

# Pressures Force the Emergence of a New Journalism

By Edward Wasserman

Journalism often appears to thrill to the sense of being in crisis, but pressures on it now truly seem to fit the bill. On one side, it's screwed down tighter than ever; on the other, the lid has blown off. The mainstream end is squeezed to the point of strangulation, while the New Media end revels in an almost explosive decompression.

How these antithetical forces will play out is uncertain, but the stakes are high. Will journalism—as a careful, independent-minded effort at socially significant truth-telling—survive, and in what form?

For the mainstream, compression. Industrial reconfiguration and regulatory retrenchment are essentially destroying local broadcast news, while the steady creep of market-driven forms that supposedly appeal to a melting readership base sap shrunken newspaper resources. Reporters risk drawing a harsh ideological barrage if they displease the roving Web-based cadre of truth cops.

Plus newsrooms are in the midst of a managerial counter-revolution, prompted by the recent highly publicized cases of reporters run wild. We should be asking why seasoned journalists were so disenfranchised that their skepticism about a Jayson Blair or a Jack Kelley went unspoken or unheeded. We might question newsroom incentives that reward the overproducing reporter whose work should have aroused suspicion. But we hear little of that.

Instead, reporter independence is tagged as the culprit. The response is a crackdown—checking phone logs and travel records and spot-checking sources—that smacks of a revocation of operational autonomy that reporters need to do their job.

But that job has changed. The work these reforms impair is street-level, enterprise reporting, which thrives on curiosity and independence. And that is the work that the cost-conscious news managers of the 21st century are least convinced they still need in a time when so many “editorial” jobs in converged news operations are clerical in everything but name, and the audience for news is fragmenting.

The opposing push from Internet bloggers and other heavily opinionated, hands-free style news analysts on cable presents itself as an alternative. It promises a reanimated journalism of insurgency, free of corporate control and the smug biases of metropolitan liberalism. Fox News embodies this spirit in its cynical claim to being fair and balanced—a powerful claim because it gives voice to a fervent wish for a place where thought and speech might truly be free.

Sadly, the history of technological innovation in the mass media is a breathless parade of new gadgets touted as a new pathway to social betterment and enlightenment—from AM broadcasting to cable proliferation, from satellite TV to TiVo.

Invariably, new technology is deformed, reformed, regulated and deregulated until it fits perfectly well with what was there before. The Internet, too, might be in the early stages of colonization. For now, though, the ideology of the blog is powerful, with its promise of emancipation from the constraints of an increasingly timid, defensive and underfunded mainstream.

What does this, and the ratings success of Fox News in using ideology to define a narrow commercial market, have to do with the beleaguered practice of journalism? How might journalism survive?

Any answer must recognize that times have indeed changed. Today, the most dynamic areas of news and public affairs respond to vastly different economic realities than those of the mid-to-late-20th century. No longer must news media realize a profit by their ability to aggregate ideologically diverse publics with broadly acceptable messages. The success of news reporting—whether sustained by advertising, subsidy or subscription, whether via blog or cable TV—increasingly depends on gathering a stable, vigorously committed public of communicants.

Must journalism then give way to polemic? I hope not. Instead, the successor to the dying regime of mass market-driven pseudo-objectivity might lie in the tradition of principled advocacy journalism. This can be an expression of conviction and commitment, but to be journalism it must submit to the test of truthfulness. The painstaking process of gathering facts must be the beating heart of the practice. Suppressing or omitting material facts or contrary thinking must be prohibited. Whatever the journalist's preferences, she must be willing to yield to the weight of stronger evidence and modify conclusions as new facts emerge. No matter how right the cause seems, for this work to be journalism—not mere rumor, clamor or propaganda—such are the rules.

A new tradition of committed journalism can emerge to marry the burgeoning multiplicity of perspectives to a canon rededicated to a veneration of fact. The tottering traditions of one kind of journalism are dying. Is a renewed tradition of journalism ready to be born? ■

*Edward Wasserman, a columnist and former newspaper editor, is the Knight Professor of journalism ethics at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia.*

✉ [WassermanE@wlu.edu](mailto:WassermanE@wlu.edu)