 2005, the most recent compilation I can find, 95 of the planet's 150 largest economic entities were corporations and only 55 were nations. Comparing nations' gross domestic products and corporations' annual revenues, Wal-Mart, BP, Exxon Mobil, and Royal Dutch/Shell Group, for example, are all larger than Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Norway, and Denmark.⁹ Perhaps in this context *vast* is a better adjective than *huge*.

To make good life decisions and good citizenship decisions in this kind of world, people need helpful and trustworthy journalism that doesn't retreat from ground it has historically covered and that patrols a landscape much broader and more complex than it has ever explored. This requires large-scale journalistic institutions with large staffs, sophisticated editors, and an audience big enough to generate the revenue to cover the budget journalism on this scale requires.

Consider the challenge of covering the global economy. As technology shrinks our planet ever smaller and makes it more and more intertwined, what happens halfway around the globe can have a direct impact on the communities in which we live. But in the face of this, news organizations have been closing foreign bureaus. For example, in the last two years *Newsday*, the *Baltimore Sun*,¹⁰ and the *Boston Globe*,¹¹ all with fine histories of foreign coverage, have abolished every one of their foreign bureaus. Not only are news organizations recalling their correspondents, but metropolitan newspapers across the land that once published a significant amount of foreign correspondence are cutting space and narrowing their focus to local news.

A LEXICON OF EDITORS

The term “editor” encompasses people with a broad range of titles and responsibilities. Some pick over commas; some stir rich intellectual stews. Some use digital snips to take fractions of seconds of excess silence out of audio interviews. Some work with video. Many are more technicians than gatekeepers.

TOP EDITOR | In charge of all editorial effort in publishing, broadcast, and Web institutions. Responsibilities include policy and budgets and final say about what gets through the gate. In magazines, often called “the editor-in-chief,” or just “the editor.” In some newspapers, “editor” is a title reserved for the person in charge of the editorial page, with the top news person called the executive editor. In broadcast settings, “news director” is most common; networks have “news vice presidents.”

OPINION EDITOR | In newspapers and some magazines, in charge of editorials and other opinion pieces such as op-ed columns; chief intellectual gatekeeper, commonly reports to the publisher to ensure independence from the newsroom. Sometimes called the “editorial page editor” or, in some newspapers, “the editor.” In local broadcast stations that express opinion, the general manager often takes this role.

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But the global village is upon us, and where is the global city editor that our citizens need? Such an editor, supported by an array of reporters and freelancers and collaborating with citizen journalists, could spot the big stories out there that nobody in either mainstream journalism or the emerging participatory forms is now covering in a meaningful way.

Let's start with the World Trade Organization. It receives almost no coverage in the general interest press. But in 1994 the Senate ratified a treaty that makes democratically enacted national, state, and local laws subordinate to rulings handed down by unelected WTO panels that meet in private and offer no due process. Corporations as well as nations may initiate proceedings, and there is no appeal. It is the antithesis of democracy.¹²

The WTO, whose authority comes from treaties ratified by 152 nations,¹³ may grease the skids of international trade and ease the flow of capital, but it also has the formal power to overrule the authority of We the People in our own communities. Particularly at risk are local and state laws protecting the environment and working conditions.¹⁴ Democracy needs the WTO to be covered as the global government it is, tracing its decisions back to their local impacts—and to the corporations whose interests it serves, often at the expense of communities around the world.

A news institution of a scale adequate to this task will have to provide, at minimum: (1) a sophisticated reporter covering the WTO headquarters in Geneva who has sources to alert her or him about impending decisions; (2) reporters in the United States who can follow up in communities that would be affected; (3) the crowdsourcing capacity to gather real stories of real people that will bring the abstraction of an economic policy decision to life; and (4) reporters sophisticated in the ways of corporations and Wall Street to gauge how WTO decisions impact their bottom lines. At the center of all this activity would be editors who can organize and direct the work of all these reporters and volunteers and who can ensure that the resulting articles are accessible to regular people, accurate and fair, and libel-free.

Let's consider coverage of the transnational corporations, whose lobbyists made sure that the U.S. Senate enacted the treaty that empowers the WTO. Newspapers and broadcast news tend to cover these nation-sized institutions as business stories, as if the only people they affect are investors. But they have huge clout in Washington, in state capitals, in political campaigns, in Third World nations whose embryonic governments are defenseless against their power, in local communities in the United States, and in the lives of millions of Americans. Just ask someone whose job has been outsourced to a country with lower wages. So to adequately serve democracy, journalism needs muscular institutions with the resources and budgets needed to cover the transnationals in a way that helps regular citizens understand the scope of their power and how it plays out in their communities and their personal lives.

Existing journalistic institutions are not only bringing foreign correspondents home, but are also shrinking Washington bureaus and, in an era of endemic corruption, cutting back investigative reporting. Why? Investigative reporting is labor-intensive and expensive, so as newspapers' and networks'

MANAGING EDITOR | Usually second in command after the top editor or news director. In large news institutions, usually in direct charge of day-to-day news operations and the gate-keeper-in-charge. Some large news institutions divide duties among more than one. In smaller ones, especially magazines, managing editors tend to be the practical people who monitor all systems to make sure the trains run on time and on the right tracks. In very small institutions, managing editors may not only mind the trains but also edit copy and even report and write.

NEWS EDITOR | In a newspaper, the person usually in charge of copy editing, headline writing, page design, photo processing, and getting the presses started on time; the gate-keeper of last resort, in that she or he is often in charge after the managing editor has gone home for the night. In some suburban papers, where the titles city editor and metro editor make no sense, the assigning editors are also called news editors. In magazines, managing editor duties usually include this role.

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revenue shrinks, they're cutting big-budget items. Although participatory journalism—especially crowdsourcing—can help with some investigative reporting projects, it can't have much impact without journalistic institutions to organize it, furnish the elements that crowdsourcing can't, write and edit the project, and distribute the stories to an audience large enough to justify all that work. Fortunately, not-for-profit investigative reporting institutions like the Center for Investigative Reporting and the Center for Public Integrity have been stepping into the void. ProPublica has recently joined them with a \$10 million-per-year budget, and Charles Lewis, who founded the Center for Public Integrity but left in 2004, is now deploying seasoned investigative reporters with teams of students at the Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University's School of Communications, where he is a professor.¹⁵ None of these institutions is rooted in the Web, but Lewis says he embraces new approaches, including citizen journalism. Still, he is a bit wary: "The litigation and accountability factor of the web hasn't played itself out yet, but it will over time," he says. "It has to be something where we use the wisdom of the crowds but we have quality control."¹⁶

Web-based journalism institutions that do original reporting are emerging, but so far they are modest in scale. The first was OhmyNews in South Korea, and it has had a mighty impact on its relatively small and homogenous nation. It was founded in 2000, based on the breakthrough idea that has come to be known as citizen journalism, and has been credited with influencing the outcome of Korea's 2002 presidential election¹⁷—and with setting participatory media in motion all over the world.¹⁸ OhmyNews's paid editorial staff now numbers more than 50, but it still relies largely on citizen volunteers for most of its content,¹⁹ using the Web-based amalgam of professional and amateur efforts that is the prototype for what participatory journalism advocates have come to call the *pro-am* approach.

In our much larger and more complex nation, opinion rather than reporting has so far dominated participatory media. But reporting institutions are taking root. Without the small but potent and growing journalistic institution called Talking Points Memo (TPM), and without Josh Marshall as its editor, would citizen journalists—or journalists of any kind—ever have assembled the story that set off the U.S. attorney scandal?²⁰ TPM represents another breakthrough idea: an institution that provides leadership, infrastructure, and easy access for a community to come together online and discover stories that no editor can know to assign. Working together, TPM participants set off the scandal about the Bush administration's firing of U.S. attorneys for political purposes by finding a national pattern in what seemed to be eight or nine local stories about firings in widely separated cities. Democracy needs lots more news-originating institutions based on fresh ideas like the ones that brought us OhmyNews and Talking Points Memo.

This brings us back to the importance of scale—and to the fact that so far no Web-based news-originating institutions come close to providing comprehensive, in-depth daily coverage on the scale of major newspapers. The need for distinct new journalistic voices and perspectives, not just more aggregation, is clear. But just assembling enough resources to provide a comprehensive news report—including coverage of the new kinds of stories playing out across the complex global landscape of the twenty-first century—is not in and of itself enough.

Democracy also needs this coverage to be distributed to a broad public so that the informed citizenry—the foundation of democracy—reaches beyond those who not only get some of their news online but have the time, energy, and inclination to seek out quality news and information there. It's particularly

ASSIGNING EDITOR | People who make most decisions about what news gets covered and by whom; front-line gatekeepers. Assigning editors also check over the reporters' work for missed angles and for writing quality. Major papers have many assigning editors, with department heads like metro editors, national editors, foreign editors, sports editors, business editors, feature editors, and so on. Most of the assigning work is done by assistants.

PHOTO EDITOR | Assignment editors for photographers who also select the best images for use by the news editor, thus a gatekeeper.

WEB EDITOR | Both in print and broadcast settings, in charge of repurposing content for the Web and adding links and related material from other sources; a significant gatekeeper. In addition to technical skill, these editors must be savvy about mixing print, video, and audio, and about ways to engage Web readers in the content. Large news organizations may have many such editors; in a Web news institution this person might be called a "production editor" or "news editor."

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important that such coverage be distributed to the hundreds of thousands of less-than-affluent Americans whom newspaper publishers have discarded since the 1970s and have scant choices in their search for trustworthy journalism.²¹

Achieving broad distribution of a comprehensive news report will require business mechanisms that can bring in enough revenue to more than pay for editorial efforts as well as a marketing engine, including promotion and brand building, that's sufficient to cement enduring relationships with a large public. Such institutions will also require high-level editors skilled at management and at imagining and delivering coverage that a broad public finds trustworthy and relentlessly useful.

And these institutions will deliver to editors new challenges. As web editors for daily newspapers have been learning for a few years now, deadlines are continuous, no longer tied to an edition or three a day. In an institution that delivers a comprehensive journalistic report to a broad

public, deadline pressures will exceed anything editors have experienced.

And in such an institution, editors' efforts will no longer be limited by the number of pages available—the Web never runs out of pages. Without space constraints, editors' judgments about how best to deploy their resources will have to be limited to paying attention through 2.0 feedback to learn what will work best for their reader/users.

Further, editors will face the challenge—and excitement—of cross-pollinating legacy journalism forms with digital forms to invent hybrid 2.0 journalism forms that are as yet unimaginable.

NEW JUICE IN OLD BOTTLES

Crowdsourcing and *pro-am* are Web-era terms, but they're not new base concepts. I remember a project that a Florida newspaper presented at an editor's conference in the early 1990s: The paper rented billboards along major commuting routes that asked motorists to call a number at the paper and tell a recording device about their experiences with recurrent traffic problems; in the several weeks, the billboards were up. It also promoted the idea in the paper. Hundreds of motorists phoned in, clerks collected the data and from it created a map that plotted the hot spots, and then reporters went to work finding out what caused them and why nobody fixed them. As I remember, the paper also hired a consulting traffic engineer to assist the reporters, critique the area's traffic patterns, and suggest fixes that had eluded the local traffic engineers. The series of articles was wildly popular and the paper's circulation increased markedly when they ran.

Until the Web came along, this was the most ambitious crowdsourcing effort I'd heard about. But look how much work it was—before the reporters could dig into the story the paper had to design and hire the billboards, set up the special phone line, hire transcribers to type up the hundreds of recorded messages, and assemble the resulting data. The expense and management load ensured that crowdsourcing projects like this—*pro-am* efforts—were few and far between. Now, with the Web, there's no excuse not to do them as a matter of routine, and the possibilities are endless—not just on local topics, but because of the Web's reach, also on national and even global issues. The possibilities are limited only by imaginations of editors and the collective wisdom of the Web readers/users they're in relationship with.

COPY EDITOR | Brings fresh and skeptical eyes to writing after the assigning editor has approved it. They fix punctuation and spelling, tighten wordy sentences, trim articles to fit space, write headlines and captions. These editors must be adept not only with language, but also with production software. The most numerous category of editor, the category being cut back fastest as newspapers cut staffs, and the category least represented to date in Web-based journalism.

PRODUCTION EDITOR | Usually copy editors who are serious technical whizzes, who troubleshoot and double-check pages on their way to press. In broadcast, production editors work with audio and video files.

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT | Sometimes called “news clerks,” these are apprentices who assist supervising editors by answering phones, running errands, and keeping track of things—and occasionally doing editing and writing.

Citizen journalists and others have been experimenting with crowdsourcing efforts for a few years now, but to date any models for organizing such projects in ways that achieve impact while ensuring accuracy still need some work. Self-organizing systems thrive in the Web, but I'm not yet able to imagine a self-organizing system capable of yielding a result like the series of articles on Florida traffic problems and solutions.

Jay Rosen's Assignment Zero was an experiment to test what would happen in a similar project on the Web, with a significant self-organizing component. Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University, set its goal as finding out whether “large groups of widely scattered people, working together voluntarily on the net,” can “report on something happening in their world right now, and by dividing the work wisely tell the story more completely, while hitting high standards in truth, accuracy and free expression.”²² The participants did more than 70 interviews and learned a lot about how this works on the Web—and learned that their approach had room for significant refinement.²³

News organizations have been using related techniques for decades, especially newsweeklies and national newspapers like the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. In the 1970s, as the national trends editor of the *New York Times*, I'd routinely commission part-time reporters in different parts of the country to interview people and gather facts about a particular issue; I'd either assign a *Times* staff reporter to fill out their reporting and write the trend story, or I'd write it myself. Once I sent an assignment to stringers in all 50 state capitals and when all the reporting came back we ended up with six major stories, five of which ran on page one. This technique was very much like Rosen's, but it fell short of being citizen journalism as understood today—instead of calling on citizen volunteers, it was a mixture of *Times* staff plus paid freelancers and moonlighters. You could call it reporter-mediated crowdsourcing. It was much more tightly controlled than Assignment Zero. And because the technique had been refined and polished for years, its results were predictably excellent.

Now, with the Web, editors in journalistic institutions can mix staff reporters, paid freelancers and moonlighters, and amateur volunteers in almost limitless ways, depending on what the story calls for. In fact, almost all the techniques that excite citizen journalists are variants of long-proven journalistic practices: not only crowdsourcing but also the use of all kinds of paid and unpaid contributors—the “country correspondents” who mailed their “local items” to rural county-seat weekly newspapers, as volunteers; suburban residents who covered zoning board meetings for zoned editions of metro dailies, as semiprofs; writers like Ernest Hemingway who covered wars and exotic places for American newspapers, as nonstaff freelancers; city desk news clerks who answered the phones and drew out the callers about why they've called, as curators of crowdsourcing—not to mention the Florida traffic project. In Web-based news institutions, editors will be able to hold on to the best practices of pre-Web journalism yet cross-pollinate them with the best uses of Web 2.0, to expand, accelerate, and enrich journalism. These will be golden tools for the new era of editing, and the prospect of working with them is enough to make an old editor's pulse race.

EDITORS, BLOGGERS, AND BIASES

But editors of the current era have to endure having a bad name, particularly among some citizen journalism advocates

with strong voices in the conversation about journalism's future.

Because I have a bias that comes from devoting much of my life to editing, and because I see formal journalistic institutions that rely on editors as crucial to the health of democracy, I think a parallel comparison of bloggers and editors is crucial to this conversation. In the analysis that follows, I use the term “bloggers” to mean not only bloggers but also citizen journalism advocates, most of whom are also bloggers. Working through the analysis, I found the tendencies of bloggers and editors to be more alike than I expected—it's good to acknowledge that all humans have unexamined biases—but still with some significant differences. The biggest? Worldview—although not all bloggers see the world through the same lens, they tend to be fiercely independent. Not all editors see the world through the same lens, either, but they tend to be institutionalists.

Let's look at bloggers first. The more independent they are, the more they tend to revere the aims of (1) freeing people from the constricting biases of gatekeepers—which is to say, editors—and (2) drawing them deep into the democratic process through direct personal participation in journalism.

Bloggers treasure their independence from gatekeepers, but, like the editors, they're gatekeepers as well, in two ways. Like editors, they select the material they present according to their taste and judgment—and unexamined biases—about what's truest and most important. Unlike editors, most operate as sole practitioners and present their material with the presumption that the people who engage with them are not just readers but an interconnected, Web-centric group with a sophistication that enables them to contribute to the blogging process—they're “the people formerly known as the audience,” in Jay Rosen's popular phrase.²⁴

The early tradition of blogs developed to serve tech-savvy people who had a lot in common, creating a style that can erect a fence around a subculture and unintentionally shut the gate on casual audiences, or those who perceive that they are not part of the “tribe” that follows that particular blog. As the blogging format has spread, with large newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* having dozens of blogs on their sites, this perception is changing. But standalone bloggers and other sites that are interested in very specific audiences can still be quite opaque to those who come to the Internet more recently, or more casually.

The reasons for this are clear—rather than select a target audience of reader/users to serve, as news institutions and their editors do, standalone bloggers count on blogosphere participants to select them as they sample the multitude of perspectives in the Web’s competitive information marketplace; this too is admirable, but the presumption of the active seeker of information limits the size of the market.

As for editors working in the large-scale Web 2.0 news-originating institutions I’m imagining, I see their aims as a bit broader: (1) to minimize the impact of all unexamined biases that infect the news, including those of bloggers as well as those of editors; (2) serve as many citizens as possible with quality journalism that enriches their life and citizenship decisions, whether they engage personally in the journalism process or not, and (3) draw as many people as possible from every part of the socioeconomic spectrum as deep as possible into the democratic process through direct personal participation.

Like bloggers, editors select the material they present according to their taste and judgment—and unexamined biases—about what’s truest and most important. Unlike most bloggers, they operate in an institutional setting with a division of labor, where many people contribute to the final product. They also select and shape their material with a target audience in mind. Editors select and oversee writers with the aim of ensuring that the material presented by the institution that employs them meets this audience’s need for trustworthy, relevant, and useful information; they present the material in a format designed to make it accessible to as many people in their target audience as possible.

But in the process of aiming to serve their target audience, they too erect a fence that’s an obstacle to people outside their target. Their target audience can be a city neighborhood, a small town, a rural county, a small city, a suburban region, a metropolitan area, a demographic segment of a metro area, or a national population with defined interests. Or it can be sports fans, or investors, or hobbyists of various stripes, or people in industries served by the trade press.

Even as more and more Americans get some of their news online, the dominant traditional news organization are still by far the largest source of original reporting; television has long been the most popular source of news.²⁵ Online or off, most media consumers are passive, and expecting them to transform their media habits to strengthen democracy by becoming direct participants in journalism strikes me as dangerous.

So does predicting a democratization of media based on the news consumption habits of a participatory elite. We are a nation where 70 percent of the population has no college degree, where a majority of people work for hourly wages away from desks with always-on Web access and are likelier to carry Nextel devices than iPhones, and where millions work more than one job and thus have very little time for participating in journalism. So although direct civic engagement through participatory journalism is a democratic ideal, there is a second, complementary ideal: getting comprehensive, quality journalism to as many Americans as possible whether they participate in it or only just take it in. I submit that both these journalistic ideals are not only valid but also crucial, and that journalists of every persuasion are called to work to make all journalism more accessible to more people.

What I believe we need is new Web-based news-originating institutions focused on the needs of people over the interests of advertisers, and on citizens’ interests over corporate interests; how such institutions would work is still being imagined and is beyond the scope of this essay.²⁶ Even the best new institutions will have some biases, but building them on not-for-profit foundations or as co-ops can eliminate the kind of structural conflicts that pollute mainstream journalism—and publishing through Web 2.0 ensures editors robust feedback about biases that reader/users encounter in their articles. This can make well-run Web-based journalistic institutions far more trustworthy than the news media people so many people revile today.

An institution’s scale does not necessarily determine its trustworthiness. The nonprofit, advertising-free, reader-centric *Consumer Reports* has four million print subscribers²⁷ and three million paid online subscribers.²⁸ People trust it, and for good reason. We need more like it—large-scale, trustworthy journalistic institutions without structural biases, where the reader comes first.

INCOME GAP, PARTICIPATORY DIVIDE

The extraordinary degree of engagement that participatory journalism inspires among its habitués amounts to a continual digital town meeting. It is exemplary direct democracy—up to a point. The difference is that in traditional New England town meetings, every adult resident of a town—no matter her or his skill set—can take part; though participatory journalism is

theoretically open to everyone, in reality only a self-selecting minority takes part.

But who is included in this minority? What are its subsets, based on different levels of involvement? What are their demographic and psychographic characteristics? What other ways do they engage with the Web? How many hours a day do they tend to spend in front of a computer screen? What is their tolerance for dealing with a set of choices large enough to overwhelm some people? What Web experiences make people adept enough to use the various participatory tools offered by bloggers and Web journalism sites? How does participants' confidence in their writing skills differ from that of the population at large?

Unfortunately, there are no answers so far to many of these questions and existing research provides very few dots to follow in trying to create a picture of the Webcentric subculture or measure how fast it is expanding. We do know that the old concept of a digital divide has faded significantly—a quarter of low-income Americans, those earning less than \$20,000 a year, now have broadband access to the Web.²⁹ But Web-based journalism has a participatory divide, so developing a clear understanding of who is inside and who is outside the participatory community is critical to sharper thinking about needed new journalistic institutions and about how the decay of traditional journalistic institutions is impacting democracy.

As for the people outside, major daily newspapers tend to do little to serve less-than-affluent Americans,³⁰ and our nation's ever-widening gap between the rich and everybody else creates an ever-widening gap between the news and information needs of the rich and of everybody else. Democracy needs journalism to serve people on both sides of the participatory divide as well as both sides the income gap.

Folks without health coverage need very different medical reporting from those who have it, and folks who earn weekly wages with poor to nonexistent benefits need different financial features than salaried professionals with substantial savings. For example, poorly paid people need guidance on how to avoid payday loan shops and other predatory lenders—and, if already in their grip, they need strategies for getting free.

The have-nots, who far outnumber the haves in our society, need journalism that shows them how policy changes will affect their lives as much as the haves need to know how they will affect their investments. Employment and other economic reports have distinctly different meanings to folks on either side of the income gap.

But today's prestige journalism is aimed almost entirely at serving the haves, sending less-than-affluent Americans to tabloids with little focus on citizenship issues and to what passes for journalism on broadcast and cable news shows. Doing news coverage and service journalism that bring relevant information to the less than affluent is straightforward—if only the right institutions can be created to accomplish this.

EDITING IN THE GOLDEN AGE

The fundamental role of editors is to bring journalists and audiences together. It's their job to know their audience and know their journalists and to guide the journalists so their work best serves the audience's needs, and then to deliver their material in a form that's relevant, appealing, and accessible to the people they serve. We editors are indeed gatekeepers; unabashedly so. We see ourselves as working in behalf of our audiences to get them the news they need—and to respect their time by not cluttering their lives with news they don't need.

Even some big Web aggregators that do not originate news have editors—at YouTube, employees choose which videos to front for its audience, using their judgment as well as data from page view counters;³¹ at Daily Kos, volunteer “rescue rangers” serve the site's readers by digging through each day's postings to rescue the good ones that got buried in the popularity derby of comment counting.³²

Such judgments are gatekeeping functions, but it's a drastic oversimplification to understand editors merely as gatekeepers. They have a myriad of roles; among others, they mentor reporters and other editors, stir pots in their communities, and goad their staffs and the audience they serve to know more and think better.

Historically, the best editors have been highly intuitive and empathic, able to tune in to the needs and interests of their audience, to understand their lives despite only the faintest of feedback. They could hear their audience directly only through a tiny and unrepresentative sample who would telephone or write letters, or they could pick up clues from focus groups and audience surveys that publishers conduct to develop advertising sales pitches. Already websites make their lives easier by increasing the feedback flow, but in the new institutions I'm imagining civically potent software that draws approaches from social networks as well as the Barack

Obama and Ron Paul campaign websites, which would deliver editors far more nourishment than they've ever known. This would include not only direct feedback but also page-view data galore plus conversations in groups that form around issues and other participatory aspects of the institution's Web presence.

Alluring as this sounds, there are likely to be fewer editors as the digital future unfolds. That's because so many menial and repetitive functions that low-ranking editors have historically handled are now automated, starting with spell-check (it's far from perfect, but nonetheless leaves less for an editor to do). Automation also extends into the arena of editorial judgment, to sifting the popular from the boring—Digg, and so on.

The new newsgathering institutions will still need a top editor to oversee the whole operation, including policy and budget matters, and people to fill at least these roles: (1) managing editor, to be in charge of day-to-day work; (2) assigning editor, to work with reporters, freelancers, and volunteers and shape the stories that result from their work; (3) news editor, to assemble the news report and publish it; and (4) copy editor, to provide fresh eyes and do detailed editing of copy that the assigning editor has shaped. The larger the institution, the more assistants these editors would have.

As the future unfolds, more and more institutional journalism will be prepared with the Web in mind and loaded with links that offer readers depth, sidebars that offer different perspectives, feedback tools galore, and Web 2.0 tools to engage with others on the issues. So preparing articles for publication will evolve to engage editors in interesting new ways.

And future editors have great opportunities to use databases to do powerful Web-based investigative journalism that has never been possible in print.³³ The possibilities are limitless. And, for editors, that will make for a golden age.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ http://www.poynter.org/search/results_article.asp?txt_searchText=buyouts&txt_searchScope=all
- ² <http://www.paidcontent.org/entry/419-d-murdoch-on/#extended>
- ³ http://poynter.org/forum/view_post.asp?id=13480
- ⁴ http://www.archive.org/details/JournalismThatMatters_DCSessions
- ⁵ <http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=31&aid=129683>
- ⁶ <http://www.buzzmachine.com/2008/05/30/editings-a-drag/>
- ⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution_
- ⁸ <http://citmedia.org/blog/2006/07/03/guest-posting-is-media-performance-democracys-critical-issue/>
- ⁹ http://news.mongabay.com/2005/0718-worlds_largest.html
- ¹⁰ http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=45&aid=104192_
- ¹¹ <http://mediation.blogspot.com/2007/01/globe-to-close-foreign-bureaus.html>
- ¹² <http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/wto/OpposeWTO.html>
- ¹³ http://www.wto.org/English/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/org6_e.htm
- ¹⁴ <http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/wto/OpposeWTO.html>
- ¹⁵ <http://investigativereportingworksop.org/>
- ¹⁶ http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2008/06/digging_deepercharles_lewis_tr.html
- ¹⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ohmynews>
- ¹⁸ <http://www.thepomoblog.com/papers/pomo22.htm>
- ¹⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ohmynews>
- ²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josh_Marshall
- ²¹ <http://citmedia.org/blog/2006/07/03/guest-posting-is-media-performance-democracys-critical-issue/>
- ²² http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/news/2007/07/assignment_zero_all
- ²³ http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/news/2007/07/assignment_zero_final
- ²⁴ http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/06/27/ppl_frmr.html
- ²⁵ <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1066>
- ²⁶ *Some ideas are sketched out on the Banyan project website, <http://www.banyanproject.com>*
- ²⁷ <http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/aboutus/mission/overview/index.htm>
- ²⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/08/business/media/08consumer.html?_r=1&sq=
- ²⁹ http://www.pewInternet.org/report_display.asp?r=257
- ³⁰ <http://citmedia.org/blog/2006/07/03/guest-posting-is-media-performance-democracys-critical-issue/>
- ³¹ *Angus Durocher, senior web developer at YouTube, personal interview.*
- ³² <http://diary-rescue.dailykos.com/>
- ³³ *The Center for Public Integrity and others are working on such projects.*