NEWS AND ETHICS IN A REAL-TIME WORLD:
Effects on the Public and Private Sectors

Philip Seib
Lucius W. Nieman Professor of Journalism
Marquette University
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201
414-288-7089
philip.seib@marquette.edu

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Introduction

The increasingly pervasive influence of the Internet and the enhanced technological capabilities of television news have made real-time journalism ubiquitous. This has profound impact on the public and private sectors. Real-time reporting of a foreign policy crisis, for example, can push governments toward responding quickly rather than wisely. For the private sector, the rise of new media has affected everything from the nature of news coverage itself (business journalism, for instance) to the structure of media advertising.

The new technologies of journalism challenge the profession's ethics. The faster speed and larger volume of news delivery require a rethinking of principles and process within the news business and also among all those in the public and private sectors who deal with the news media.

This paper examines some of these issues, and maps some of the new ethical terrain that will be occupied by journalists and those they cover.

Real-time News and Public Policy: "Something Must Be Done"

Real-time journalism often delivers the news in easily consumable bites. These are intellectual snacks, not meals; they satisfy briefly but leave a hunger for more. There is not enough substance to be truly filling.

In the cases of some news reports, this doesn't matter much because the story topics themselves – especially spot news items – are shallow and inconsequential. More substantive stories – those that have long-term importance – suffer from high-speed, quick-and-dirty coverage.

So do the audiences that try to make sense of these reports. News does not exist merely to satisfy idle curiosity. Those news consumers who have public policy responsibilities rely on journalism as a source of the information tools they use to build opinion, shape policy, and govern. They know that news coverage can spur the public to demand action about a particular issue. Policy makers are expected to "do something" in response to the version of events presented by the news media. A good example of this can be seen in the relationship between news and policy in foreign affairs.

Real-time news coverage can compress the amount of time governments have for responding to a sudden crisis. The effects of this compression are debatable. One school of thought holds that news coverage – particularly live reporting, with its intrinsic

urgency – can drive policy making. But an argument can also be made that the impact of news coverage is overrated, and that competent policymakers resist news-generated pressures.

The truth probably falls somewhere in between. Congressman Lee Hamilton, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in 1994: "Televised images quickly become a central part of the foreign policy debate. They affect which crises we decide to pay attention to and which we ignore. They affect how we think about these crises, and I have little doubt these televised pictures ultimately affect what we do about these problems."[1] James Rubin, State Department spokesman during much of Madeline Albright's tenure as Secretary of State, said, "The compression of the news cycle has put a greater premium on highly critical reporting." This can keep policy makers on the defensive and, said Rubin, "that harms our ability to get our policy across to the public."[2]

The effects of live news coverage, in foreign affairs as with other subjects, are related to the stories' content. Live reporting – on television, radio, and the Internet – may lack context, detail, and even accuracy, leaving its audience uncertain about how to find the locale in question on a map, much less understand the dynamics of the players and the politics. Nevertheless, such coverage can capture the public's attention and affect public opinion. Events of recent years provide a number of striking examples of this interplay.

Prime Time War

As seen through the television camera's night-vision lens, downtown Baghdad was drenched in a surreal yellow-green glow. For much of the time all was still, with an automobile's headlights occasionally sliding across the screen. Periodically, the night became alive with flashes: small ones dotting the sky; then a larger one – like a torch – moving steadily across the horizon; then a huge burst of light. The shells and bombs crackled and boomed. Reporters gasped and tried to steady their voices. It was quite a show.

This was the scene in mid-December, 1998, as the United States and Great Britain launched four days of air strikes against Iraq. Live coverage of combat, such a novelty during the 1991 Gulf War, now was smoothly mixed into the flow of television news.

In this instance, the attack on Iraq provided extra drama as counterpoint to impeachment proceedings against President Bill Clinton that were under way in the U.S. House of Representatives. On Saturday, December 19, as debate proceeded prior to the impeachment vote, the television audience could watch both the House chamber and Baghdad on split screen. It was an impressive, if not particularly meaningful, electronic collage.

For its part, the Clinton administration seemed to have adjusted well to the requisites of prime time war. White House press secretary Joe Lockhart timed his official announcement about the air strikes to coincide with network television reports from Baghdad about the attack. In a display of military self-confidence, the Pentagon casually let journalists know when a wave of missiles was launched, despite the fact that the audience for CNN and other networks quite likely included members of Saddam Hussein's government.

Hanging over the bombing was a political question: Did President Clinton order the attack as a way to rally public support and impede the impeachment process? Did the White House hope that a dose of "living-room war" – engrossing but safely remote violence – would give a final boost to anti-impeachment poll numbers? The administration forcefully denied all such allegations but could not dispel suspicion.

Although it is impossible to determine Clinton's true intent concerning the relationship between the attacks and impeachment, any president knows that televised images of war – particularly when they are part of real-time coverage – will capture the public's attention and may well stimulate a rally 'round the flag response.

As the 1991 Gulf War illustrated, live coverage has complex ramifications for policy makers and journalists. It shrinks time and diminishes flexibility. When the public is seeing events as they happen, policy makers may feel pressed to respond rapidly. When news organizations provide real-time coverage, their journalists must similarly keep pace with the action. Time for reflection – a precious commodity in both government and journalism – may be squeezed to the point of nonexistence. This affects many levels of the news business. By the time of the Gulf War, even local television stations (at least those in major markets) could afford to buy enough satellite time to allow independent live reporting from the war zone.

Despite the censorship imposed by the Bush administration, reporters still found plenty to discuss, but sometimes the quest for drama overwhelmed thoughtful news judgment, and the emphasis on speed superseded fact checking. Lawrence Grossman, a former president of NBC News, said that television viewers experienced "the illusion of news" because by providing a view of merely the surface of events "the on-the-scene cameras and live satellite pictures at times served to mask reality rather than shed light on what was happening." He added, "Rumors, gossip, speculation, hearsay and unchecked claims were televised live, without verification, without sources, without editing, while we watched newsmen scrambling for gas masks and reacting to missile alerts."[3] Journalist Johanna Neuman wrote that "viewers could not so much see war as they could observe news-gathering in the war zone."[4]

Government can sometimes wield considerable influence in shaping coverage of its actions. What it cannot afford, however, is to underestimate the potential impact of live reporting about a war or similar foreign policy event. For both journalism and government, speed is important. Policy makers will find themselves at a political disadvantage if their efforts lag too far behind the pace set by news coverage. The Persian Gulf War was brief – the ground war lasting only about 100 hours – but as the first war to be covered live it provided some valuable lessons for coverage of future conflicts:

- SECURITY AND CENSORSHIP. Governments can make an irrefutable argument about the need to control live reporting that may be seen by the enemy (as virtually all satellite broadcasting can be). Real-time information about deployment of forces or after-action status is priceless intelligence and indiscriminate dissemination simply cannot be allowed. News organizations should recognize this and design their own guidelines that balance reporting duties with security realities. A self-imposed embargo for a reasonable time would take care of much of this problem. There is no

reason journalists cannot do this for themselves, rather than waiting for government officials to impose their own rules. If news organizations take the initiative on this, they may be in a better position to resist other censorship that is motivated more by political than by security concerns.

- COMBAT AND CASUALTIES. Since the Gulf War, the truck-carried flyaway transmitter has shrunk, making it even more mobile and allowing even more opportunities for real-time reporting. Live coverage of combat is technologically easier, and it would unquestionably be audience-grabbing. But this is real fighting, not a movie; these are real soldiers, not actors; and this is real blood, not Hollywood makeup. News organizations should consider the impact such coverage would have, especially on the families of the combatants, and even more particularly on the families of those who are killed or wounded. "News," regardless of its accuracy and impact, should not be allowed to override basic decency.

- DELIVERING NEWS AND DELIVERING MESSAGES. Live coverage carries information not only from journalists to their mass audience, but also from government to government. Going on CNN is faster than using the diplomatic pouch. This kind of public diplomacy may, however, comprise both substance and propaganda; governments have been known to be less than truthful, particularly during wars and other crises. When a lie is delivered by journalists, it carries the imprimatur of news, perhaps lending it more credibility than it deserves. News organizations may want to be helpful by providing electronic courier service, but they should be alert to being manipulated.

There is nothing particularly hard to understand about these matters. The task for news professionals is simply to recognize the many facets and ramifications of live coverage during wartime, anticipate as many contingencies as possible, and design some general operating principles that can be used when making coverage decisions at such times.

News coverage is likely to have most effect on a weak policy making process. A firm, principled policy foundation probably will not be shaken by news reports and resultant public demands that "Something must be done!" Peter Jennings of ABC News observed that "political leadership trumps good television every time. As influential as television can be, it is most influential in the absence of decisive political leadership."[5] Nevertheless, policy makers should brace themselves for a surge of emotion-driven public opinion in the wake of graphic news coverage of events such as war or famine. This is especially true when the coverage is live, because these reports carry an additional drama of their own. Professor Steven Livingston, who studies media and foreign policy, has noted that "the creation of global real-time television has undermined the diplomat's ability to mediate between distant events and the public."[6] Policymakers also should keep in mind that journalists are not infallible, and that their reports – no matter how well supported with convincing video – sometimes may be incomplete, lack nuance, or simply be wrong.

For their part, news organizations should be sensitive to governments' reliance on their coverage when it serves as messenger, early warning system, and general gatherer of information about goings on elsewhere. The traditional prerogatives of the diplomat have been usurped to some extent by this expanded news media capability. The erosion

will continue as communications technology becomes more sophisticated. Private spy satellites and Internet communication are among the tools journalists will use to acquire and disseminate the kinds of information that once remained exclusively within governments' domain. Steven Livingston has said that not only will policies be measured against what is seen on television, but they also will be "constantly measured against a more comprehensive array of information and images – including satellite images – found on television and on the Web." This reliance should lead to renewed commitment to thoroughness and accuracy on the part of those who deliver the news.

As a corollary to this, journalists who present live reports should beware of being manipulated by those who want to affect policy via the news media. With so much emphasis on speed, the temptation may arise to shortchange corroboration of sources and other fact-checking procedures. Suspending disbelief inevitably leads to errors.

The Internet will be an increasingly significant factor in foreign policy and its coverage. Of particular importance will be the ability of interest groups to deliver their messages to wider audiences. During humanitarian crises, for example, relief agencies will use their Web sites to make the case for assistance. How public opinion and governmental response are affected by this will vary from case to case. Much will depend on whether news organizations avail themselves of the opportunity to use these sites as information sources.

Part of the egalitarian power of the Internet lies in its ability to be accessed directly by the public, regardless of how the news media respond. But mere availability of information means little in itself. The public has to find it, care about it, and act upon it before it really matters. Information, without such response, is worth very little. It is reasonable to hope, however, that when online news sites devote even terse reports about famine, refugee crises, or other such matters, they will include links to public and private agencies' Web sites so news consumers who care, however small their numbers, can get additional information and perhaps become involved. Humanitarian relief organizations will use e-mail to alert their constituencies and raise money. By expanding awareness about a situation, they might push news organizations to provide more thorough coverage. That may make a difference.

As this media expansion takes place, a general conclusion about the effect of real-time coverage on foreign policy will probably remain constant. The accumulated case evidence is that this kind of reporting has been and will continue to be influential but not determinative in its effect on policy. That distinction is important.

Just as the Vietnam War was the living-room war, and the Gulf War was the first live war, the 1999 war in Kosovo was the first Web war. This conflict illustrated the impact of the Internet on the news media's reporting. Although mainstream news organizations used their own Web sites, the Internet dramatically changed journalists' gatekeeper role. Web users could create their own array of sources, moving with a click of the mouse from the White House to the Serbian Ministry of Information, taking and believing whatever they want from each. This was a good example of unmediated media: no filter, no editorial judgments, no commentary or context beyond what was offered on the screen by the unchallenged source.

For some news consumers, this be the intellectual freedom they have long wanted. "No network anchor is telling us what to think; no editor is chopping out paragraphs that we might find interesting. We can gather news just as journalists do and decide for ourselves what to make of it."

That certainly has appeal, but with limited ability to verify information picked up at various Web sites, independent news gatherers are at the mercy of their sources.

News organizations facilitated this independence by providing links from their own Web sites. CNN, for example, offered a long list of war-related links, such as ones to the Kosovo Liberation Peace Movement, the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook (for CIA-compiled information about Serbia and Montenegro), a free-lance journalist's site with a road map of Kosovo, refugee assistance agencies, and a number of audio and video offerings. Individuals trapped in the battle zone sent their own e-mail messages to the world. On its site, Radio Yugoslavia denounced NATO as "the fascists of the new world order," and NATO on its site offered video sequences of its recent air strikes. For the news consumer, this marriage of smart bomb and home computer was a new kind of journalism – a self-produced mix of high-tech war movie and newscast.

CNN's list of Web connections was preceded by a parenthetical note stating, "These sites are not endorsed by CNN Interactive." But for Web users moving from the principal CNN site to the links it offered, there may have been no real sense of leaving the news organization's premises. As the news-seeker moved among cyber-sources, shrill pronouncements from some sites may have been met with skepticism, but subtle spin may have been accepted as fact.

When the line between news and information blurs in this way, journalists and policy makers should take note. The public's attitude toward traditional news media may be affected by whatever has been found on the fringes of the Web. "Dan Rather is telling me about this story, but I know I saw exactly the opposite somewhere on the Web." Similarly, government officials explaining policy will have to compete with dissonant voices using the Internet as electronic soapbox. The Web will educate with unpredictable effect.

In response to the ever-growing flow of Web-based information, news organizations might decide to emphasize their role as providers of context and analysis. At some point, even the most independent Web surfers may want a little help. Making sense of the world is not necessarily easier just because more information is available.

Online news coverage of the world will keep expanding. The "CNN effect" has become old hat. The Web has overtaken all-news television because of the almost infinite variety of sites and links it can feature.

Journalists will try to find their place in all this. As the war in the Balkans showed, the amount of easily available news grows steadily. Somewhere in the midst of all that news is truth. Journalists still have a role in finding it.

Adventures in Convergence

As print and electronic news organizations have developed their presence on the World Wide Web, they have, for the most part, retained primary identities that are based

in their respective media. Washingtonpost.com, for example, is clearly a journalistic subsidiary of the *Washington Post* newspaper. Sometimes there is blurring of primacy, as with MSNBC on the air and MSNBC on line, but so far this is the exception, not the rule.

So far. Separation among the three principal news media – print, television/radio, and Internet – might not prove sensible or even feasible in the long run. Some new amalgam of the three may evolve as their technologies of news delivery come together. This will be the future: convergence.

A crucial factor in the future of Internet use, is "transparency" – use of the Web as an integral part of daily life. As technology improves and Internet access and use become faster and easier, people will go on line as part of their everyday routine, not even thinking about it – much like making telephone calls or switching on the television. When this comes about, much of the Web's use will be for mundane tasks such as getting weather forecasts, checking movie theater schedules, getting traffic reports, and other items that people want with the least amount of trouble. International Data Corporation has estimated that by 2001, sales of information appliances will outnumber those of home PCs, with the gap between the two growing as ease of use increases and prices decline.[7] These new devices will be particularly popular once Internet access is easier. Fiber optic cable will allow a telephone line to serve dual purposes: standard voice communication and "always-on" connection to the Internet. No more of the dial-up pinging and busy signals that can discourage Web use. Communication companies are rushing to make this the new standard.

Presumably, this easier access to the Internet will affect news consumption. In addition to quick hits for nuggets of information, checking the news might become more of a habit. For many people, this will not be a substantial commitment to get detailed background material, but rather will be just a check to make sure the local community and the world are still in one piece. News organizations must make such news presentation easy to reach and interesting. Ideally, it will entice the consumer to dip deeper into the reservoir of information, either at first visit or later. The easier the access and the more user-friendly the news site, the more likely that the frequency of online news consumption will increase.

Jupiter Communications, which monitors computer use, predicts that 56 percent of American homes will be connected to the Internet by 2002, up from 32 percent in early 1999. (Office percentages will be higher.) Internet service provider EarthLink Network Inc. reports that while today's Internet users may spend 40 hours a month online, that figure could rise to 200 hours per month once Web use becomes more transparent.[8] Given the explosive growth of Internet use, these estimates may prove to be too conservative. On the business side, advertisers will be taking note of such changes, and ad revenues will fuel expanded offerings on the Web.

Internet use is being transformed from a high-tech exercise that is daunting to many, and is becoming just another convenience. That is a tremendous breakthrough. As this proceeds, the first decade of the new millenium may be as important to the rise of the Internet as the 1950s were to the acceptance of television as an integral part of American life.

Part of this evolution will be a function of a convergence of hardware. The conventional wisdom to date has been, "No one wants to 'watch' a PC like he or she watches television." With its various pieces (keyboard, monitor, separate hard drive and speakers), the personal computer is a useful but clunky device, and the logistics of its use generally run counter to the transparency that makers of information appliances hope to foster.

That problem is dissolving as computer equipment becomes less cumbersome (such as thinner monitors) and as Internet connections become smoother. These two factors are crucial in the convergence of television and the Internet because they enhance "streaming" – transferring data, including video and audio, in a continuous stream, rather than in a file that must be downloaded. This is the process by which live news coverage is delivered on the Web. It also will be used by corporations to carry speeches, seminars, and other content on what can be the equivalent of an in-house television/Web network. Businesses can also reach their customers this way. Some brokerages offer online "newscasts," with their own analysts reporting about the markets and touting their services. With streaming, anyone with an adequate computer or other "information appliance" will be able to watch a newscast – whatever the species – live. The traditional television set will not be necessary.

Among other attributes, this technology allows remote access to local television. Travelers, for example, wherever they may be, can watch streamed newscasts from their hometowns if they want to do so. All they need is Internet access. In its early stages, this kind of video has been flawed by its choppy flow and occasional interruptions. Those are transient problems that will be erased by new generations of modems and improved Internet connections.

Radio is another growing presence on the Internet, also through streaming. The Web's appeal to radio stations and Net-only audio suppliers is largely economic; much of the expensive technology of a broadcast station is unnecessary when delivering audio on the Net. This works to the benefit of listeners, because fewer costs mean fewer ads. Also, Web radio is interactive, allowing listeners to chat electronically while listening, read information about the music being played, or order a recording of what they are hearing.

Radio news on the Web possesses much of the same appeal as television carried on the Internet. It can be accessed through a computer when no radio is available, and local radio stations can be listened to from remote places. For the American traveling overseas who wants to listen to his or her hometown baseball team's game, streaming audio on the Web is a simple way to do so.

As with video, streaming audio still has problems of sound quality and sometimes stalled flow, but many stations are nevertheless streaming their audio to build an audience while technical shortcomings are worked out. Worldwide, thousands of radio stations have begun doing this. Aficionados of foreign news and foreign music can spend countless hours electronically traveling the globe.

The next step for radio is the Internet-only station. An early example is WTOP2.com, a 24-hour all-news station created by Washington, D.C.'s WTOP AM/FM

and the Associated Press. With its own news director and technical staff, WTOP2 used WTOP and AP material to begin, later expanding into providing some unique coverage.[9]

Web radio will certainly have its users, but more intriguing are the prospects for Web television. Computer technology companies are producing the hardware that allows the television viewer to put on his or her screen an array of images simultaneously – fare from regular TV channels, Web sites, videocassettes, digital video discs (DVD), and anything else that is suited for either a television or computer screen. Living-room electronics will steadily grow smarter.

During news coverage, viewers can create their own visual context for stories as they are aired, mixing video, still photos, and text. The convergence here will be found in the format similarities of news organizations' sites, regardless of the original media of those organizations. In terms of ability to provide mixed media news coverage, what providers such as ABC News and the *New York Times* offer separately will be little different in format, and their initial joint efforts may well expand into a more complete partnership. But then, as now, it will be up to each news organization to make editorial judgments about what it will deliver to online consumers. Those judgments will be more complex than they are today. On any given day, ABC may want to offer supporting text to back up video from a story; the *Times* may decide to use video as part of some of its stories.

Technological convergence will not, in itself, impose bland similarity on the products news organizations offer. Other than the expanded range of format options, how news decisions are made – the journalistic criteria used to determine what gets covered and how – will not differ much from today's editorial process. The quality of journalism will still be important and will distinguish any one news site from its competitors.

Making Convergence Work

Journalists who deliver the news on line work in several ways. Some redo material that has been published in another venue, such as in a newspaper or on a television newscast. Others are devoted to creating the online news product. Virtually all of these people who are doing serious journalism consider themselves members of the same profession. There are, however, some differences in the ways they do their jobs.

How their audiences get the news is a factor in these differences. A significant number of online news consumers go on line at the workplace. That environment affects expectations about the news product. Time pressures may force Web readers to check only the top of a story, maybe coming back to the rest later. The teasing leads that are much in vogue in newspaper writing today may be met with impatience by the workplace news consumer.

For audience members who have the time and inclination to use online news for in-depth journalism, a non-linear approach might work best. Readers will survey the array of relatively short blocks of text, then choose those that most interest them. From these blocks, they can proceed to links – electronic digressions that amplify the elements of the basic story. The task for the online journalist is to provide enough solid information (meaning that it has been verified and merits the imprimatur of the news

organization) and then offer the news consumer access to additional material through internal and external links. The former might include a connection to the news organization's own archives, and the latter might offer an array of primary and secondary sources that were used in writing the original story.

Online journalistic style will develop swiftly, shaped by the demands of the market and the evolution of the newsroom. Meanwhile, the most significant impact of the Internet on journalism across the board will be found in its use as a research tool. Particularly for smaller news organizations that don't have their own extensive research libraries, Web sites and e-mail provide almost unlimited avenues to background research and sources. This research capability is spawning its own quasi-journalistic industry among the access providers that try to bring some order out of the vast and in some respects chaotic universe of Web offerings. A tool such as thebighub.com provides access to thousands of searchable online databases. A reporter need only type in a topic and the search mechanism will provide a list of relevant sites.

Another factor for all journalists to consider is the speed of reaction – individual and collective – fostered by the Internet. As a major story unfolds, Web chat rooms are likely to be crowded with attendees ready to expound on the events at hand. As Lisa Napoli observed in the *New York Times*, by making available these cyber gathering places for expressing opinions, the Net is "the soapbox – and barroom – of our times."[10] The existence of these forums does not affect how basic reporting is done, but for journalists it opens a window on public sentiment.

This can be useful in fashioning further coverage, but only in a decidedly unscientific way. Ease of access to chat room discourse is alluring, but sampling chat room sentiment should not be considered a legitimate replacement for properly done opinion polling. Chat rooms may be used by people simply interested in the news, or they may be populated by those with a common interest or ideology. Some chat rooms allow anonymity, which is usually not allowed in a newspaper's "Letters to the Editor" section.

Particularly until Internet use becomes much more widespread, journalists should keep in mind that the online constituency differs significantly from the overall population. A Pew Research Center study of online polling (conducted in October, 1998) found "significant attitudinal differences between the general public and those who participate in online polls." Although the Internet user base is steadily expanding, this group (especially the true devotees) is still younger, better educated, and more affluent than the overall American population.[11] Similarly, e-mail discussion lists can provide useful insight into opinions and agendas, but again, these lists by definition encompass relatively narrow constituencies.

This is just one cautionary note for journalists intrigued by the Internet as wellspring of information. The Internet's value in this regard is indisputable, but as with any source it is far from flawless.

Those who are doing new media journalism are likely to develop an affinity for their medium, and this might influence the selection of story topics and intensity of coverage. During the 1999 trial of the federal government's antitrust suit against Microsoft Corporation, online news coverage was more extensive and more regularly

updated than that provided by traditional media news organizations. The reporting was also more creative, using the Net's capabilities to good advantage. The online version of the *San Jose Mercury News* offered a "virtual courtroom" where readers could click for information about witnesses, evidence, and other material about the trial. ZDNet News updated its coverage as often as four times a day. Non-journalistic sources also used the Web. Both Microsoft and the Department of Justice had Web sites providing information about the trial from their respective perspectives.[12]

The news consumer interested in this trial could thus pick and choose from among objective and not-so-objective sources of information. In addition to making those selections, that news consumer had to decide which of these sources deserved trust, distrust, or something in between. Given the vast volume of material available on the Internet, determining trustworthiness of online information is a daunting challenge, but the medium's fundamental characteristics may foster self-policing. Interactivity expert Edwin Schlossberg wrote: "The astonishing speed and connectivity of the Internet provides the opportunity for the on-line community to become more adept at evaluating the truth of what they are told, the meaning of what they see, and the conclusions that can be drawn from the material. If a scientist fakes an experiment and posts the results on the Internet, many other scientists will test it and will immediately post their own results. That's the way it should work with all ideas. This kind of collective response expands all our knowledge simultaneously."[13]

Although its newness dazzles, the Web really is little different from other media in terms of its potential to abuse and be abused, and its capability for self-governance. If its quality and standards are taken for granted, a journalistic and ethical mess will certainly be the result. If, on the other hand, the medium receives the thoughtful attention that its potential merits, many problems can be resolved. In late 1998, the Online News Association was formed to evaluate the unique and shared responsibilities of this form of journalism. The group's members, many of whom are veterans of other media, plan to address topics such as ethics and journalism education.

Interactivity – Next Steps

Traditional delivery of news is a one-way process. The news organization sends – on paper or electronically – and the public receives. Aside from a few avenues such as letters to the editor, no communication flows the other way.

One interactive venue certain to become more widely used is the chat room. This allows collective, rather than just one-to-one, contact between journalists and public. Reporters can discuss the content of stories and the news gathering techniques they used. Editors can electronically chat about newsroom policies and decision making. This might win some new friends for the news media, and at the very least could help dissolve some of the suspicions many people have about the press. If journalists see their role as that of shining a searchlight on institutions of power in society, it follows that they should be willing to illuminate their own practices. Chat rooms and other interactive Web capabilities provide excellent opportunities for doing this. At the very least, every substantive news story and opinion column should include the writer's e-mail address.

While daily news providers are expanding their offerings, magazines have also embraced the Web in order to keep pace with real-time news providers. *Money* magazine, which publishes on paper monthly, offers a full calendar of daily updated material – financial news, columns, research, and more. Some of the magazine's journalists respond to e-mailed questions every day. *Money* also provides online services to help site visitors evaluate stocks, check interest rates, buy a car, and so on. The market is driving this; just appearing monthly is no longer competitive.

In every aspect of the news organization's online product, the primary commitment should be to news content. This is not just a call for journalistic responsibility as an esoteric matter of principle. The arrival of the new media brings with it the need for reassertion of some old journalistic functions. First among these is the exercise of editorial discretion. With an almost infinite supply of information flowing through the Internet, the public may have greater need for the filter of journalistic judgment and standards to help sift through the mass and separate news from propaganda and falsehood. Intellectual anarchy can thrive in cyberspace. The Web has already proved to be fertile ground for rumor.

Easy to use and pervasive in its reach, the Internet amplifies speech. That is a wonderful thing when it means bringing truth to people who have been deprived of it. But it is far less wonderful when the Web's messages are false or hate-filled. One of the news media's traditional roles has been to be an arbiter of public discourse. That task is even more important in the cyber age.

There will be much debate about policing the Web. Pornography and protecting children have been the biggest initial concerns, and legal measures are being designed to address them. But what should be done about a neo-Nazi Web site that provides bomb-making instructions? And should a news organization that does a story about this group and its Web site provide a link to it? Would this be an appropriate adjunct to the news story, to let the public see for itself what the issue is, or would the link only amplify hatred?

As convergence takes place, all news organizations, regardless of their original venue, will have to redefine their ethical duties in accordance with the demands of evolving news technology. Stepping into cyberspace means taking on responsibilities that may have received little notice previously. Television stations, for example, might provide a forum for their audience by formalizing their "letters to the executive producer" policy and allotting space for it on their Web site. Newspapers will need to address issues related to video content (such as graphic violence) when they offer it on their sites.

Convergence will be accompanied by a collapse of walls between the various news media in terms of their distinct professional ethics. It also will change the public's expectations about how much news will be available. Television has long excused the lack of depth of most of its news offerings by pleading format limitations. In the Internet era, that excuse will no longer be credible.

The extent of interactivity is limited only by the extent of imagination. As traditional news media converge on the common ground of the Internet, their futures will be determined partly by how efficiently they remove the longstanding barriers between themselves and their audience. The Web will not be the property of journalists or any

media organizations; it will belong to everyone. The sense of autonomy arising from that is the essence of an interactive medium.

Converging Profits

Almost all of the online news business is being built in unknown territory. How big the audience will be, what inter-media competition will be like, where revenues will come from – these and other issues make developing the new media a high-stakes gamble even for the most venerable news corporations.

So far, the trend has been for most news organizations, regardless of their principal medium, to launch on-line ventures. In many large cities, the newspaper(s) and local television stations have Web sites, which compete in much the same way that their parents do. To considerable extent, these sites' audiences are derived from those of the parents. All of them charge ahead, trying to keep pace with technology advances and audience expectations.

That might not continue indefinitely. The field is likely to narrow simply because it is unlikely that any market – national or local – can sustain so many news Web sites, at least not until the science of Internet advertising catches up to the science of online news delivery. Some news organizations might find sustenance in niche markets with programming such as Spanish-language or sports-intensive newscasts, but many will run into two big problems. First, their sites and those of their competitors will be similar, particularly in quasi-journalistic features such as events calendars, and movie and restaurant listings. The one or two most comprehensive and artfully presented such services will probably satisfy the public and draw the advertisers. The second problem is that while the Web sites might attract some new constituents, they will also pull people away from the parent organizations' newspaper or broadcasts, which will affect their revenues. "Profits" will be illusory if income is generated at the expense of another arm of the same entity.

One response to such difficulties will be a growing number of Web site partnerships among news organizations. A local television station and a newspaper might find it more economically sensible to combine rather than to compete on line, even while keeping their respective on-air and on-paper efforts wholly separate. The systemic mechanics of such a relationship are complex but not overwhelming. The division of labor might, at least initially, follow lines of traditional expertise: television station personnel would be responsible for the site's video and audio content, while the newspaper's staff took the lead in text content. A combined editorial team would, presumably, make the decisions about what is to be covered and how it gets reported.

In Tampa, Florida, the *Tampa Tribune*, WFLA Television, and Tampa Bay Online have formed a combined news organization that is truly a joint venture. They coordinate coverage constantly, sharing a "superdesk" that directs assignments and tracks the progress of stories. Journalists' work product may be used on any or all of the three media outlets. A WFLA reporter might follow up a broadcast report by writing a *Tribune* story that incorporates material that was too long for the TV story, and Tampa Bay Online might feature video of entire interviews from which short sound bites were pulled for the original TV version.[14]

Partnerships are also likely to be relied on for news organizations' non-news products, such as classified advertising. The on-paper classified section may soon become obsolete, but no newspaper can afford to let such an important source of revenue simply evaporate. By combining efforts, classified ad providers can offer the comprehensive and sophisticated listings that online consumers will expect. Regional and even national efforts along these lines are already operating; their scope makes them the advertising version of the news wire services.

Although much early focus has been on ads, the future of Web sites' revenue will largely depend on e-commerce, with media site proprietors getting a percentage of sales revenues generated from their sites. These transaction fees, according to Forrester Research, will provide media Web sites with $25 billion in revenue by 2003, while ads produce $17 billion and subscriptions $5 billion.[15] Traditional ads run on a fixed-rate basis, but the transaction fee system creates a tighter economic tie to the advertiser. This arrangement on the Internet, along with the specifically underwritten material that is becoming more common on line, will test the independence and ethical resolve of news organizations.

Driving news and non-news partnerships will be an economic imperative based on evolving audience expectations. Just as the television viewer's eye has become accustomed to first-class production values in on-air presentations, so too are Web users coming to expect aesthetically appealing and easy-to-use online services. Given the exponential increases in Internet users and Web site providers, competition will be commensurately explosive. Going it alone might not be feasible except for a very few giants.

At the national level, a number of news organizations have been converging in ways that would have been unseemly just a few years ago. The *Washington Post* and *Newsweek* (both owned by the Washington Post Company) are sharing news content with NBC and MSNBC. *The New York Times* and ABC worked together on coverage of the 2000 political campaigns. The *Wall Street Journal* cooperates with CNBC, which is NBC's financial news cable channel.

This means that some *Post* stories, for example, will appear on MSNBC.com. The *Post* in turn gets access to NBC video for washingtonpost.com and could even use NBC stories in the paper. The network and the newspaper could try some joint reportorial ventures. The *Times* gets into the TV business by producing segments for "20/20" and "Good Morning America."[16]

It's not that any of these news giants is incapable of doing its own work, but each wants to tap into still larger audience pools. MSNBC has the most popular news Web site, with more than 6.6 million monthly visitors by the end of 1999, while the *Post* had the sixth most popular news site, with about 1.6 million monthly visitors. Each might be able to steer some of their visitors to the partner's site. Expanded traffic means higher ad revenues.

Commercially, such partnerships make sense. Ethically, some questions arise. NBC is owned by General Electric. Microsoft is a partner in MSNBC. Both these corporate titans are the subjects of lots of controversy and news coverage. In the *Post*

newsroom, there were concerns not that the newspaper's coverage would be affected, but that the public might *think* it was. Perception is important.[17]

After a while, multimedia teams will be common, and the resulting corporate entanglements may make the public even more cynical about the integrity of the news business. That is a natural response, and it is something journalists should keep in mind if they want their work to be taken seriously.

In addition to real or perceived conflicts of interest, joint ventures nationally and locally work against the diversity of news voices. Cooperation will produce homogeneity, which can cheat the public. Independent, competitive news gathering might produce better journalism than may emerge from economics-driven partnerships.

These issues and many others will be part of the media convergence that will gain momentum during the next few years. The news business will be dramatically changed by this process. For news organizations, a primary task will be to maintain ethical as well as financial equilibrium as the ground on which journalism stands trembles and shifts.

Sailing the Uncharted Sea

In his 1999 book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman wrote, "The Internet is going to be like a huge vise that takes the globalization system…and keeps tightening and tightening that system around everyone, in ways that will only make the world smaller and smaller and faster and faster with each passing day."[18] This tightening will make more real the "global village" that Marshall McLuhan prophesied. It will affect news delivery and news consumption, raising expectations about the speed and breadth of coverage and presenting complex challenges to those who want to provide that coverage responsibly.

No one should be surprised by the expanding demands that the news business will face. The physical nature of new media may be different from that of its predecessors, but in many ways the substance of its content is not. A logical progression exists from traditional journalism to this new news. Likewise, in terms of real-time coverage, there is a direct path from live radio and television to real-time news delivery on the Web.

The easy comparison is between today's rise of the Internet and the rise of television during the 1950s. There is, however, a big difference in the physical nature of watching television versus using the Internet. Television sets have varied in size and quality, but for the most part they have remained stationary objects within the household, like other pieces of furniture. The "computer," however, is not so limited. Despite the picture that comes to mind of a desktop assemblage, the new array of information appliances will make "the computer" a much more diverse and adaptable product than the television has ever been. That will enhance the transparency of Internet use; it will become a matter of habit to tap a few keys on a wireless telephone or other handy device and check the news on the Web. Speed of delivery of Web-site material and ease of use – such as "turning the pages" of an online newspaper – will also improve steadily.

The comparison with television raises a cautionary point about Web use projections. Some people may prefer the more passive role of traditional television-watching. Even with Web and TV integration, some intellectual effort is required of the Internet user. There may be those – who knows how many – who are quite happy to

watch Jerry Springer and sitcoms, and not bother with anything more demanding. This "couch potato corollary" to the general theory of expanding Internet use will challenge the creativity of those who are trying to enhance the allure of Web sites.

  New media will pass through a time of fierce competition marked by coming together and shaking out. Lots of online offerings will not survive; the market can sustain only so many. As with other businesses, the best-funded and most creatively managed efforts will rise to the top. New alliances will mark a significant restructuring of the news business. Some of these will be between long-time competitors that find it both journalistically efficient and financially beneficial to undertake joint new media ventures. Also, corporations thought of as primarily non-news businesses, such as AOL and Microsoft, will increasingly be major players in Web-oriented journalistic enterprises.

  Media mergers are another form of convergence. They create industry entities that engulf media properties like a horror movie's giant protoplasm. The mergers may lead to increased profits but diminished diversity of journalistic enterprises. The Tribune-Times Mirror merger in 2000 made financial sense, but it raised further fears about the trend toward a narrow perspective on deciding what is news. Coalescing around a few leaders might also occur among online news ventures, with similar muting of independent voices.

  While this sorting out is under way, the people doing new media journalism will have plenty of issues to address, particularly about ethics. Talking about that is easy; doing so will be more difficult, particularly given the temptations online delivery dangles in front of news organizations. Some of the investments in media enterprises are investments in technology and gimmicks, not in basic journalism. In journalism, broadband delivery will mean little without broad-based news gathering. The notion that the public demands high-speed news is one of those self-perpetuating axioms that should be challenged. Reasserting the primacy of accuracy and taste will not drive the audience away.

  The rise of new news has ramifications for journalism education, which will shape the standards that the next generation of journalists will bring to a profession in which new media play an ever larger role. Increasingly in vogue is "cross-training" journalism students to ensure multimedia proficiency. Walls between print, broadcast, and online journalism are coming down in schools just as they are in the profession. The task for journalism educators, as for working journalists, is to avoid getting too caught up in the technological aspects of the new news and shortchanging the fundamentals of professional responsibility.

  An NBC job posting in spring, 2000 for an "Interactive Content Developer" offers an indication of the convergence-oriented world these new journalists will enter: "The job entails understanding how text, audio, and video are combined and used to create a compelling online product. The candidate should have some knowledge of content acquisition, channel development, and local Web site production. We are looking for someone who has a strong sense of changing deadlines and workflow throughout the day. The successful candidate will also possess excellent knowledge of the Internet and an appreciation of graphic images and design and how they work together to make Web

pages richer….Must have some familiarity with PhotoShop, Premiere, and Sound Forge and have experience in JAVA, HTML, and JavaScript programming languages." That's a long way from a job that Tom Brokaw would have applied for.

The mere *availability* of more news does not ensure that it will be welcomed, nor does it mean that the news audience will expand. That remains one of the great mysteries of online news – just how much of it is wanted and how many people want it? The answers to such questions will do much to define the news content and business structure of online journalism. As those answers take shape, there will be plenty of temptations to use electronic gimmickry to try to hook consumers. That approach has two intrinsic flaws. First, it is likely to exacerbate the problems related to premature reporting because providing "up-to-the-second" bulletins will probably be a key selling point for screen crawls, "news alerts," and other such packaging. Second, it may produce a misleading estimate of long-term audience size because the charms of the gimmicks might prove only temporary.

These matters become more complex when the news consumers themselves determine at least some of the content they will receive. "Customized news" is attractive because it highlights interactivity and gives audience members the feeling that they, rather than the faceless "media," are making decisions about which news topics are important.

Turning over decisions about newsworthiness to news consumers has populist appeal, but tunnel vision may result. One of the duties of journalists is to present even unpleasant and complex information if they decide that the public needs to know about it. There may be something patronizing about this, but it remains a duty of responsible journalism.

When offering Web site visitors the "customized news" list of topics from which they might select, few might choose Central Africa, for example. But if a devastating famine strikes that region, the public should be told about it. Another example: in 1998, how many news consumers would have put Kosovo on their lists? It was a horrifying story and, at least initially, difficult to understand. But, as it turned out, it was also exceptionally important.

Pre-selecting news topics inevitably means screening out stories. This approach may let parochialism flourish and might constrain the growth of knowledge. Perhaps the "one size fits all" approach to news is no longer commercially viable, but if news organizations abdicate from their intellectual and moral leadership roles, they would be paying a high price for perhaps getting a larger audience.

Some years will pass as patterns of news consumption evolve. In the meantime, broadcast and cable news organizations have an obligation to improve their standards and content, regardless of what they think the future will bring. In journalism as in other professions, advances in technology can easily outstrip progress in ethics. Television's sometimes rocky experiences in live coverage, especially of crises, should be put to good use in designing guidelines for live reporting on the Web. The bulletin-delivery service that already is a principal feature of some Internet news services is the kind of journalism that is especially susceptible to errors in fact and in judgment.

The progression from broadcast to cable to Web is leading to not merely a convergence of technologies, but also of the core principles of a profession. As with all the other aspects of Web-based news providers, the new media will be (or, at least, should be) influenced by the experiences of what may come to be called "the established media," and then perhaps "old media." Ethical codes, for instance, need not be constructed from scratch. Their specifics will, in some ways, differ from those of other media, but these differences will be far less significant than the similarities in fundamental responsibilities to the public and to journalism as profession. Convergence may turn out to be far less traumatic than some pessimists would have the public (and journalists themselves) believe.

That is not to understate the profound changes that Web news will bring about. The increased accessibility of information is, in itself, revolutionary. Anyone able to connect to the Internet has the world's news at his or her disposal, and any efforts to impede this access will prove decreasingly successful as the new media's pervasiveness and technological sophistication increase. This is not merely a matter of reading uncensored text. Broadcasters are already using the Internet to subvert efforts to block their work. In 1996, the Serbian government began jamming the signal of Belgrade radio B92 when the station carried reports about protests against Slobodan Milosevic's regime. The station, however, sent RealAudio versions of its broadcasts to its Web site on a Dutch service provider, so Internet users within Yugoslavia and elsewhere could listen to B92's coverage on the Web. Radio Free Europe also picked up the station's material from the Net and broadcast it back into Serbia, bypassing Milosevic's censors.[19] This showcases a powerful facet of convergence, and shows how the Web can be a valuable instrument of freedom.

For all the talk about the duties of new media journalists, there also are clear responsibilities for the citizen in the new media era. Not everyone need become a news fanatic, but all people with access to the Internet should use the newly deepened reservoir of news to raise their level of knowledge about events in community, nation, and world. On election day, no one with Internet access will be able to plead a shortage of information about candidates and issues as an excuse for not voting. As many campaigns from top to bottom of the ballot in 2000 have illustrated, the Internet offers not only unprecedented amounts of information, but also – in many races – the opportunity for interactive communication among politicians, journalists, and voters. Online voting, an experiment in some 2000 elections, will become much more common. (That may produce an interesting debate about just how easy voting should be. If ballots can be cast with the click of a mouse, participation may increase, but how knowledgeable will those new participants be?) News consumers also have a responsibility to learn about online news issues, such as those related to speed of news delivery and the quality information sources that are found on the Web. The public can do much to push the news business toward higher standards.

As important as the public's obligations are, they do not diminish the responsibilities of the news media in the real-time world. The women and men of the news business must use the new media to achieve the traditional goals of journalism – to

provide, fairly and accurately, the information the public wants and needs to know. The speed and impact of real-time news should complement, not dominate, that mission.

  The technology of communication may change, but the task for news professionals is what it has always been: to act in good faith, doing journalism well and passionately.

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