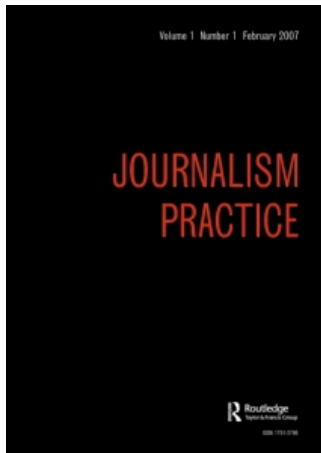


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# “SOMEONE’S GOTTA BE IN CONTROL HERE”

## The institutionalization of online news and the creation of a shared journalistic authority

**Sue Robinson**

*Journalists explain daily happenings according to a uniform mission, agreed-upon routines, and established societal relationships. Their product—American newspaper stories in this case—helps shape the social order by controlling information dissemination in a structured environment. As a result, the press enjoys the status of a political institution that operates with some authority. When technology allows the audience to take over some control in this process, its institutional dynamics shift. This research examined the words of 35 journalists to explore how technology is causing marked evolutions in newspaper journalism’s missions, routines, and relationships with sources and readers. This paper found that news considerations center on personal experience for journalists and their audiences. The evidence indicates that journalists are sharing their ability to tell the day’s news with people outside of the institution. Eventually, the changes in news production will have implications for the press’s ultimate authority as a societal institution.*

**KEYWORDS** authority; institution; interview; online journalism; press

### Introduction

Journalists explain daily happenings according to a uniform mission, agreed-upon routines, and established societal relationships. Their product—American newspaper stories in this case—helps shape the social order by controlling information dissemination in a fairly structured environment. As a result, the press enjoys the status of a political institution that operates with some authority. The characteristics of an institution include “taken-for-granted social patterns of behavior valued in and of themselves [that] encompass procedures, routines, assumptions, which extend over space and endure over time, in order to preside over a societal sector” (Cook, 1998, p. 84). The Web has provided the institution of the news media with a new portal for the dissemination of information. The diffusion of new multimedia and interactive technologies has allowed audiences to take over some of this control. This leads to the question: If the press as an institution helps create our political, economic, cultural, and social reality through a constructed product, and online news is moving toward depicting that reality minus the construction, then doesn’t such technology undermine the press as an institution in some ways? This is a broad question that can be pared down into more manageable research questions: How do print and online journalists conceive of their mission for the newspapers’ websites? How have routines such as story writing, formatting, and editing changed because of the technology available? What role is the audience meant to play upon this new platform?

Transformations in journalists' mission, routines, and relationships with audiences would have significant ramifications for the state of the press as an institution (Cook, 2006). But scholars have disagreed whether these transformations will truly be revolutionary, or something merely evolutionary. Resnik (1998), in the *Politics of Cyberspace*, argued that the Web is becoming "normalized" and hinted that a commoditization of information is occurring. In this same book, Kellner (1998) contended that cyberspace is becoming "decommoditized;" its potential is not so much utopian as limitless. Society has only to educate itself and train in the technology to improve democratic public spheres. Which version of the Internet's power is accurate in regards to the press? Informed by the literature about journalism as a political institution and as an evolving Fourth Estate, this paper scrutinizes the stated missions, practices, and societal relationships of journalists to consider whether the Internet is becoming normalized (and thus, institutionalized), or whether it has remained something more nebulous, more alternative, or even more democratically perfect.

Offering the words of 35 journalists from in-depth interviews as evidence, this study suggests that news considerations center on personal experience for journalists and their audiences. A number of sub-themes emerged over and over again in these interviews. For these journalists, the newspaper websites represent an opportunity for community building, broadcast thinking, brand and competition channeling, immediate reporting, limitless content producing, customizing, personalizing, dialoguing, experiencing, and transparent information sharing. Most startlingly, the evidence indicates that journalists are sharing their ability to tell the day's news with people outside of the institution. Journalists hope cyberspace's particular attributes will save their industry and preserve the press's authority by building communities on the virtual pages of their newspapers. Eventually, such dramatic changes in news production will have implications for the press's ultimate authority as a societal institution.

### **News as an Authoritative Political Institution**

Media are not a series of organizations, but a singular institution that has re-enforced the dominant ideology and political power structure, wielded authoritarian influence and operated as a place of collective guidance for people's thoughts, principles and actions (Cook, 1998). To be considered institutional, an entity must have the ability to control communication messages and contribute to the social order, according to Giddens (1979). Institutions establish that social order's environment by discarding some messages in favor of other more politically palpable ones (March and Olsen, 1989). "Political institutions not only respond to their environments but create those environments at the same time" (March and Olsen, 1989, p. 162). Such a structure also stems from the developments of media that carry those messages, noted Giddens (1979), who tracked the birth of writing as the impetus for our current linear way of thinking and acting.

Putting aside that not everyone believes the press is an institution in and of itself (see Lippmann, 1922, who contended that the press is no substitute for our institutions or Gans, 1998, who described the press as a tool rather than a guide), this paper takes up those scholars from Cater (1959) to Cook (1998) who have insisted that the press is a Fourth Estate of democracy with an entrenched organizational system. Its stated missions have traditionally included its desire to monitor government and those in power, tell stories that inform people, lead public discussions, and generally provide a truthful,

accurate, relevant, and interesting accounting of the day's news (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). There lies power in news (Schudson, 1995), which constructs the picture of reality in our heads (Lippmann, 1922), tells us what we think about (Cohen, 1963), and provides a structure for our communication rituals (Carey, 1992 [1989]).

Routines form the basis of the longevity inherent in press's institutional power. The meaning of life is inextricably intertwined with the centrality of rules and the construction of a constructed ordered society (March and Olson, 1989). News production tends to be hierarchal (in other words, a top-down approach from officials to reporters to the audience, but also from media owner to publisher to editor to reporter). It is also often both multivocal and conventional. News scholars have documented newspaper journalists' professional norms and routines such as their methods of verification (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001), their careful selection of story topics and facts (Altheide, 1976; Tuchman, 1978), and their reliance on other media as a check for news value (Zelizer, 1992). Such methods "have an important impact on the production of symbolic content" (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 137). By certain "strategic rituals," they determine the "who, what, when, where, and why of our lives" (Tuchman, 1972, p. 667), and in doing so, solidify their own importance in the community.

In addition, journalists "construct and reconstruct social reality by establishing the context in which social phenomenon are perceived and defined" (Tuchman, 1997 [1973], p. 188). Molotch and Lester (1997 [1974]) saw "media as reflecting not a world out there, but the practices of those having the power to determine the experience of others" (1997 [1974], p. 206). Indeed, "what the news means depends on how the news gets made" (Sigal, 1973, p. 1). "Routine is closely linked to tradition in the sense that tradition underwrites the continuity of practice in the elapsing of time. Any influences which corrode or place in question traditional practices carry with them the likelihood of accelerated change" (p. 220). But Giddens cautioned that typical institutions are of an *evolutionary* nature; traditional practices tend to be replaced by other practices that also soon become traditional. Such changes are rarely *revolutionary* in nature.

Finally, the institution believes itself to exude authority and has convinced everyone else that it does (see Cater, 1959; Schudson, 1995; Zelizer, 1992). Media have achieved this power to tell news stories in part through their way of weaving a specific narrative described by Zelizer (1992), their strategic rituals of objectivity described by Tuchman (1972), and their standard of formatting described by Schudson (1995). The communicative form matters to the nature of the press-society relationship, as does sourcing, content and framing. Audiences look to the news to set their political and economical agenda and to explain the news. But the press also serves as an integral component to people's social lives. Journalistic communication offers a "sacred ceremony which draws persons together in fellowship and commonality" (Carey, 1992 [1989], p. 18). Journalists have nurtured this relationship with their publics by providing familiar, often standardized stories, and then helping to prioritize the news for people. The nature of these relationships reflects a certain hierarchy of influence, according to Shoemaker and Reese (1996).

### **Institutions, News, and New Technology**

In the past, new media have played a part in altering the press's missions, routines, and relationships. Medium theorists study how new channels create new environments

and thus necessarily alter social interactions (Meyrowitz, 1985). Democracy is substantially changed by new technology, noted Friedland as he in 1996 heralded the savior potential of the Internet even from within the conglomerated matrix of media that exists. Abramson et al. (1988) argued that it was new technology that shaped the current news institution as national, private, centralized and weak. Television, video and computers shepherded in “unmediated news” (Abramson et al., 1988, pp. 292–3) and the demise of gatekeeping, at least as we have traditionally understood it. Many scholars tout the Internet’s abilities to save democracy by ridding journalism of the bias and top-down hierarchy that are said to result from the industry’s learned routines. Newhagen and Levy (1998) described multimedia (that is, the ability of the technology to relay different kinds of media from within one channel, such as both text and video) as a catalyst for information metamorphosis, one that reverses the sender–receiver nodes. The Internet’s information capacity is diffuse and parallel, not condensed as in traditional media. Interactivity levels (Downes and McMillan, 2000) and hyperlinks (Pavlik, 2001) also involve the audience in the construction of the message, even of data collection, and create a more layered journalism.

The relationship between media and their audiences has been rearticulated because of the interactivity and multimedia (Matheson, 2004). “New media are bringing about a realignment between and among news organizations, journalists and their many publics, including audiences, sources, competition, advertisers and the government” (Pavlik, 2001, p. 1). Even the scholar who wrote the book advocating the press as a singular political institution in 1998 was rethinking that position by 2006, in part because of the Internet: “I argue here that we need to approach the news media with attention to the institutional walls surrounding them *and* the ways the newsmaking process includes actors on both sides of that wall” (Cook, 2006, p. 161)—now more than ever, Cook suggested.

It should be noted that many scholars downplay the Internet’s democratizing abilities in a world entrenched in institutional media controlled by various powers-that-be. What good is hyperlinking if no editor allows it to flow off the site of the institution? Instead journalists are merely folding the technology into existing routines, according to some of these scholars. Golding called this the “mediatization” of new technologies “as they follow past scenarios of commercialization, differentiated access, exclusion of the poor, privatization, deregulation, and globalization” (2000, p. 814). Resnick (1998) thought of it as the “normalization” of the Web as being divided into traditional concepts of labor mirrored in the non-virtual capitalistic world; Singer (2005) showed that journalists’ political weblogs tend to link to other mainstream news sites, creating “in some ways an enhancement of traditional journalistic norms.”

In-depth interviews with news producers would offer a chance to explore the nature of the press as an institution in the latest emergent media environment. The research questions arose from this understanding of the press as an institutional body whose particular missions, practices, and relationships with its audiences have given journalists the power to tell the news. These questions are, once again: How do print and online journalists conceive of their mission for the newspapers’ websites? How have routines such as story writing, formatting, and editing changed because of the technology available? What role is the audience meant to play upon this new platform?

### Method: Journalist Interviews

Interviewing the creators of news products has provided other researchers essential insight into journalistic norms and practices. White (1950), Gans (1979), Tuchman (1997 [1973]), and many others have used the words of reporters and editors to develop news communication models and value systems that describe the industry and its operations. Deuze (2005) queried reporters and editors on the differences between working for tabloids and mainstream papers in order to understand professional identity. Interviewing in newsrooms, Lowrey (2003) revealed journalists' motivations and detailed their professional norms in determining when and to what extent news photos were manipulated. Gieber (1999 [1964]) decided that news was, in fact, what "newspapermen make it," as a result of his discussions with editors. Talking to journalists allowed Gieber to know not only what news is, but also how it is determined.

This article reports the evidence gleaned from 35 in-depth interviews with print and online editors, reporters, multimedia producers, and photographers from 24 publications. I employed purposive sampling because I wanted a targeted population of journalists. I chose each newspaper based on its presence on the Web, as well as its geography and size. I wanted a fairly equitable sampling of large, medium, and small newspapers. Each interview request was customized according to the organizations' specific features or projects, though the basic interview template was always the same to provide consistency. I chose the journalists similarly. Several print-only reporters were included in the sample of 35 to give me a breadth of perspective. The response rate was about 50 percent. I found the journalists by contacting the top 10 and bottom 10 of the largest 100 newspapers by circulation, as determined by Audit Bureau Circulation (2006). Most of the nation's largest publications, including *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Dallas Morning News*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, are represented in my sample. I selected 40 others in the same list, choosing every other publication going down the list. I found smaller papers (those under 100,000 circulation) through the online news trade organizations Online News Association and Cyberjournalist.net, which recognize newspapers for their online coverage. I contacted my own former newsroom, the *Burlington Free Press* in Vermont, a Gannett paper of about 65,000 circulation. I was able to interview three very different sources there—the managing editor, a traditional print reporter-turned-blogger, and a photographer/videographer. I received approval from my university's Institutional Review Board to interview these subjects. The interviewed sources gave permission to use their name and company affiliation. Each had an opportunity to review and edit his or her comments.

I conducted the interviews via e-mail, on the phone, or in person at conferences during 2005 and 2006. Each interview lasted about an hour. I asked the journalists to compare their print and online missions, routines, and relationships with the public. The interview questions were chosen according to the definition of the press as an institution that controls information. I textually analyzed the journalists' words. My unit of analysis was the journalists' words. I transcribed each interview, reading through each twice. I compared their words to my understanding of the traditional newspaper press as an enduring institution whose enduring routines help it preside over a societal sector (Cook, 1998). Thus, these pages are organized according to journalists' perceptions of their online missions, their news craft, and their relationships with sources and readers.

## Journalistic Missions

### *Same Old Missions, Still an Institution, They Say*

An institution must believe itself to be an authority and go about its business with an enduring purpose as such (Cook, 1998). In the beginning of each interview, the editors and reporters reaffirmed that the primary mission of their newspapers' websites is to deliver information and to perpetuate their publication's brand. In doing so, the publications have hoped to expand their authority as their community's news purveyors (Len Apcar, Jon Donley, Ellen Foley, Geoff Gevalt, Steve Smith, Brian Thevenot, Eric Ulken, interviews).

Len Apcar, the (former) NYTimes.com editor in chief, termed the online newsroom an "institution," synonymous with *The New York Times'* brand. He emphasized that "a scoop is a scoop is a scoop no matter what." In other words, *The Times* in any form must dominate both print and online news competitors (Apcar, interview). Indeed, most of these newsroom leaders considered the Web a vehicle to "recapture circulation losses" (Gevalt, interview) by "building bridges to help my industry survive in the new media world" (Donley, interview). Newspaper Web journalism still depends on old, institutional media: "Your success," said Jim Brady, executive editor of the Washingtonpost.com (interview), "is only as good as your relationship with the print paper since they provide 90 percent of your content." To these online editors—mostly former print journalists—the online staff works in a "newsroom" in both name and objective. Old terminology framed much of these conversations: newsroom, editing, sources, gatekeeping, inform, community knowledge, agenda setting.

The press remains an authoritative institution, insisted these journalists. "We encourage people to help us set the agenda" (Ulken, interview). As a blog writer, Mark Memmott of USAToday.com considers himself both a "filter" and a "guide" to help people navigate through the vast stores of information in the world. A NYTimes.com's blog during the 2004 presidential campaign amounted to an updated version of a print product called "Political Points." Len Apcar from the NYTimes.com employed the term "authoritative read" for the blog, called "Times on the Trail," pointing out that the blog was not only produced by "news staff" but also "edited." At the International Symposium for Online Journalism in Austin, Texas in April 2005, journalists, bloggers, academics, and even Apcar himself questioned whether such a product could thus be considered a free-flowing blog in the cyberspace sense. But editors said it was important to maintain authorial control, and that blog or not, certain standards had to be met.

Indeed, by mid-2006, most of those newspaper journalists interviewed had limited their reader commentary or explicitly moderated discussions. NYTimes.com was forced to close down many of its online message boards, which "turned out to be sewers of profanity" (Apcar, interview). "We want to keep the discussion focused on the topic at hand, and to allow people to not get to know each other too well and start holding grudges" (Mark Briggs, interview). The print editors and the online department at *The Burlington Free Press* battled over the rules for reader commentary after a mother wrote about the rape of her children by her husband, naming both perpetrator and rape victims. Managing Editor Geoff Gevalt had a hard time getting the online editors to take down the posts. "They said, 'you don't have to worry about slander as much on the Web.' Oh really? You don't?," Gevalt (interview) said. "We have to keep asking, who's in charge? Newspapers must keep the same standards for fairness, accuracy and civility that it

follows in the newspaper. Someone has gotta be in control here." The newspapers' journalistic mission has not transformed, regardless of the delivery vessel switch, wrote Suzanne Levinson (interview), the managing editor of the *Miamiherald.com*.

### *New Missions Emerge*

Nevertheless, once the interview conversations turned to story conception, it became obvious that these traditional journalistic missions have expanded for the new kinds of news products made possible by the Internet technology. "We are in the midst of an evolution" (Briggs, interview). "We are changing the rules" (Gevalt, interview). "We are creating a new form of journalism" (Tom Pellegrine, interview). In the interviews, journalists ticked off the questions they said have been circulating in their newsrooms, including "would this new journalism be more of a service or a product?" and "what would its relationship be to the old brand?" The editors' words made it clear that a battle over identity was being fought. New terminology entered the conversations: experience, senses, total package, flexibility, personalization, translation, richness, layers, fun, play, platform, and community building (as opposed to community knowledge).

Reporters, photographers, and editors have begun to think about the purpose of their news stories differently online. The print medium limits storytelling, and thus inhibits the basic informative mission of journalism, said *Washingtonpost.com*'s Tom Kennedy (interview). Even though he stated in an e-mail interview that his mission is "to produce content that meshes with stories being received from the *Washington Post* newspaper," he expounded in a question and answer with *CyberJournalist.net*:

I don't want to be bound by those strictures . . . For most print products, there's such a force of institutional history that it's very difficult to allow for new possibilities. [At *Washingtonpost.com*] virtually everything is new and fresh so there's more of an "aha" moment when you start to see good stuff. (Willis, 2003)

The editors constantly repeated the mantra that people need to *experience* the news. On their websites, journalists said they felt a certain freedom of purpose, a breakaway from formulaic storytelling to "experiment" and "explore." Even a resolutely print reporter from *The Providence Journal* in Rhode Island likened his ability to add audio and video to his stories as creating "richer and enhanced experiences" for his readers (Peter Lord, interview), a sentiment shared by most of the journalists. The online journalist's new job is to give readers "a sense of the journey" of the reporter as he or she discovers the news, said Memmott of *USA Today*. "I take (readers) along in sounds and visuals as well as with my words and give readers a chance to experience what I am experiencing in the field, alongside me" (Memmott, interview). The *Los Angeles Times*' photographer Rick Loomis described how he painstakingly paired audio of the doctors discussing the life or death of a soldier with powerful images of deadly wounds. He recorded one mother talking to her son, who must now eat via a tube and "talk" using a pen and paper. "If you just saw her words on a page, it might move you. But if you hear his mom, hearing her voice catch, her frustration, well, every mother recognizes that anguish. It makes her more real." He suggested that "if you hear something and see the words on the page and view the pictures, you multiple the intensity of the experience" (Loomis, interview). A multimedia producer at *NYTimes.com* stated the following: "I look at what I do as a whole other thing apart from traditional journalism" (Naka Nathaniel, interview).

By moving the conversation from information-oriented missions to ones incorporating experience, the journalists have opened the process of communication. News dissemination is now incorporating not only multiple actors, as Cook (2006) noted, but also multiple authors, for the technology has made the reader's perspective an integral component of the content production. Any concentration on personal experience—be it the journalist's or the audience member's—through multimedia and interactivity makes the resulting product more fluid and dynamic; this new process seems less like the assembling of a car (a Gans' 1979 analogy of newsmaking) and more like a road trip in that car. Indeed, such shifts in purpose indicate that the individual level for ideological influences on media content can no longer lay at the center of Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchal model from 1996. Rather, newsmakers are thinking about how individuals can help in the driving of that car, the experiencing of news.

### The Newsmaking Process

News media have garnered the authority of a political institution in part because of its standardized routines and procedures (Cook, 1998). Today journalists are thinking differently about their online stories and incorporating technological considerations into every aspect of their jobs.

Online, the processes of news production have fundamentally changed the creation of the news narrative, according to these editors. "The whole notion of story is beginning to change," said the online editor at the *Spokesman-Review*. Ben Estes (interview) from the *Chicago Tribune* noted that "what we can do online goes beyond print journalism." Naka Nathaniel, trained as a print journalist, paired the columns of *New York Times'* Nicholas Kristof with video, audio and interactive graphics. "We have this horrible story that needs to be conveyed, but on the printed page, it sounds a bit flat. Online we can put a face and a voice to those stories . . . and in doing that we can highlight different things than he can in the column" (Nathaniel, interview). As a result, the narrative present in the one-dimensional column grows into something more three-dimensional, he said. "Now we are trying to make more instant coverage and add a component of interactivity, so that you can go backwards or sideways if you want (as a reader)" (Nathaniel, interview).

To do this, the online journalist must develop new "nodes of thinking" that bring the "user to the next level" (Jody Brannon, interview). This has meant that formerly text-only reporters must branch into oral storytelling techniques (Lord, interview). Photographers must consider story chronology and think about sounds and text as much as they have thought about visual storytelling (Peter Huoppi, Loomis, Nhat Meyer, interviews):

The gathering process is much more complicated for multimedia. Equipment-wise we now have to remember to bring our audio recorder and microphone, make sure those batteries are up and running. You also have to balance shooting and taking audio . . . We also have to shoot a lot more images. (Meyer, interview)

Whereas reporters used to file a story and head home, today "we have asked them to do more, to think about a little different story, one that will give them a broader audience, and it's a bit more extra work" (Nathaniel, interview). "The good reporters are going to be the ones who want to tell a story using all the tools available to them," said George Rodrigue, managing editor of the *Dallas Morning News* (interview).

Gatekeeping—the art of deciding what is newsworthy—has remained a central component of these routines. Information selection is more important than ever. After one trip to Zimbabwe with Kristof, Nathaniel was charged with paring down 10 40-minute videotapes into 2.5 minutes for the website. Similarly, photographer Nhat Meyer at the *San Jose Mercury News* described the lengthy processing of editing audio for slide shows: “One has to limit him/herself to what a reader can handle. Just because we can produce a piece that is 20 minutes long doesn’t mean that anyone will watch it or be interested by it” (Meyer, interview).

Editors once concerned only with news value are now considering technology (Pellegrine, interview). The more technological the element, the more technological the process considerations become. There is less content editing and more digital troubleshooting. These journalists identified their “assets in their arsenal,” as the software, hardware, and multimedia tools at their disposal (Brannon, interview). For example, Rick Loomis, a photographer for the *Los Angeles Times*, said he had to train his print reporter not to respond to sources during interviews, to just let them talk so as not to disrupt the audio (interview). In some newsrooms, those responsible for the multimedia complained that they were more technicians or computer coders than journalists. Word choices for headlines are made according to Web search engines. Ellen Foley, editor of *The Wisconsin State Journal*, even called the next generation of journalists “technologists.”

This has meant learning new-world skills such as multimedia storytelling and computer programming, while remembering old-world standards of accuracy (Brannon, Foley, Loomis, personal communications). In some cases, the online reporters have been subject to even higher standards: Alberto Cairo from Spain’s largest newspaper, *El Mundo*, noted that in a multimedia world of graphics, producers like him need a much more detailed picture of what happened than a print reporter would need. For example, a reporter covering the March 11, 2005 train bombs in Spain could write in the newspaper article that the bombs were placed in a bag or that the terrorists arrived at the station in a vehicle. However, the online producer must know what that bag or vehicle looked like (was it a backpack or a satchel? A truck or a car?) in order to be able to draw it accurately (Cairo, 2005).

Editors said they rely on off-site partners and writers to have completed the vetting process (Brannon, interview). They feed their websites with the Associated Press and other wire service content automatically. Most newspaper blogs are even directing readers to competitor work (Memcott, interview). That NYTimes.com blog “Times on the Trail” mentioned earlier linked to offsite competitors, with Apcar arguing that

We knew that there is plenty of other very good reporting out there. And we knew that to have credibility with the reader we couldn’t just say, well, here’s what The Times is reporting and ignore everybody else. (Dube, 2004)

This indicates that the “strategic rituals” of the institution to be objective, accurate, and alone (or at least, ahead) in its news coverage are relaxing or expanding. If a newsroom’s routines result in “the standardized, recurring patterns of news and entertainment content,” ensuring that “a media system will respond in predictable ways” (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, p. 106), then such drastic changes to traditional practices introduce uncertainty into what was once considered to be a fairly structured, hierarchical, institutional system.

## Relationships with Readers, Communities

News media retain authority because they “preside over a societal sector,” acting as an institutional guide in establishing community and individual identity, according to Cook (1998). Online, readers have been invited into the institution, according to these interviews. Gatekeeping has diminished as editors let “readers into the door more,” said Nathaniel (interview). Another journalist said, “the audience is becoming part of the presentation” (Dube, 2005). Readers have more control over the news (Donley, Foley, Huoppi, Randall Keith, Smith, interviews), and more access to both sources and journalists (Gevalt, Keith, interviews).

The reader comments feed back into the newsroom information loop. Reader feedback caused *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof to go back into Zimbabwe and Sudan, for example (Nathaniel, interview). During Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans’ Nola.com’s extensive reader forums became sources of information for rescuers as loved ones posted news of pleas for help from family and friends still trapped (Donley, interview):

At times when our forums clogged, rescuers contacted us to plead with us to speed them up—that they were being used to save lives. A news video shot from inside a Coast Guard helicopter showed a rescuer holding a page printout from Nola.com with addresses circled, matched with GPS coordinates. The blog and forums were also used to reunite families. A Chalmette woman wrote to thank us, saying that she was able to locate 200 family members from St. Bernard Parish, by using our forums.

In addition, a popular story often warrants its own discussion topic in the site’s forum, said Joe Territo of nj.com (interview). “We follow the users. What they want, we can give them like in no other medium.” More than a thousand readers have agreed to serve on an electronic advisory board at the *Greeley Tribune* in Colorado for reporters seeking information, sources, and feedback (Chris Cobler, interview).

Sources can post their own versions of interviews (Ken Sands, interview). Readers can dictate their own experience with the news (Cobler, interview). Readers have turned into authors and narrators, and reporters have become readers (Jamie Gumbrecht, Pellegrine, interviews). Multimedia and interactivity have become a way for people to “explore their personal spaces,” said Brannon (interview). “We’re a partner with the public now,” said Brady (interview). Editors wanted to link audiences to the power elite, said Apcar (interview): “We’re a switch connecting both sides.”

Journalists and audiences interact on the same level, as co-communicators who together negotiate the meaning of the news. E-mail, blogs, forums, comment boards, chats, and Q&As all open up the “dialogue.” These journalists hoped the Web would build community relationships by offering a place for discourse. “I want blog readers to feel as if they are in on a joke. I want them to feel as if we are all part of the same community (Gumbrecht, interview). One editor even referred to journalists and their audiences as “disjointed families” (Pellegrine, interview).

Journalists have started new dialogues by introducing themselves to readers online. Reporters are making themselves characters in their own news stories. Slide shows and video allow the reader to understand a little bit about what it is like to be a journalist (Memcott, interview). During the Iraq War, USA Today.com’s Mark Memcott was embedded with the American troops and wrote a blog utilizing both multimedia and interactivity. His multimedia contained his conversations with troops and photos of

himself during his voyages, as well as personal accounts, feelings, and perceptions of the events going on around him. Entertainment columnist Brent Hallenbeck described his foray into blog writing about local music as an informal journaling (interview). Nola.com's Jon Donley shared with readers his own anguish at missing family members during Hurricane Katrina: "I bared my heart about my own daughter, a Ninth Ward resident who was missing for five days" (Donley, interview).

Some print reporters have taken on celebrity status in their communities as a result of their online activities (Pellegrine, interview). Reporters at the *Journal Gazette* in Fort Wayne, Indiana, created a daily blog about their diets, called *Weighty Matters*. "People saw them at the gym, came up to them on the street. It turned them into stars for a short period of time" (Pellegrine, interview). No longer are newspaper reporters hiding behind the anonymity of bylines (Patrick Schmidt, interview).

Visitors to online newspaper sites can choose how they want to learn about the news of the day. While one person can listen to an audio feature, another might gravitate toward the interactive graphic. Still another may grasp the significance of the news in the photo galleries available—all on the same topic. Multimedia have allowed readers to hear "the pathos of people mourning. It is a palpable emotive experience with a story that evokes a totally different understanding," Brannon of USA Today.com (interview) said.

Indeed, the ultimate mission of journalism on the Web is to construct communal relationships, to build a "community of communities," said Jon Donley, editor of *The Times-Picayune's* Web partner, Nola.com. These interviews indicated that the public and civic journalism movements of the 1980s were being resurrected online. During that time period, some newspapers sought to involve citizens in their communities by hosting town meetings and forums that connected them with their leaders. Publications took direction for news coverage from reader panels, and journalistic investigations were supposed to perform a public service as much as a watchdog role. The movement lost momentum in the mid-1990s, in part because of media conglomeration and consolidation. Cyberspace has brought it back in full force.

"From the moment I went online, I determined that we would create a place without space limits, in which grassroots people could express themselves. A guided tour of people telling their own stories" (Donley, interview). *The Providence Journal* created a "guest book" for visitors to reporter Peter Lord's multi-part series on "Saving Block Island" (Lord, interview). In this commentary, readers related childhood anecdotes about Block Island. *The Los Angeles Times* hosted a conversation with hundreds of people about the Iraq War project, which photographer Rick Loomis illustrated with audio, photographs, slide shows and other multimedia: "I didn't even know what to say to half of these people, I was just so overwhelmed by what they shared" (Loomis, interview). *The Wisconsin State Journal* prominently displays readers' comments in forums and blogs, even using them to decide what to put on the front page (Foley, interview). "As a community paper, it has always been about trying to get as many people's names into the paper as possible, and the Web allows us to do that in spades," said Chris Cobler, publisher of the 26,000-circulation *Greeley Tribune* in Colorado.

It should be noted that in traditional public journalism, the newspaper's reporters, editors, and publishers remained at the center of the community building. Online, citizens are charged with creating the forums themselves. The official mission for Nola.com, the online partner of *The Times-Picayune*, follows as an example:

### What We Want to Be

Everything local on the Web: the best possible website, with the widest possible appeal, that keeps the audience coming back for more, many times throughout each day.

- The leading 24/7 local source of breaking news, sports, entertainment, business and lifestyle coverage.
- The most engaging and interactive local site, with multimedia content produced specifically for the Web.
- A true online community, empowering the audience to collaboratively build and shape the site into the deepest, most diverse resource for all kinds of local information and entertainment.
- The most innovative local Web environment, where the local audience can network, share ideas, entertain themselves and get to know one another.
- The online voice of the audience that we serve. (Donley, interview)

Only the very first point in the above list makes any reference to the print world and its core missions. Nola.com editor Jon Donley further described his mission to establish Nola.com and *The Times-Picayune* as a “place” where “the heart of the community” is kept. Local audiences of Nola.com are meant to “network, share ideas, entertain *themselves*” in this environment. Again, it is the *personal experience* of audience members and their relationship to the raw material of the news (as opposed to the journalism) that matters on these sites, not information. This idea reverberated throughout the interviews (Cobler, Gevalt, Ulken, interviews). Such an approach to journalist–audience relationships brings to mind Gans’ desire for multiperspectival news, but in an even more dynamic sense. When sources and readers have greater access to the journalism, the journalists, and the information itself, the symbolic arena expands, becomes more diverse, more complex, more layered, and perhaps more reflective of reality (Gans, 1979).

### Conclusion

Journalists said they are seeking to reinforce journalistic authority. To accomplish this, they have aimed to provide transparency and build credibility.

In terms of transparency, the reader is much more involved in the story process or at least they can be. They can have a say in how we gather the news. They can have a say in how we select the news. They are making decisions about what stories they want to read. They are not respecting our traditions of putting five stories on the front page or the home page and just going with that. (Cobler, interview)

Journalists contended that this “unfiltered look at the news” (Martha Carr, interview) would “fix our credibility problems with the public” (Gevalt, interview). For example, the *Spokesman-Review* posted all its interview transcripts as well as the legal documents associated with its investigation of Spokane Mayor Jim West, accused of pedophilia.

This was very self-serving, and that was to establish a culture of transparency. We wanted to throw everything we had at everyone, so people would see that we were not making this stuff up. It was an offensive move on our part. (Smith, interviews)

The *USAToday* reporter added that the linking and the extra material provide “a very transparent way to reassure people that what happened was real” (Memmott, interview).

The posting of raw data and other reporter materials formerly left on the cutting room floor should make for a more accurate story (Gevalt, Memmott, Smith, interviews). "What goes online is a more accurate and truer representation of reality" (Briggs, interview). Donley at Nola.com described a series of 83 photos that he posted from a local resident who snapped pictures as the water rose outside his living room window. The resident continued shooting as he climbed into his attic, broke through the roof, and sat in hurricane winds. "No professional photographer provided shots of this authenticity," Donley noted.

This discussion about authenticity, transparency, and audience experience echoes that of earlier journalists such as Edward Murrow, who promised to bring viewers the news experience with the radio microphone during the early days of World War II, and then with the television camera. Today the multimedia and interactivity of the Web can make every news event an enhanced "see it now" moment, said the journalists interviewed. Once "there" at the site of the news, users can manipulate the presentation and alter the content on the pages of the virtual newspaper. Hyperlinks—and users' clicking ability—have become the new quotation marks, the new strategy of providing credibility and objectivity. Readers can literally create and change content, advancing Murrow's promise of "seeing it now" to "experiencing" it now. Journalists have allowed readers to peek past the institutional curtain to see the working parts of newsgathering. In that glimpse, readers are supposed to feel as if they participated in the reporting. In this way, journalists hope the newsgathering seems more "real," and the news therefore more authentic.

In providing the raw material, hyperlinks, multimedia, reader-only forums and other Web accompaniments, the press is (knowingly) creating a new form of journalism—one that offers a literal news experience. The new missions push journalists to give customers a personal and communal experience, as much as they strive to be an information transmitter, an agenda setter, and a community leader. Ultimately, these online editors and producers hope that when people are able to *experience* the news in various media and *interact* with it, such informed citizenry will then *participate in* the marketplace of ideas and politics. This new kind of journalism approaches Gans' idea for a multi-perspectival newsmaking process, one whose rigid structuring of missions, routines and practices, and relationships has relaxed.

Ironically, in producing the news in this manner, the industry is also (perhaps unwittingly) undermining its own role as a societal institution whose jurisdiction has been over life's facts. These particular changes in content, control, and mission have several implications for the authority of the press to tell its news stories in this new environment. News scholarship holds that the press's authority results from its status as an institution, and that its power comes from the professional norms accepted by audiences. These editors reported that they see their service function in society eventually becoming a "platform"—a much different concept than an "institution." They see their mission as providing a "switch" between individuals, the journalists and the news sources. Their newsroom practices incorporate technological considerations of multimedia and interactivity, ahead of gatekeeping, news value determinations and other traditional professional norms. Their routines include posting the raw material of their reporting, writing the "back-story" of the newsgathering, and creating citizen-submitted journalism sites. Their relationships have changed with the new audience interaction encouraged on their publications' websites.

These notions imply a new sharing of authoritative space on the pages of the electronic newspaper. Journalistic authority in terms of its institutional cache cannot help but become diluted as it makes room for such expansions. With these changes to journalistic missions, routines, and societal relationships, newspapers and their websites are turning into an interactive public sphere that just may be forming a new kind of institution, one whose enduring boundaries are malleable and constructed as much by the content receivers as by the information producers. Such changes must have implications for the press's power to dictate knowledge to society. The institution of the press is still fully functioning, but the news is no longer the sole purview of the press.

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## NOTE

1. Those interviewed were: Len Apcar, former executive editor of NYTimes.com (1.7 million circulation), 8 April and 7 October 2006; Jan Biles, print reporter for the *Capital-Journal* (Topika, KS; 64,000 circulation), 22 July and 7 October 2006; Jim Brady, executive editor of Washingtonpost.com (960,684 circulation), 8 April 2005 and 6 October 2006; Jody Brannon, former managing editor of USAToday.com (2.5 million circulation), 6 April 2005 and 5 October 2006; Mark Briggs, online editor for *The News-Tribune* (Tacoma, WA; 138,000 circulation), 28 June and 2 October 2006; Martha Carr, assistant city editor for *The Times-Picayune* (253,000 circulation), 27 July and 5 October 2006; Chris Cobler, publisher and editor for *The Greeley Tribune* (CO; 26,000 circulation), 27 July and 12 October 2006; Jon Donley, editor of Nola.com, Web partner for *The Times-Picayune* (253,000 circulation), 25 July and 1 November 2006; Ben Estes, editor of the Chicagotribune.com (957,212 circulation), 26 June and 3 October 2006; Doug Feaver, former executive editor for the Washingtonpost.com (960,684), 8 March 2005 and 7 October 2006; Ellen Foley, editor of *The Wisconsin State Journal* (Madison; 92,000 circulation), 18 August and 12 October 2006; Geoff Gevalt, managing editor of *The Burlington Free Press* (VT; 65,000 circulation), 27 June and 28 September 2006; Jamie Gumbrecht, print cultural reporter for the *Lexington Herald Reader* (KT; 141,000 circulation), 23 June and 5 October 2006; Brent Hallenbeck, print reporter and blogger for *The Burlington Free Press* (VT; 65,000 circulation), 27 June and 16 October 2006; Peter Huoppi, photographer/videographer for *The Burlington Free Press* (VT; 65,000 circulation), 25 July and 2 October 2006; Randall Keith, online editorial director for *The San Jose Mercury News* (263,000 circulation), 5 August and 5 October 2006; Tom Kennedy, managing editor of Washingtonpost.com (960,684 circulation), 6 and 8 March 2005; Jason Laughlin, print reporter for *The Courier-Post* (Cherry Hill, NJ; 92,000 circulation), 15 August and 1 October 2006; Suzanne Levinson, managing editor of the Miamiherald.com (390,000 circulation), 28 March 2005 and 5 October 2006; Eric Loomis, photographer for *The Los Angeles Times* (1.23 million

circulation), 20 August and 4 October 2006; Peter Lord, science reporter for the *Providence Journal* (RI; 230,000), 22 June, 21 July and 3 October 2006; Bill Marvel, print reporter for *The Dallas Morning News* (800,000 circulation), 21 June and 1 October 2006; Mark Memmott, print-turned-Web reporter of *USA Today* (2.5 million circulation), 26 July 2005 and 6 October 2006; Nhat Meyer, photographer for *The San Jose Mercury News* (263,000 circulation), 15 August and 10 October 2006; Bill Morlin, print reporter for *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA; 119,000 circulation), 21 July and 2 October 2006; Naka Nathaniel, multimedia producer for the NYTimes.com (1.7 million circulation), 24 March 2005 and 7 October 2006; Tom Pellegrine, online technology editor for *The Journal Gazette* (Fort Wayne, IN; 121,000 circulation), 26 June and 9 October 2006; George Rodrigue, managing editor and vice-president of *The Dallas Morning News* (800,000 circulation), 7 April and 6 October 2006; Ken Sands, online editor for *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA; 119,000 circulation), 20 July and 6 October 2006; Patrick Schmidt, sports writer for the *Casper Star Tribune* in Wyoming (73,000 circulation), 27 July and 4 October 2006; Steven Smith, print editor for *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA; 119,000 circulation), 28 June and 2 October 2006; Joe Territo, director of content development for Advance Internet, New House Company and nj.com (48,000 circulation), 9 April 2005 and 1 October 2006; Brian Thevenot, city reporter for *The Times-Picayune* (253,000 circulation), 5 August and 3 October 2006; Eric Ulken, night managing editor of *The Los Angeles Times* (1.23 million circulation), 5 August and 6 October 2006; Larry Webb, multimedia developer of USA Today.com (2.5 million circulation), 26 July and 5 October 2006.

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