

**Old Values, New World:
Harnessing the Legacy of
Independent Journalism for the Future**

Peter C. Goldmark, Jr.

with

a report of the Fourth Annual Aspen Institute
Conference on Journalism and Society

by David Bollier

*Values profit
Tradition
Change
markets*



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The Evolution of Journalism in a Changing Market Ecology

by David Bollier



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

Communications and Society Program

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Executive Director

Washington, DC

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Foreword

Four years ago, the Aspen Institute established the Conference on Journalism and Society to address the rising level of concern about the quality of journalism and new trends in the news business. This roundtable conference is a neutral forum for leading decision makers in journalism, business, and technology to address the influence of technology and market pressures on the quality of journalism. It is designed to help business and editorial leaders of the news media better understand how they might leverage their leadership positions to enhance the contributions of the media to democracy and civic life.

This volume is the result of the Fourth Annual Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society, held at the Aspen Institute's Aspen Meadows campus in Aspen, Colorado, from August 23-25, 2000. The conference was made possible by the generous sponsorship of the Catto Charitable Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. This publication includes the keynote address to the conference, delivered as a public lecture by Peter C. Goldmark, chairman and chief executive officer of the Paris-based *International Herald Tribune*, and a report of the conference by independent journalist David Bollier.

Previous Aspen Institute conferences in this series have yielded a variety of suggestions for improving the quality of journalism during a time of great change in the media. (A complete list of reports available from previous years appears on page 57.) Many of the suggestions focus on the role that enlightened leadership—whether in the news room, in the executive suite, or at the board of directors level—can play in ensuring the continued health and vitality of high-quality journalism. These include a stronger emphasis on the importance of core values to the mission of the organization, educating shareholders about the value of quality journalism, improved communication between management and journalists, and greater criticism and transparency within the journalism profession itself.

This volume continues the search for promising and innovative solutions for adapting quality, independent journalism to the realities of the changing marketplace. Peter Goldmark challenges the leaders of media

enterprises to make their organizations more accountable for the quality and independence of their journalism operations through several intriguing suggestions offered in his keynote address. Of particular note are his ideas to raise oversight for the strength of the journalistic enterprise to the board of directors level in a manner that is consistent with the ways that many corporations manage compensation and financial audit functions. His ideas receive further discussion in the report of the conference by David Bollier, who very effectively describes the new media ecology—that is, the emerging “complex portrait of competitive adaptation and evolutionary change” taking place in the media. In his report, Bollier conveys the sense of the meeting from his particular vantage point. It should be understood that the arguments and conclusions of this report do not necessarily reflect the view of individual participants listed in the appendix, nor those of their employers.

As with many inquiries, the more we have sought to learn, the more we have uncovered deeper, more complex issues to probe. With the experience and support of our sponsors and the many committed individuals who contributed to the inquiry and dialogue in Aspen, the conference has accumulated a record that we hope contributes to the understanding and articulation of the challenges facing the leaders of journalistic enterprises.

Acknowledgments

On behalf of the Aspen Institute, I would like to acknowledge and express our sincere gratitude to the Catto Charitable Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for sponsoring the 2000 Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society. In particular, I thank Jessica and Henry Catto, president and vice president of the Catto Charitable Foundation, Hodding Carter, president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and Del Brinkman, former director of journalism programs for the Knight Foundation and now dean of the University of Colorado School of Journalism, for their leadership in convening this conference.

I would like to express the Institute’s appreciation to Peter C. Goldmark, whose eloquent and forceful keynote address vividly conveys the urgency of adapting the fundamental values of journalism in the new media environment. Our gratitude also goes to Jim Lehrer,

executive editor and anchor of *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, who expertly guided the roundtable discussions and whose nightly news program is a premier example of how it is possible to adapt the core values of journalism to the contemporary marketplace.

We thank each of our conference participants, listed on page 53-54 of this report, who generously gave their time to reflect on their work and the current state of their profession. We especially appreciate the support provided by Gerald Levin, chief executive officer of AOL Time Warner, and Robert Decherd, chairman, president and chief executive officer of Belo Corp., whose efforts to broaden the participation to a wider audience of media executives has helped to advance the goals of the Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society. We appreciate the unique talents of David Bollier, conference rapporteur, who has once again captured the most interesting insights of the conference and woven them into a very readable report.

Finally, I wish to thank copy editor Jacqueline Arendse; Chris Boardwine and Steve Johnson of the Aspen Institute's publications staff; Sunny Sumter-Sana, senior program coordinator and publications manager, for her work on the conference and on this report; and Charlie Firestone, executive director of the Communications and Society Program, for his guidance in developing this conference and his strong support of the Program's journalism projects.

Amy Korzick Garmer

Director of Journalism Projects

The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program

**OLD VALUES, NEW WORLD:
HARNESSING THE LEGACY
OF INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM
FOR THE FUTURE**

Old Values, New World: Harnessing the Legacy of Independent Journalism for the Future

Peter C. Goldmark, Jr.

A keynote address delivered at the Fourth Annual Aspen Institute
Conference on Journalism and Society

I have watched the discussion in the United States about whether our journalistic values are decaying. I have watched it from the United States. And I have watched it for the past two years from Europe, from a perspective that is not essentially European, but simply that of an American based outside the United States.

This is an important debate. It is becoming, also, an old debate. As the line from that wonderful old song in that wonderful old movie goes, “the fundamental things apply.” The American tradition of journalistic standards and independence is a strong one, a remarkable and a wonderful one. The second half of the twentieth century—from the slow arousal in the face of McCarthyism in the 1950’s, through civil rights and Vietnam, to the series of crises and political scandals carrying the suffix “gate” and to the end of the 1990s—will emerge clearly as a grand, long, and strong run in that tradition.

The tradition that the second half of the twentieth century exemplifies so well is a remarkable tradition. The role of America in the world and the prominence of her press in her political struggles and evolution have kept the spotlight sharply focused on the American code of journalistic values. Although it is by no means an exclusively American tradition, it is strongest here, most acknowledged here, most clearly and firmly anchored in our governing constitution and beliefs, more staunchly and systematically defended by the judicial branch of government here.

Yet even here in America, it is fragile—more fragile than we understand. Truly independent journalism is relatively new in human history. Many of the traditions of democratic theory and governmental institutions trace their origins back several millennia to the classical period. But

the tradition of an independent press does not find its roots there. It is much, much newer, and this has made the whole adventure both much more exciting and much more precarious. How old is it at most—a couple of hundred years or less?

It is also a very vulnerable tradition, as we are fated to discover again and again. During the 1990s we experienced the euphoria of seeing dictatorships around the world cede or crumble, from Prague to Pretoria, from Santiago to Seoul. And now for many of those very same countries in whose transition to new democratic forms we rejoiced, the future of a free press is in doubt. And in some cases the forces that today cast shadows of threat and intolerance over the exercise of an independent press are the same forces that a few short years ago led the opposition to prior tyranny. For human beings, power is a fascinating, addictive, and somewhat hallucinatory elixir, and most seem happiest to praise the virtues of an independent press when they are in the opposition. The fundamental things apply.

One of the most important functions performed by the independent press is to chronicle the travails of the press itself in these new democracies. This reporting is undertaken, in fact, largely by the written press, not by television or the new media. But it is a vital and important function. The future of democracy in those countries is centrally linked to the fate of the independent press.

Do you think I exaggerate?

Think a minute. Can anyone here name a democracy that has long survived without an independent press? The fundamental things apply.

The debate in which we have all been both witnesses and participants, has been about whether traditional journalistic values are in decline, are being abandoned, are being compromised; about whether we are losing something valuable and special that we once had, or whether *mutatis mutandis* the tradition of independent, high-quality, relevant journalism continues to operate effectively in our land.

I have read the three Catto talks that precede the one you are good enough to listen to today. Two were given by individuals I know and respect enormously—Robert MacNeil and Max Frankel. The third was given by a man I do not know, but whose ability to influence for better or worse the issues under debate is greater than that of all the others combined—Gerald Levin. I am not sure any of us knows enough about

where all this is going, to be standing up here trying to tell you. But, like them, I'm not afraid to try.

I learn from these Catto talks that there is much to worry about in terms of the strength of independent journalism. And I learn at the same time that the tradition is alive, evolving, and strong enough to engender and sustain strong criticism.

What are the basic ingredients of this tradition of an independent news function in our society?

- ***First, independence from any political influence or commercial sway.*** I imagine we are all pretty clear on that one. The quality of that independence needs to be redefined by each generation, and can never be taken for granted. Attempts to extend political influence and commercial sway will be made over and over again. With inevitable, tidal regularity they will well up in efforts to check, discredit, or limit the press statutorily, and they must be resisted and defeated each time. That contest of wills at the frontier of political and commercial power on one hand and independent journalism on the other, never ends, it simply takes different forms in differing circumstances, and the centrality of that struggle to our system of self-government needs to be understood and celebrated and taught, because independence is easy to lose and heart-breakingly difficult to reclaim.
- ***Second, legal guarantees and protections.*** In the American case, legal guarantees and protections are sewn deep into the constitutional fabric.
- ***Third, a bright, clear line between opinion and reportage.*** Here, some of our European colleagues part company with us. Let us not debate that today; let us simply note that this bright clear line is an essential part of American journalism, and central both to its highest forms and to its public credibility.
- ***Fourth, a nosy, assertive inquisitiveness.*** We have a restless curiosity to look behind closed doors and into dark corners, particularly those places to which officialdom in whatever form seeks to bar entry. We want to look in because there usually turns out to be a reason why they are seeking to bar entry, and that reason is often one of self-interest or well-founded fear of exposure.

- ***Fifth, the quest for relevance.*** Let's spend a moment on this one. Relevance means focusing on what turns out to matter. If you were an editor in the German principality of Saxony in the sixteenth century and you decided to cover in depth the pomp and pageantry surrounding the marriage of the next Holy Roman Emperor, and decided to pay no attention to a young monk named Martin Luther, you would run a serious risk of having ordered up coverage that was irrelevant. Your readers may have been more interested in the marriage—the colorful personalities arriving from near and far, the drama, the intrigue and festivities. But, measured by the test of what turned out to be important and formative, you would have failed. I prefer this formulation of the “test of relevance” to the more ascetic formulation that the duty of the press is ‘to tell people what they need to know, not what they want to know’. I prefer it because the distinction between “need” and “want” to know is for me too neat and too artificial; the press has always dealt in both. And part of the art is in any case telling people what they “need” to know in such a way that they “want” to know it, or at least come to *realize* that they “need to know” it, which is a long step in the right direction. But the other reason I prefer the formulation of “relevance” is because it turns in part on the time dimension, rather than on a distinction between “want” and “need,” or between “enjoy” and “ought to.” Journalists deal in patterns and indications, and these patterns are not momentary, they extend longitudinally in time, often like a concealed palimpsest. We are talking about weighty, influential judgments that go right to the heart of journalistic responsibility as well as relevance: Which primary candidates will be covered more heavily than others? Is the fall of a given currency an oscillation within the range of normal expectation, or is it the decipherable harbinger of some deeper trend? Was the burglary in the apartment building an everyday, big-city event, or was it the loose end of some larger political conspiracy whose tangled skein eventually leads back to a sitting President? Relevance is the test of whether coverage turns out to be germane, important, focused on forces and trends that bear with consequence on the course of both daily and long-term events. In the end journalism that is not relevant will not be judged to

have been great journalism. And in that hard reality lies a great portion of our most difficult challenge today.

I believe there is a special characteristic of this period in which you and I live, and I believe it is this: For the first time in history the human race is faced with a set of ultimata.

What is an ultimatum? An ultimatum is a challenge, a threat, an adverse condition to which you must respond effectively, or else there will be serious negative consequences. I will mention only two of these ultimata, ones on which we can probably agree fairly easily. The first is the threat of weapons of mass destruction, whether delivered by missile by a foreign power, or delivered in a truck or in a jar by a terrorist. And the second is the deterioration of the planet's ecosystems brought on by the pace and extent of human economic activity. The special characteristic of our period, then, is this: For the first time in human history we encounter—indeed we have helped to create—forces and threats which if not dealt with effectively can dramatically and adversely change the entire quality of life on this planet and the prospects of the human adventure itself. That has never been true before.

I have stated the adventure in intellectual terms. Is this too abstract for you? Let me try it in more human terms.

Can you hear it?

Behind the gentle sounds of Aspen in August, can you hear the sound of the Earth's drama? Can you hear the hissing wind as it whistles across thousands of acres of sand and waste that used to be part of the Aral Sea?

Beyond this summer afternoon in Colorado, beyond the beautiful evening light, the breeze, the mountains, and skylscapes of this stunning countryside—are you able to discern the images of the passion play in which we find ourselves?

Can you see it?

Can you see the Iranian diplomats and government agents striding purposefully, in neat dark suits, through customs, getting their passports stamped, as they fan out across the world to acquire the components of a nuclear arsenal? Can you see the children of El Guasmo? El Guasmo is a slum in Guayaquil in Ecuador, a poor country allowed to go bankrupt. We bailed out Lockheed, Chrysler, New York City, some of

Asia, Russia several times over, but not Ecuador. Was it too poor, too little, too weak for us to save? Can you see the children, distended stomachs leaning over water barrels? Can you see the net resources of their poor country flowing North? Can you *imagine* that?

Can you see the shadow of Japan? It falls over every forest, every forest dweller, and every wild animal in East Asia, and over many in Latin America.

Can you see the bottom of the sea? Most Americans have not seen pictures of the bottom of the sea. Do you know what you see on the seabed of the world's fisheries, where the dragging scoops and nets have crossed? There are gashes and furrows—vast, rake-like gashes and marks left by huge American and European fishing drags. We thought the ocean, like the air, was so vast that man and all his scrapings and all his foolishness could not make a difference. But I have seen the picture where the draggers have been, the sea has been raped and despoiled. It is barren—a desert at the bottom of the sea. There is no plant. There is no fish. There is no life, it has been ripped out. And then the camera turns and there's a little triangle where the marks, the gashes of the draggers did not quite overlap—there is a little triangle, perhaps with a plant, perhaps with a fish or two left.

Can you hear all this? Can you see all this? Can you imagine all this?

Are we covering these stories with the attention and in the depth they deserve? No, we are not. There are reasons for this.

First, as with most large, ill-defined, new trends, the players along the political spectrum are sufficiently confused about them to appear to require qualification, caution, and defensive presentation of offsetting views in reporting them. What is more damning to our present journalistic performance in the case of the two ultimatums I have mentioned, however, is that the relevant scientific and expert communities are far more broadly agreed than are the politicians that both trends are profound and dangerous. There is significant difference about the time horizon over which these trends are likely to impinge visibly on our lives. But of course within the context of human history, let alone geological time, all of this is happening in the blink of an eye. And that is one of the things that stymies us in the press—the question of time scale. If the threat were that an asteroid was going to hit the earth one year from today, we would know how to report that. That is immediate enough to command intensive coverage. The experts would be clearly divided—some would say it will hit the earth,

some would say it will miss it. As the months rolled by one group or the other would turn out to be right. The consequences would be catastrophic, understandable, and somewhat predictable. And the mobilization of technological and governmental resources to deal with the threat would constitute a frenzied and impressive pageant.

Second, the two ultimatums I have mentioned are, ironically, far more real—but they are far more difficult for humans to react to. A time horizon of one, two, three decades is not something we have much experience in reporting on. It is not, understandably enough, a time horizon for which any of our basic governmental institutions were designed. And, the arena for much of this is global, not national or local, and global news coverage is among the most expensive to mount, and among the most unsuccessful in attracting audiences.

Third, in the case of the two ultimatums I have mentioned there are powerful groups who have shown themselves thus far to be disinterested in bringing attention to these problems in any realistic way. In the case of the spread and eventual use of weapons of mass destruction, particularly by terrorists, it is the government experts. In all the developed countries experts have undertaken analyses of these possibilities and made assessments of their potential consequences. The picture is so grim that they and their political masters have decided not to discuss this subject, for two reasons. The first is because some of them believe that to discuss it is to make it more likely—a proposition that needs to be debated. The second reason is because they see very little they can recommend to counter this threat within the context of presently acceptable political alternatives, and therefore they do not want to raise a big, messy problem for which they have no immediate answers.

Let's pause there a moment. Does that raise an echo for you? Not wanting to raise a big, messy problem because we have no immediate answers? That is what we did for a decade on the problem of AIDS. That is what Barton Gellman laid bare this summer in his brilliant reporting in *The Washington Post* on the history of the AIDS crisis. He finally told the story of the governments and other official organizations, including U.N. agencies that for various reasons didn't want to talk about the real measure of the problem. One of those reasons was the fear that they didn't have the resources or the political will to respond if they confronted it honestly. It was all discussed—the dimensions of the problem,

the implications of trying to deal with it, the consequences of a world-wide epidemic. It was all discussed, but mostly in private. Almost all the large institutions that should have faced the AIDS problem squarely, including the United States government, flinched, ducked, and looked away. And the quality of the reporting on the AIDS problems contributed to enabling them to flinch and duck. The reasoning that produced a mindless conspiracy of inaction and silence on the AIDS problem is exactly the kind of reasoning that now paralyzes us in regard to a whole series of problems, including the two that I have classed among the ultimata that define our moment in history. And that story in the *Post* is the kind of reporting we should be getting on, the set of huge problems around us.

In the case of the environment, a strange and uneasy alliance of business and government—often fierce antagonists in other arenas—simply does not want to face the scale, cost, and dislocation implied by the changed models of economic production and consumption that would be required to respond seriously to environmental deterioration.

Why do I raise these two ultimata?

Because they are among the most distinguishing and fateful characteristics of the period of history in which we live and we are not reporting them very well at all. We are not covering a big chunk of what will turn out to be most important about these years, and independence and objectivity without relevance will turn out to be a half-baked, half loaf indeed. How many among us will turn out to have been journalists who covered the emperor's wedding rather than the young German monk who brought the Roman Catholic Church to its knees?

There is never a time in which it is so difficult to defend and apply core values as when things are going well and those values appear not to need affirmation or protection. We are in such a period now. Can we think clearly? Can we bring discipline, and logic, and passion—all three—to bear on our present situation and prospects? Or like other civilizations who have enjoyed great power, great prosperity, and great acclaim, will we fritter away these years of relative calm and economic munificence, and through weakness and inattention fail to do the hard work required to figure out where we are, where we're going, and what we have to do to get there safely?

Listen to these words by Edward Gibbon writing about ancient Athens:

“In the end, more than they wanted freedom, they wanted security. They wanted a comfortable life and they lost it all—security, comfort, and freedom . . . When the Athenians finally wanted not to give to society but for society to give to them, when the freedom they wished for most was freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free.”

What is our challenge? Is it to recover the greatness of Murrow and Reston and Bradlee and Cronkite? What shall we do to measure up to the values of which they were such marvelous exemplars? Shall we follow in the footsteps of the men of old, as the old dictum suggests?

Let’s review some more of the fundamental logic.

The function of independent journalism is necessary to a democratic society. It is an indispensable and indissoluble element of the great human adventure in self-government. It is not a luxury or a frill. It is essential; without it everything would change, and we would lose much of what we say we stand for, and for which we have in the past been willing to put at risk our lives, our fortune, and our sacred honor.

What is food for? Food is for the body.

What are education and learning for? They are for the mind.

What is entertainment for? For diversion and relaxation.

What is religion for? It is for the soul and the spirit.

Who is the news for? News is for the citizen.

The citizen is that dimension of each one of us that is responsible for, contributes to, and benefits from the cooperative endeavor of self-government. The citizen is the basic constituent element of the public dimension of human activity. Without the citizen, there is no self-government, no individual basis for responsibility, choice and values; there is only the state in all its fearful, unchecked power and unaccountability. And without the independent news function, the citizen is starved, paralyzed, neutered, rendered insensate, ineffective, and robotic.

To report the distinctive challenges of our moment in history will take some changes. It will certainly take some daring, and discipline, and tenacity. Traditional hard news reporting is largely event-focused. A

prime minister is chosen; a summit meeting is held; two companies merge. It has been considered dangerous, with good reason, to wander too far into speculation, even expert speculation, or to look too far into the uncharted future where one can easily become dependent on opinions and guesstimates and more vulnerable to manipulation. Leave that for an occasional piece in the science pages.

But venturing into those waters is exactly what is required now, because in those waters will be found the slow-moving, scouring, currents that will carve out so irrevocably the world our children and their children after them will find. And therefore, we will have no choice but to develop techniques that will allow us to encompass the time horizons and uncertainties of these deep sea changes without either being manipulated or getting lost in conflicting or abstract expert speculation.

We are not helpless. We have learned new techniques in the past when we had to. We learned painfully, slowly, but eventually successfully how to report stories in the security domain where much critical information was unavailable, classified, or easily manipulated by the institutions that controlled it. That, after all, is our craft isn't it—to take the realities as they present themselves, and to find ways to report them out, consistent with the values that guide us? We need to do this even when it hasn't been done before. The fundamental things apply.

What does this add up to?

Here's what I make of it, in its simplest form.

We are the heirs to a wonderful and rare legacy, the tradition of tough, independent, uncompromising journalism. The vital functioning of this tradition is an indispensable fuel of a free society; it is the oxygen of the civic metabolism that animates the human adventure in self-government. It is not a function that can evolve easily and be supported totally by the operation of short-term market forces, although we must note that the bastions of the best journalism in our society today are commercially viable companies that have known shrewdly when to sacrifice short-term commercial profit for journalistic values, and how to profit commercially from the long-term practice of good journalism. It is not a function that can be kept alive by the public sector. It is a sector of our society that is accountable to everyone—except to government, and that exception is fundamental.

Are the strong journalistic values that flourished in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States still alive and vital? Yes. Are they at the same time, paradoxically, under threat from changed economic circumstance, new technologies, and new audience dynamics that include larger numbers, greater individual choice, new technologies, and shifting relationships with advertisers? Yes, yes, and yes. What is our task? Part of our task is of course to be conscious of our legacy. John Ruskin tells us why:

“No nation ever had, or will have, the power of suddenly developing, under the pressure of necessity, faculties it had neglected when it was at ease; nor of teaching itself, in poverty, the skill to produce what it has never, in opulence, had the sense to admire.”

But, we must not confuse understanding the power and value of our legacy with the real test that is before us. The real test is to harness that legacy and apply those values to the particular challenges of our moment in history. And they are long-term secular trends in the use of technology, particularly for destructive purposes, and in the impact of the Western pattern of economic production and popular consumption that dominates the globe and is damaging at an accelerating rate the fragile biosphere in which and from which it originally arose.

These trends pose ultimata to us because we will eventually find life as we know and enjoy it today unsustainable if we are not successful in comprehending and then modifying our collective behavior. That will require, one way or another, collaborative action on a global scale—a totally new stage in the adventure in self-government. And that cannot happen and will not happen without the indispensable fuel, the critical catalyst of independent journalism. Simply by saying what I have just said—a thought you have heard before, and a thought from which too many of us have learned to turn away because it seems so daunting, so unwieldy, so discouraging, sometimes so idealistic and often so paralyzing—simply by saying or hearing what I have just said we sense the immense scope of this task, and the extraordinary rigor that will be required in the face of this challenge.

Can we face it? Can we do it? I do not know, and you do not know. But what we both know is this: that we certainly will not do it unless we

try, with focus, with clarity, with generosity of spirit, with discipline in thought and action. Go back through history, and you will find what each of you has already learned in whatever domain or enterprise you are personally engaged: that in every difficult, apparently improbable endeavor, in every triumph over the apparent odds, focus and tenacity have played central roles. But even with focus and tenacity; even if we are fortunate enough to have skilled leadership; even if we add to the recipe a measure of good luck, which we shall surely need—even then, that will not be enough. It will only be possible if we put into the mix as well the operation of a vital and robust independent journalistic function.

Our job then—yours, mine, of all those who belong to this wonderful tradition, all those who claim the mantle of independent reporting, all those who are willing to brave the anger of governments and to risk the pressure, the calumny and worse that private corporations can bring to bear on an individual reporter or news organization when it feels its commercial interests are threatened—the job of all of us is to devise the new techniques, to forge the new tools, to learn the new patterns of thought required to report the really big, really fundamental stories of the next few decades. It will require new techniques and tools because in many cases those stories will involve unfolding trends that are at first obscure, then denied or dismissed by governments and private business. They will involve forces about which experts—some legitimate, some who are “for hire” and have been purchased—will differ. And these forces and trends will represent dangers and pressures operating in more cumulative fashion over a longer term than those for which the reporting techniques of the past were adapted.

It is in doing this that we shall be judged, and that we should be judged. The questions will be asked: Did they see and get on the biggest stories of their day? Unlike AIDS, whose basic dimensions they essentially missed for over a decade, did they see the other stories emerging and really dig into them, really take them apart, despite the resistance of many governments and some corporations? Did they get inside and expose what governments did not want them to expose about the danger of terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction in our cities? Did they find ways to tell the story of dying fisheries, the story of threatened food supplies, the story of the progressive diminution in the quality and availability of potable water around the world? Were they able to get inside the ‘don’t ask-don’t tell’ zone that many corporations have erect-

ed around their own activities in this regard? Did they find a way to add these pieces up into the macro story, the story of the gradual but accelerating exhaustion of the earth's capital and resilience? Did they find the techniques to do that and still respect the limits and principles of reasonable scientific judgment?

Who is "they"?

"They" is we.

Are these big stories?

Absolutely.

Are we perhaps already doing the job on these stories now, as I sometimes hear?

No, we are not. What we do now is produce episodic pieces, or one-off analyses of these subjects. Some are quite good; many are not. But good, mainline journalism is about the big patterns, the big consequences. They help frame the terms of public debate and they leave behind benchmarks against which future actions and utterances by public leaders are measured, and we are not doing that now. We are not covering the real movement of the tectonic plates in the landscape around us. To put it another way that may be helpful historically, our coverage of these issues today has about as much to do with the actual unfolding of these historical ultimata as the coverage of European politics and military affairs in the first years of the twentieth century had to do with the unfolding reality of the First World War.

If you disagree with me, then do this. Go back and read Barton Gellman's piece on AIDS from this summer in *The Washington Post*. What I am saying is this: Every broad conclusion that Gellman's piece draws fifteen years after the start of the epidemic, could have been drawn in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Gellman's words are dramatic and harsh. He writes:

“ . . . For a decade the world knew the dimensions of the coming catastrophe . . . Individually and collectively, most of those with power decided not to act.

“How and why they made their choices is a story of authentic doubts for a time, because the disease concealed itself in years of latency and layers of social

taboo. It is also a story, by turns, of willful ignorance and paralysis in the face of growing proof . . .

“At nearly every level, the process featured what some participants see as shameful ‘demand management’: a reluctance to act for fear of prompting further claims on time and money.”¹

Is that a big story? It is. It is the story of a new kind of globalized cover-up born of laziness, lack of willingness to face and think through evidence, and the desire to sidestep unpleasant political consequences. In terms of our future on this planet it is emblematic of the kind of cover-up we have to fear the most.

And now you see why I have chosen the AIDS example and this marvelous piece of reporting to make my point. Because it was a long, slowly developing story. Because many people knew, or judged it very likely, that what would in fact eventually unfold was a plague-like pandemic that could have been countered and limited by early, concerted action. Because the weight and the common logic of this expert opinion was ignored or suppressed by official bodies, both national and international, and was discoverable by the press. But it was not in the actual event discovered and explored by the press.

As we see over and over in human affairs, the signs are there; they always are, aren't they? The examples are there. Even the early prototypes of challenge and dilemma are there. That is what the AIDS story is—an early prototype of the kind of story that will be central to the human experience of the first half of the twenty-first century.

I often think that the most fitting epigram for our new century was written by one of the great writers of the last century, Samuel Beckett. He told us:

“Everything will turn out all right . . . unless something foreseen crops up.”

Shall we seek then to emulate the behavior of the great reporters and editors who created the twentieth century tradition of journalism?

The fundamental things apply.

Two issues recur in this debate about journalism: technology and gigantism.

Let's take the challenge of technology first.

Will technology change journalism, its practice, its modes, its venues? Will technology change fundamentally the relationships between journalism's producers and consumers? Will it change the connection of citizens to the public process, in which it is the principal intermediary?

Yes. It always has, and it will again this time, in this technological revolution. We may indeed have entered what was once called, in another domain and in another time, the "permanent revolution."

These changes and the issues they raise are terribly important. But they will compound, not supplant, the issues we are wrestling with in terms of the fundamental values of journalism and their application to the challenges of our moment in history. And, as has been the case with most technological revolutions in the past, it will be blindingly obvious to many that big changes are afoot, and frustratingly indecipherable to most what the consequences and impact of these important changes will be. I do not dismiss the importance of the discussion, and I certainly do not underestimate the importance of the changes. On the contrary, I worry about them, and like most of you encourage discussion and thoughtfulness about them. But I also think that the best preparation for them is to be clear about the values that underlie our system of independent journalism and guide its interaction with public and private centers of power, and to apply those values to the truly big global stories staring us in the face.

In that task reporting skills, commitment, ingenuity, and bravery will get those stories to the citizens through one medium or another, new or old. Or, looked at from another angle: We don't know which new technologies will dominate. Some are here—We have PDA's and WAP's. More are on their way—new TFT's and oLED's² that may make foldable electronic sheets of paper feasible. And what about audio? Are you willing to bet me that five years from now you won't be able to personalize your own news offering verbally, by speaking into your mobile telephone lapel mike and have the articles you select read to you as you drive or walk?

Don't bet against that. Want to know why? Here's Damon Runyon telling you why:

“Some day, somewhere, a guy is going to come to you and show you a nice, brand-new deck of cards on which the seal is never broken, and this guy is going to offer to bet you that the jack of spades will jump out of this deck and squirt cider in your ear. But son, do not bet him, for as sure as you do you are going to get an ear full of cider.”

And what about corporate gigantism?

Here I part company with many of my friends.

I know big corporations can be soulless, greedy, and destructive. So can small corporations. So can news organizations and all manner of other organizations, including non-profits and religious groups.

But in a world where avenues of communication are multiplying, where censorship and control of news by the state in general is declining, and where technology is lowering the entry barriers to the communications field, I have trouble pointing to the single characteristic of size alone and saying that this is a mortal danger to good journalism. I think an understanding of the role of good journalism in our society and fidelity to its core values as a public trust will be more important to our future than trying to limit our news organizations exclusively to corporate homes that are modest in size.

Put it another way: Every CEO understands that they have a fiduciary obligation to their shareholders. In terms of journalism, I put more faith in corporate leadership that understands that they have an equally solemn fiduciary obligation arising from their ownership of a news organization; that they hold a public trust that is a vital component of a free society. I put more faith in that than I do in whether the corporation is big or small.

That said, what can we do to cement the value of the journalistic enterprise within these huge corporate empires where some of them are now located? What can we do to make sure this rare and fragile generator of illumination for the citizen and oxygen for the public arena remains healthy within the vast, temperature-controlled, caverns of the lumbering multinationals?

I have four suggestions. They are all relatively easy to do. They are all implementable by the decision of a single CEO acting imaginatively

and with foresight. The problem is they all presuppose the commitment to independent journalism that they are meant to further.

And they all have to do with process. But here I am on solid ground. John Dingell, that wily Congressman who has struck fear into the hearts of corporate giants, was once quoted as saying: “You decide the substance and I’ll decide the process, and I’ll beat you every time.”

- **Suggestion 1:** The CEO of any large company that contains a serious news organization should meet once a year, with other CEO’s of similar organizations and with other independent figures in the news field, to assess the health, independence, and status of his or her news organization.
- **Suggestion 2:** Each company that owns a news organization should designate a member of its board of directors to assume a special responsibility for oversight and protection of the independence and strength of that news organization. You all have audit committees, don’t you? You all have compensation committees, no? Many of you have lead outside directors. This value—the value of an independent press, in our country, in our world, in our culture—is infinitely greater, and requires and is worth an infinitely greater level of attention, than the values being protected by the Audit Committee and the Compensation Committee. It is a matter of the highest public trust. Why not reflect that at the highest level of corporate responsibility in your organization? To be the Independent Press Director on one of the major media conglomerate boards would be one of the most prestigious positions in our society. It is not a very hard step to take, and much that is good would flow from it.

Sometimes difficult choices would flow from it—and that is part of the point. If the values we are talking about today are present in a unit of the corporation you lead, then you are a custodian of that value. You may not have sought it, you may not even enjoy it. But you have it. I and millions of Americans and probably even your own children want those values preserved and kept alive, even if we chafe under their expression from time to time. Do this then—it is an institutional and procedural step to reflect the value of those values in relation to everything we strive to be at our best.

- **Suggestion 3:** Invite an annual outside review—call it an audit if you like—of the independence and vigor of your news function. Choose the reviewers among the best, the most skilled, the most independent in the world—the Ben Bradlees, the Robin MacNeils, the Anthony Sampsons, the Punch Sulzbergers,—there is no shortage. And commit yourself to publish that review. Shell and Dow and others are now publishing annual social and environmental reports to accompany their financial reports. Are you willing to invite the discipline of an independent audit on the health and independence of your news organization? What reason would you have not to? Are you afraid of what it might say? Is the subject not important enough? For many of us, that report will be more important than your annual financial report.
- **Suggestion 4:** Fund, jointly with your sister companies, an independent council to track, promote, examine, and defend the independent news function in America and in the world at large. Give it teeth, give it a good budget. What is a good budget? Probably \$5 million a year minimum. Your share of that would be lost in the rounding error of your annual expenditures, and it would be tax deductible. Make the grants multi-year. To select the first board and the first CEO, put together a nominating committee that is completely independent of your corporate structures and turn them loose. We have a National Academy of Science. We have National Endowments for . . . you name it, Arts, Democracy, Education, Humanities, and probably a dozen others I'm not familiar with. But we have no prestigious, national, institutionalized advocate for the independence and vitality of the most distinctive non-governmental tradition in our democracy. And if we are to have one, it must of course be created, sustained, and funded outside government.

I believe we are embarked now on by far the most fateful chapter in the drama of our self-stewardship on this planet. The consequences of our military endeavors, ethnic hatreds, destructive spasms and persistent spoliation of the biofilm in which we live can no longer be ignored as the unfortunate but tolerable corollaries of 'the pursuit of politics by other means,' or shrugged off as the waste byproducts of a dynamic and

productive economic system. For centuries we have been able to run from or ignore the more harmful results of the human experiment upon this planet. But there is no longer any place to run to. The weapons are vastly more destructive, almost unimaginably so. They and their electronic control systems are miniaturized and mobile, and they are getting into many more hands. And on this beautiful blue-green planet, entire ecosystems teeter, in ways we are only beginning to understand or measure, along the path of deterioration: first-growth forests; coral reef systems; water tables; the three great plains that support the largest grain-producing systems, among others.

This complicated and disorienting transition is daunting and not yet well understood in some of its dimensions. Because we are at peace and riding a wave of stupendous economic prosperity, we too often accept the categories of the previous moment in history rather than seek out the new ones. We squeeze our definition of political issues into the confines of four-year presidential terms. We cover fast disasters like the crash of the Concorde, the Kursk, or the flooding on the Indian subcontinent, but not the slow disasters like the falling of water tables or the development of cyberwar capacities. Who is building the hunter-killer computers? Who is selling Iraq centrifuges? Who is suffering because the first of the world's fisheries is collapsing?

The theater of new dangers and challenges is complicated and it is global. It is fascinating to some, numbing to others, discouraging to many. But, however daunting or unfathomable you may find it, remember that compared to other transitions humans have faced in the past, two things are fundamentally different: the stakes this time are dramatically higher; and believe it or not, with all our shortcomings and ignorance we know more about the transition we must accomplish this time than most generations in the past have known about the changes and dilemmas they faced.

I am an unreconstructed creature of the public space, the shared arena where we forge our values and in applying them where we write our destiny and reveal through the history of our actions what we really care about. And I believe that the most critical decisions about our future, the decisions or failures to act that shape the world our children will inherit, will be made in the public arena, in our capacity as citizens. I do not believe they are preordained by fate. I do not believe they will

be determined by forces over which we have no control. I certainly do not believe that they will be made by the market. I believe the most important responsibilities will be assumed or abdicated by us in our capacity as citizens. And I believe that as citizens we will be deeply, perhaps decisively, influenced by the quality of news available to us regardless of the medium by which this news is accessed. And therefore, I believe we must have a strong, powerful, luminously independent news function, to provide oxygen for the citizen, to allow the citizen to breathe and reflect and act, and to measure and challenge those who would claim the right to steer the frail vessel in which we must make the difficult crossing before us.

Is our most important task to model ourselves on the journalistic giants of the past fifty years, who acquitted themselves so well in the discharge of the responsibilities they faced?

I believe it is proper to ask that question, and to ask: Can we keep alive the journalistic values that we have inherited? Can we live up to the high standards of those who have applied those values before us? But I believe the fullest answer to those questions is less likely to be found in debating incessantly exactly what those values were, and to what degree and in what respects they are thriving or attenuating. I think the answers are more likely to be found in the hard work of applying those values in practice to the distinctive contemporary tasks we face. That is how we will be judged by those who two decades from now write the history of the press today. That is how we should be judged. That is how we shall be judged—by how well we apply to the challenges and circumstances of our own moment the values and traditions we have received and learned to hold dear from those who have gone before and who, in the crucible of their own crises, learned to apply them to their own circumstances.

Shall we seek to duplicate the feats of those in our profession who have gone before?

No.

The answer lies in a Chinese proverb: “Do not follow in the footsteps of the men of old. Seek instead what they sought.”

The fundamental things apply.

As time goes by.

Notes

1. Barton Gellman, "Deathwatch: The Global Response to AIDS in Africa," *Washington Post*, 5 July 2000, A1.
2. PDA: Personal Digital Assistant; WAP: Wireless Application Protocol; TFT: Thin Film Transistor; oLED: Organic Light Emitting Device.

**THE EVOLUTION OF
JOURNALISM IN A
CHANGING MARKET
ECOLOGY**

The Evolution of Journalism in a Changing Market Ecology

Executive Summary

by David Bollier

The familiar world of mainstream journalism is changing irrevocably as a crush of new electronic technologies, mutating market structures, and shifting professional norms force the news business to reinvent itself on the fly. These changes are causing many editors and publishers to worry that the fiercely competitive marketplace is jeopardizing the core values of journalism. They also worry that corporate owners of news enterprises do not really understand the culture of journalism and how it contributes to business success and therefore are not interested in exploring institutional reforms that might bolster high journalistic standards.

These issues were the focus of discussion by a gathering of twenty-four of the nation's top editors, publishers, news producers, academics, and media executives held in Aspen, Colorado, from August 23-25, 2000. Convened by the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, the conference was the fourth in a series of annual meetings to take stock of the unprecedented challenges facing journalism today.

Future historians may regard these times as a kind of Cambrian era in the evolution of electronic media—a period of great ferment in market structures, digital technologies, and professional practices that persisted for a disquietingly long period of time. The Darwinian analogy seems apt. As the Internet gives rise to a new set of news organizations and faux-journalists; as new technologies blur the lines between journalism and entertainment; and as the “fitness landscape” for commercial journalism changes, spawning new business models and spurring new rounds of experimentation; the portrait that emerges is one of competitive adaptation and evolutionary change.

The sheer pace of change and tumult is one reason that journalism may need to redefine its core values and reassert its identity. With so many voices competing for people's attention these days, it is important

that journalism differentiate itself from other forms of information, especially entertainment and marketing.

This is imperative not only for the integrity and credibility of journalism but for the future of our democracy. Good journalism, it has been said, is the “oxygen” for a democratic culture. While it can be elusive to try to define “quality journalism,” there is a distinct sense that it means putting something on the line—resources, physical safety, moral authority, reputation—to amass the facts and present them in an artful, compelling way.

But this task is becoming harder as news and entertainment vie for the same audiences, and as once-distinct markets and genres start to blur. The broader, entertainment-dominated marketplace tends to reward flashy marketing and tabloid sensibilities, while the tried-and-true virtues of quality journalism do not necessarily yield the same financial results, at least over the short term.

If the economic changes roiling the journalism business are more or less inexorable—inescapable structural trends that are only likely to intensify—the challenge facing journalists may become how best to *adapt*. An editor can bemoan the new competition and futilely resist change, or he can find ingenious new ways to compete. Several practice strategies were suggested for promoting quality journalism in the new marketplace:

- Arrange for the CEOs of media companies to meet once a year
- Assign a member of each media company’s board of directors to oversee the independence and strength of its news organization, and instigate an annual audit of the independence and vigor of its journalism
- Improve internal communications within news operations
- Give readers a voice within the news operation

While reputable news organizations have regained some measure of confidence that the Internet will not be soon destroying their business models, competitive pressures on newsrooms remain fierce. In a market ecology that is changing so rapidly, the best hope may lie in news organizations becoming supremely alert and flexible—not just to shifts in technology and market competition but also in the social connections and moral credibility that sustain any business enterprise.

The Evolution of Journalism in a Changing Market Ecology

**The Report
by David Bollier**

It is not entirely clear when the new era of journalism began—with the bizarre O.J. Simpson chase on Los Angeles freeways, the rise of Matt Drudge, the gradual onset of the 24/7 news cycle, or the media consolidation triggered by the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The more relevant point may be that the familiar world of mainstream journalism has changed irrevocably. A crush of new electronic technologies, mutating market structures, and shifting professional norms are forcing the news business to reinvent itself on the fly. Some segments of the profession are reeling even as others are deftly capitalizing on emerging opportunities.

It is natural, in such a period of tumult, to reflect about the future of journalism. Many editors and publishers wonder, for example, whether the core values of journalism can survive intact in today's fiercely competitive marketplace. They also wonder, whether the corporate owners of news enterprises will ever try to understand the culture of journalism and how it contributes to business success. And even if a new rapprochement between the business and journalism sides can occur, it is unclear what specific institutional reforms could help bolster high journalistic standards.

These are among the issues addressed by a gathering of twenty-four of the nation's top editors, publishers, news producers, academics, and media executives held in Aspen, Colorado, August 23-25, 2000. Convened by the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, the conference was the fourth in a series of annual meetings designed to take stock of the unprecedented challenges facing journalism today.

Happily, this conference generated a number of intriguing new proposals for bolstering quality journalism. The more provocative ideas seek to expose top corporate executives and board members to the day-

to-day practices and values of journalism. Why not arrange for CEOs of media companies to meet every year to assess the journalistic performance of their respective enterprises? Why not assign a member of a company's board of directors to monitor the strength of its news operations? Why not instigate an annual outside audit of the independence and vigor of a news organization's journalism? These and other specific suggestions were among the issues explored at the conference.

Jim Lehrer, executive editor and anchor of *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, moderated the sessions, skillfully steering discussion and eliciting key points. And David Bollier, an independent journalist, served as rapporteur, distilling the essential points of discussion into the report that follows.

The Fate of “Journalistic DNA” in the New Information Ecology

Future historians may regard these times as a kind of Cambrian era in the evolution of electronic media—a period of great ferment in market structures, digital technologies, and professional practices that persisted for a disquietingly long period of time. The Darwinian analogy seems apt. As the Internet gives rise to a new set of news organizations and faux-journalists; as new technologies blur the lines between journalism and entertainment; as the “fitness landscape” for commercial journalism changes, spawning new business models and spurring new rounds of experimentation; the portrait that emerges is one of competitive adaptation and evolutionary change. In classic Darwinian terms, a rich variety of journalistic “organisms” are struggling to adapt to the new information ecology.

Serious journalism has adhered to certain basic principles for so long—accuracy, fairness, independence from commercial and political pressures, for example—that they constitute a kind of “journalistic DNA.” A core genetic code shared by most of the profession has resulted in a broad consensus about newsgathering practices, editorial judgments, and ethical values. A great many journalists today worry that the new electronic marketplace threatens the profession's DNA with extinction. Others feel confident that the profession's core values are hardy and resilient enough to transform themselves in the new milieu.

Despite the growing difficulties of financing quality journalism, Peter Goldmark, Jr., chairman and CEO of the *International Herald Tribune*, believes that the profession's ethical gyroscope is more powerful than is generally realized. "What are professions?" Goldmark asked. "They have codes. Each has its own DNA. They have a peer dynamic. They have values." Surprisingly, Goldmark said, even in the wake of some embarrassing journalistic episodes, "the DNA of professional journalism is more 'together' and consistent than that of most other professions in our society, most of which are in various degrees of disarray."

This paradox—a strong professional ethic that co-exists with great anxiety about the future—might be traced to the convergence of once-distinct media markets. To extend the analogy, the "journalistic DNA" has diffused into a larger gene pool. At one time journalism operated in a more protected space, somewhat insulated from market pressures by family ownership and federal limits on the sale and ownership of broadcast properties.

Now, as corporations buy, sell, and merge media properties with greater frequency, many news operations have become small fiefdoms in large business empires. The culture of journalism has become folded into a larger universe of entertainment media managed by business executives who really do not understand, or perhaps even care about, journalism as a professional calling or democratic necessity. "The new owners are buying delivery systems and promotional platforms, and all of a sudden they find that they're stuck with this journalistic operation," explained Rick Kaplan, president of Cable News Network U.S. at the time of this conference. (Kaplan is now the Visiting Lombard Lecturer at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.)

A striking result of such changes is that the "DNA of journalism" is becoming more strongly infused with marketplace values. As reporters and editors fret about their stock holdings in the company, through 401k plans and other incentives; newsrooms have become more "yup-pified," in the words of one conference participant. This in turn affects how the news product is imagined and crafted. Editors are being asked to keep a keen eye on both the journalism—and its marketability. "I'm the walking embodiment of the breakdown between church and state, since I run both sides of *Newsweek*, editorial and business," said Richard Smith, chairman and editor-in-chief of *Newsweek*. "But my roots,

heart, and soul are entirely in editorial, and I'm concerned that the erosion of the traditional barrier has meant that too many line editors, reporters, writers, and producers spend too much time thinking about where the business is going."

The traditions of journalism are also being diluted by the new genres of news, information, and commentary made possible by media abundance, particularly through the Internet. People who may not have much commitment to traditional journalistic values are creating the new genres—and it shows. "Some Internet companies have no rules about what information and fairness are, and they almost don't care about accuracy for the most part," said Rick Kaplan. Besides giving self-styled journalists, celebrities, and other irregulars their own idiosyncratic platforms, the Internet has also enabled relative newcomers like MSNBC on the Internet and *Slate* to enter the marketplace. New publics are also arising to support hybrids such as *Salon*, which combine the serious reporting and interpretation of *The New York Times* with the frisky playfulness of the *New York Post*.

In short, the business and cultural ecology for journalism is becoming far more diversified, market-driven, and unpredictable. Under the circumstances, a reconsideration of what it means to be a serious journalist seems an entirely appropriate, indeed, an urgent task.

Defining the Core Values of Journalism

The sheer proliferation of information outlets is one reason that journalism may need to redefine its core values and reassert its identity. "In this confusion of voices that comes from the ether these days, people are not sure about the reliability of information they are getting," said Bill Kovach, chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists. "You can go on a cable talk show and shout across the table at your companion, and viewers have no way of knowing whether they can trust that information or not. If we're going to live in a world of supply and demand—and I'm certain that we are—then it's incumbent upon journalists to become much more transparent about who they are and how they do their work, in order to help create a consumer demand that says, 'Yes, this is what we need.'"

Differentiating quality journalism from mere “information product” is not just a matter of professional pride or marketing. Good journalism, it has been said, is the “oxygen” for a democratic culture. “Journalism stands for the notion that political sovereignty is not dead—that people can have a governing role in their lives and in the world around them,” said Jay Rosen, professor and chair of the Journalism Department at New York University. “The most successful acts of journalism persuade people to keep in touch with a wider world than they ordinarily would—to help them feel themselves to be participants in the public arena. Whatever does that is, to me, quality journalism.”

For Rosen, “Journalism is about the rule of publics, not just the reign of audiences. Assuring consumer sovereignty in the media marketplace is not enough to solve environmental problems or bring legitimacy to global media empires. Journalism is the one art, housed within a media company, that is *exclusively* about the world of publics and not just audiences.”

At some level, the journalism profession understands this fact. That is why various journalistic bodies take great pains every few years to clarify the profession’s values and standards. After three years of inquiry, for example, the Committee of Concerned Journalists recently identified nine distinct principles that ought to govern journalism. The American Society of Newspaper Editors has conducted similar discussions to articulate the core values that should animate their work.

Reasserting the profession’s core values “is a very important process that helps us engage the ‘unwashed’ business people and new media,” said Gerald M. Levin, chairman and CEO of Time Warner at the time of this conference. (A few months later, he became CEO of AOL Time Warner.) The problem, many conference participants agreed, is that some powerful media executives oversee important news operations but do not seem especially familiar with, or even interested in, journalism.

“If we’re going to clone this journalistic DNA in executives who don’t have it,” said Eugene Patterson, the former chairman and CEO of the *St. Petersburg Times* and former president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, “we have to *tell* them what a core value is. I don’t know how we can get through to business executives who don’t have a clue unless we tell them.” Important core values, he said, include accuracy in reporting, the separation of fact from opinion, fairness in coverage, and avoiding conflicts of interests.

But will proselytizing core values have any discernible effects on media executives who are new to journalism or indifferent to it? “Do you really think you’re going to talk these folks into it?” asked Peter Goldmark. He believes that restating core values may be less important than trying to *apply* those values in new ways. “You [journalists] have got your DNA. The question is, What are you going to do with it?”

Geneva Overholser, a former ombudsman for *The Washington Post* and now a syndicated columnist for The Washington Post Writers Group, agreed: “So many of these conversations that we have in this profession are so sterile by now. Talk about core values is so self-referential. While I’ve led these conversations, they alone aren’t going to get us anywhere.” Overholser believes the most important priority is “finding new ways to reach out to the public and to report on ourselves more fully so that the public is better aware of what’s happening to the media. Thus we might help focus a consumer demand for good journalism—the most promising partnership for us.”

This sort of challenge is far more bracing for journalism than simply defending core values. As Professor Jay Rosen explained, journalism’s sense of itself has historically stemmed from defending its integrity, not advancing an agenda. The profession asserts its identity by warding off external threats to its values, whether from business people who would invade the newsroom, government officials who would manipulate the news, or advertisers who would corrupt editorial independence. Given this history, professional journalists are wary about undertaking proactive campaigns to “project their values forward into new territory and undertake rhetorical and persuasive tasks,” said Rosen. “There is very little in the training, culture, and traditions of the American press that is active in this way.” This may help explain the feelings of disorientation that many segments of journalism are experiencing today.

What is “Quality Journalism”?

If journalism is going to reassert its identity and standards in the face of the new media onslaught, then it may be useful to move beyond restatements of core values, and try to define what exactly “quality journalism” ought to consist of. Can this elusive essence be defined? Or is it

destined to be vague, explicable only through the subjectivism that Justice Potter Stewart reserved for pornography—“I know it when I see it”?

Conference participants agreed that some attributes of quality journalism remain constant, no matter the era or technology. Clearly, at the most basic level, quality journalism must be accurate and fair. It must show skill in the use of language and in the telling of a story. While some of the best journalism deals with serious matters of politics and world affairs, quality journalism does not necessarily mean sobriety of tone or an aversion to human interests.

“I think quality journalism connects with people in an emotional way,” said Walter Isaacson, managing editor of *Time* magazine at the time of this conference and now editorial director of Time Inc.. “It can teach them a lesson, tell them a tale, and make them feel more like public citizens. This can be as true of *People* magazine as of journalism about public affairs.” Quality journalism may be most distinguished from more workaday reportage by the emotional engagement and moral authority that a journalist brings to a story.

The best journalism also evinces risk-taking of some sort. It conveys a sense that the journalist, and perhaps her editors and publisher, had to put something on the line—resources, physical safety, moral authority—to amass the facts and present them in a artful, compelling way. “Quality journalism is often an exceptional act of truth-telling that takes courage and is rendered against pressure of one kind or another,” said Professor Rosen.

This leitmotif is certainly seen in the great stories of the past generation—coverage of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the Pentagon Papers. In these stories, news organizations dared to ferret out important stories that they knew would be controversial. Such landmarks in journalism remind us of a cardinal attribute of quality journalism, said David Talbot, editor-in-chief of the online magazine, *Salon*—“the willingness to cut against the grain and challenge conventional wisdom.”

The courage to take risks is a perennial challenge for journalism because there are always pressures to treat certain topics with great deference. Today, for example, the media is failing to ask some fundamental questions about its value and effectiveness of the government’s war against drugs, Talbot argued. Quality journalism not only requires the

audacity to ask such questions, but the institutional willingness to invest in stories that may not pan out. “News staffs need to know that it is not necessarily a failure if a story does not work out,” said Rick Kaplan.

Relevance and taste are two other important attributes of quality journalism.

Does a story matter to the general public? And is it presented in a way that respects the reader/viewer and the people covered?

While many stories may seem only remotely relevant to the average reader, quality journalism strives to make stories interesting and compelling. This does not mean “spinach journalism”—force-feeding readers with something that is “good for them.” It means communicating important facts and analysis in an emotionally engaging way. At the same time, quality journalism respects the irrelevance of certain facts— gratuitous personal details and rumors, for example— by omitting them.

“One measure of quality journalism,” said Geneva Overholser, the syndicated columnist, “is a thoughtful consideration of its effect. This does not mean that we’re not willing to piss people off,” she hastened to add. “But we should care about whether we’re pissing people off in the interest of the public good, or merely because we want to strut our stuff.” This may be why some readers are bothered by Maureen Dowd’s columns, speculated Overholser. As a columnist, Dowd may not have an obligation to be fair or balanced. Still, it isn’t always clear that her brilliantly snarky characterizations of politicians in any way serve the public good.

It is also worth noting that the American people may have better taste and discernment than media companies give them credit, said a number of conference participants. “If I asked a group of educated young people, ‘Who gets higher ratings—Jim Lehrer or Larry King?’ nine out of ten of them would answer ‘Larry King;’” said Jay Rosen of New York University. “And it’s factually untrue. It’s not even close, in terms of raw numbers. This is really interesting, because it means that there is a cultural bias towards assuming the worst about the audience. And the more educated somebody is, the more likely they are to make this error. Young people have assimilated these attitudes without a lot of empirical evidence or data, and assume that undercutting quality is the way to profit and the way to succeed. It simply isn’t true.”

In like fashion, only a year or two ago, many people feared that the Matt Drudges and tabloid news shows would drive out solid, reputable

reporting. “That has not happened,” said Walter Isaacson of *Time* magazine. This suggests that, “we shouldn’t be so condescending about what readers and users want,” he said. “When people have choices, good sources drive out bad; bad sources don’t drive out good.” The lapses in journalistic values that have affected ABC, the Hearst Corporation, and the *Los Angeles Times* over the past year or two,¹ said Isaacson, have also undercut shareholder values at those companies, making them less economically valuable. “That’s a good sign,” he said, “because it shows that if we uphold our journalistic values, we’re doing good not only by our profession but for our corporations.”

These various definitions of “quality journalism” are useful, agreed Peter Goldmark of the *International Herald Tribune*. But they may not be enough to save the human race. In his keynote address, which is included in this volume, and during the conference discussion, he cited the unprecedented environmental and terrorist threats to human survival—the depletion of the earth’s ozone layer, the worsening of global warming, possible nerve gas attacks in subway systems, among other realistic dangers.

“This is the first time in human history that we, as a race of animals loose on this planet, face very serious threats to our survival,” said Goldmark. “It is the first time that forces that we have helped engender can change forever how the ecology of this planet operates, and with it the continued prospects of life. That’s never been true in the history of the human adventure. That’s big. And I think our immediate past traditions in journalism are not going to lead us to see it.”

For journalists, said Jim Lehrer of *The NewsHour*, the problem might be stated as follows: “How do we cover a story that doesn’t have an event—a big explosion or terrorist attack on a subway—but is creeping, creeping, creeping?” Rick Kaplan responded, “CNN has a great deal of resources dedicated to covering the environment, almost to no effect. Doesn’t the public have a responsibility here, at some point, to react? What if they don’t? Do we just keep on with our coverage?”

But Goldmark argued that most news coverage of the environment is “benign, fairly bland, instructional coverage” that does not truly grapple with the long-term issues or their political dynamics. In any case, said Goldmark, the public’s response to environment news coverage “will not be a curve, but a step function”—that is, reactions will not be a simple linear progression but a sudden change.

The New Economic Pressures on Quality Journalism

Previous reports of the Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society have explored the growing economic pressures on quality journalism. Briefly, new technologies—the Internet, cable television networks, satellite networks, and others—have fed the competition for advertisers and viewers/readers. As news and entertainment vie for the same audiences, once-distinct markets and genres have blurred. As entertainment criteria, flashy marketing and tabloid sensibilities flourish; the invisible guild of journalism has more difficulty protecting its core values. This is a fundamental structural change in the profession.

For John Dotson, publisher of the *Akron Beacon Journal*, financial markets represent one of the most potent threats to the core values of journalism. “I don’t see how we can continue to talk about the kinds of reporting that traditionally have been part of newspapers and television as long as we are forced to reduce the resources to produce that kind of journalism,” said Dotson. The financial expectations of investors are steadily making it more difficult for conscientious editors and reporters to produce high-quality work, he contended. “On the one hand, media executives are saying, ‘Journalistic values are important,’ and yet they’re also saying, ‘But bring me some increase in profit margin no matter how you have to do it.’”

But two leading executives of media corporations—Gerald Levin, former chairman and chief executive officer of Time Warner and now chief executive officer of AOL Time Warner, and Robert Decherd, chairman, president, and CEO of Belo Corp.—dispute the idea that Wall Street is to blame for journalism’s problems. “Newspapers clearly are going to have a challenge in their core business, in terms of growing at the rates that will be rewarded on a purely investment basis,” said Decherd. “But so what? That is not unique to this business, and it is the application of some fairly predictable, easily understood economic principles... There isn’t anything insidious about this trend. I can find a place in this big market where quality creates some kind of an advantage.”

Levin, for his part, also questioned the argument that Wall Street is the problem: “The market has a fair amount of integrity to it. That is, it holds people’s feet to the fire and makes them deliver on their promises. That’s normally how you define integrity. I do think it is a rational

market.” Levin also questioned the conventional wisdom that Wall Street emphasizes quarterly results over long-term performance. “It really gets back to us [managers], because as long as we deliver overall, we can allocate resources. If one of your businesses goes south unexpectedly, you can make it up somewhere else, so long as you deliver on the total bottom line. It’s a question of how you’re allocating resources.”

Steve Rattner, managing principal of the Quadrangle Group, LLC, also believes the fabled Wall Street obsession with quarterly performance is “a little bit of a straw man.” Yes, he conceded, there is a fundamental tension between “the for-profit model that exists in the media world today” and the aspirations of editors and reporters to pursue costly, high-quality stories. But Rattner believes that “Wall Street, broadly construed, would be equally happy with long-term results [as it would with short-term results], but they have to be results. I think quarterly performance is an issue, but I need to stipulate that I would be happy to invest in something where I thought that the company would be worth a lot of money in, say, five years.”

Quality Journalism as a Management Issue

If the economic changes roiling the journalism business are more or less inexorable—inescapable structural trends that are only likely to intensify—the challenge facing journalists may become how best to *adapt*. An editor can bemoan the new competition and futilely resist change, or he can find ingenious new ways to compete. “The challenge,” said Richard Smith, chairman and editor-in-chief of *Newsweek*, “is how, with the resources available, we can live up to the things that a lot of us would like to see in our news coverage. We can’t shout back the tide of business change.”

Robert Dechard of Belo Corp., for one, is excited about finding new business models to support quality journalism. He likens it to re-engineering the “journalistic DNA” to adapt to the evolving business environment. “Yes, there are people who are uncomfortable talking about the business of journalism. But my very strong belief is: If you want to be there at the finish line, you better change the way you think about journalism and leave behind all of the constraints that are natural byproducts of how

we have thought about journalism traditionally. We're running as fast as we can to expand our business into new partnerships and iterations that would have been considered heretical ten years ago."

The future of quality journalism, Decherd argues, lies with finding a business model that will sustain it. "To think that we are going to shame anybody into a better pattern of corporate behavior is a ridiculous idea," he said.

Seen from this perspective, the pursuit of quality journalism becomes a matter of corporate and editorial leadership. It is a matter of seizing new opportunities as they arise in shifting media markets and shrewdly deploying available resources. It becomes perilous to regard journalistic traditions as inviolate, or to regard "the competition" simply as the other programs at the same viewing hour. *Everything* is in flux, and new competition is arriving from all directions. Now that the news cycle is almost continuous and available on the Internet on demand, news is becoming something of a commodity. Entertainment values are becoming ubiquitous and marketing is becoming a key competitive factor.

Changes of this magnitude suggest that some basic definitions of journalism may have to change, said Bill Kovach, chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists. "The business that journalists have to be in is *meaning*, not news. That's how you will differentiate yourself. Because the news is going to break all day, every day."

If news is becoming a commodity, a fundamental question is whether quality journalism can remain profitable, relative to other market opportunities. Can a news organization *make money* from top-flight news reporting and interpretation—or are the pseudo-journalism alternatives (tabloid coverage, shouting pundits, "info-tainment") simply too attractive financially?

The lack of empirical data on this question shocked journalism professor Jay Rosen. "There's very little data on whether quality sells. This is amazing to me. You would think there would be reams and reams of data on this issue." Rosen speculated that there might be non-economic reasons for the failure of media executives to document the long-term commercial value of quality journalism. Perhaps executives are wary of surrendering too much editorial control to journalists, said Rosen, even if the resulting news quality eventually generated value for the bottom line.

National Public Radio and the public television system are both examples of quality creating their own distinctive markets, said Professor Rosen. All sorts of investors and companies are eager to develop partnerships with public radio and television as a way to exploit their “brand value.” What this suggests, said Rosen, is that “not all future ways to profit from the media are necessarily going to be produced by the standard business practices of the media.” Over the course of years, public radio and television relied upon non-commercial, public service-oriented broadcasting to build up institutions of great value. The irony, Rosen noted, is that this value accrued through a process that conventional media would not know how to develop itself.

There is some provisional evidence emerging, however, that quality news tends to be more profitable over the long term. The Pew Charitable Trust’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, directed by Tom Rosenstiel, has been studying the quality of local television news and its relation to ratings and station profitability. The Project now has three years of data based on studying 61 television stations in 20 cities. According to Bill Kovach, who has seen some of the study results, 63 percent of the stations with ‘A’ grades in quality had rising ratings and the highest ratings for their local market. (Local television news directors established the criteria for quality for the Project on Excellence in Journalism.)

The latest local TV news survey by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (published in the November/December 2000 issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review*) found that in eight cities studied, only one station (out of 28) with an ‘A’ rating failed to add to its lead-in audience. This suggests that quality newscasts at least maintain if not build the size of audiences. In Atlanta, WXIA earned an ‘A’ for quality and beat its lead-in audience rating by 33 percent, according to the survey. In Denver, KUSA put on the best broadcast in town and beat its lead-in by an average of 21 percent. In Phoenix, KTVK had the best 6 p.m. newscast in the market, the best ratings, and more viewers than the show that preceded it.

By contrast, only two stations with quality ratings of ‘C’ or lower were succeeding in adding to their lead-in, according to the survey. These empirical results suggest that quality is not only holding audience, said Bill Kovach, it is attracting audience from the low-quality stations:

“There is beginning to be some hard empirical evidence that quality in local television can pay off.”

The leadership of KGUN-TV in Tucson, Arizona, offers an excellent glimpse of how a commitment to quality builds audience goodwill, said Kovach: “The news director drafted a Viewer’s Bill of Rights, which the station uses to promote its local news team.” The document enumerates specific standards that viewers should expect from the KGUN news broadcast, said Kovach, and even outlines specific procedures for holding the station accountable. The station is now moving into first place in its ratings in the local area, he said.

Robert Decherd cited his company’s experience in starting a 10 p.m. newscast on its second station in Seattle-Tacoma using the resources of its principal Seattle-Tacoma station, KING-TV: “The newscast is an *extremely* cost-efficient extension of our existing franchise, and it has created more audience flow for us, not to mention cross-promotion and co-branding.” The lesson that Decherd takes from starting the newscast is the value of cultivating durable relationships with viewers through quality. “By deciding you’re going to take the long view and invest in quality, you can produce some very attractive financial outcomes while achieving very high journalistic standards,” said Decherd.

Even if corporate managers believe that higher-quality news can generate higher profits, they may face skepticism from a surprising source: the newsroom itself. The marketplace ethos has become so pervasive that reporters and editors are only too aware of the business implications of their journalism. Does it sell more product? Does it boost ratings? How will it affect my company’s stock performance? Young journalists in particular are often convinced that cutting quality and boosting sensationalism is the best way to succeed in the news business—a conviction too often fortified by the success of Rupert Murdoch and the industry’s fealty to overnight ratings.

“In the old days,” said David Talbot of *Salon*, “newspapers had to do surveys about how many people went to the jump page on a story. Now we can track how many readers go to page two on one of our stories. Before our recent layoffs, it used to be a joke at *Salon* that if an editor’s hits were down, people would say, ‘Your hits are down—you’re out of here.’” (Talbot added, amidst laughter, that that was not the criteria used in *Salon*’s layoffs in August 2000.)

Talbot conceded that there is a “brutal kind of black-and-white quality” to overnight ratings that he, as editor-in-chief, has sought to mitigate. When *Salon* found that its coverage of the CBS show, *Survivor*, was drawing its heaviest web traffic, for example, Talbot sent his staff a memo reminding them of the importance of hard-hitting stories of genuine public importance—such as a firsthand piece that *Salon* ran about AIDS in Swaziland. “I didn’t want the staff to be so obsessive about the overnight ratings,” said Talbot. “We printed the AIDS story on the cover—and it was the number one piece for the day, in terms of reader traffic. That was very heartening to me.”

Practical Strategies to Promote Quality Journalism

For Peter Goldmark, who called attention to some of the more fearsome threats to the earth and civilized life, the key question is whether journalism can grapple intelligently with the issues facing mankind. Or will the media focus obsessively on epiphenomena and trivia? “What can we do to make sure this rare and fragile generator of illumination for the citizen and oxygen for the public arena, [journalism,] remains healthy within the vast, temperature-controlled caverns of the lumbering multinationals?” asked Goldmark. He offered four concrete suggestions:

1. Arrange for the CEOs of media companies to meet once a year. The purpose of such a gathering, said Goldmark, would be to assess the health, independence, and status of serious news organizations, along with independent figures in the news field.

There was wide agreement that CEOs have a singular role in setting the ethical tone for a corporate culture, and that anything that helps a busy CEO focus on the quality of journalism within a large media empire is valuable. With so many media acquisitions occurring, it would be valuable for the CEOs with no background in journalism to learn more about the profession’s practices and values. Ignorance of these things, after all, can have serious business consequences, as recent examples have shown.

There was skepticism about how an annual gathering of this sort might be organized, however. “I actually like this idea,” said Robert Decherd, “This is a conversation that chief executive officers in our industries don’t typically have. *That* is the problem. But you have to decide, going in, what the purpose of the discussion is,” he said, so that it does not simply become another opportunity to discuss financial, regulatory, or policy issues.

Gerald Levin concurred that the idea was a good one, but believes that the sponsorship of such a gathering is critical: “Who is the convening authority that will get CEOs to come to the meeting?” Levin could think of only three forums that would have sufficient standing to attract top media CEOs: Herbert Allen’s annual Sun Valley conference, Teddy Forstmann’s annual meetings in Aspen, Colorado, and the Aspen Institute’s Communications and Society Program.

2. Assign a member of each media company’s board of directors to oversee the independence and strength of its news organization. Just as corporations have special board committees to oversee executive compensation and financial audits, so it would be valuable for media companies to assign a board member to watch over the organization’s journalism, said Goldmark. “An independent press is a matter of the highest public trust. Why not reflect that at the highest level of corporation responsibility in your organization?” he asked. Goldmark conceded that difficult choices would sometimes flow from this new oversight—but that is part of the point. Creating an institutional and procedural commitment to independent journalism is a way to bring competing corporate priorities into a better balance.

Whether or not a specific board member is assigned this duty, Decherd believes that “boards of directors in our world need to have *on* the board—not just attending, but on the board—a person (or persons) who understands and cares about the journalistic dimension of the business. Just having them there to assert their point of view, to use a vocabulary that the non-journalist is not accustomed to hearing, much less understanding, is truly valuable.” The board member serving this role need not be a journalist, noted Gerald Levin. What’s more critical is that this person have great moral authority and a larger perspective—“somebody who is outside the company and not necessarily a professional in the business.” Ultimately, he said, “these are value questions, and maybe that ought to be a criteria for people on the board.”

This idea encountered a number of objections, however. A practical problem is whether a working journalist could serve on another company's board of directors without triggering a conflict of interest. In addition, the pool of truly qualified people available to serve in this capacity is quite limited. Other conference participants worried that a board member assigned this role would be too subjective in making his or her judgments, and that leadership for quality journalism ought to be vested with the CEO in any case.

3. Instigate an annual audit of the independence and vigor of journalism within the media company. Expanding upon the idea of the preceding suggestion, Goldmark proposed that media companies sponsor an annual outside review of their journalism. "Choose the reviewers among the best, the most skilled, the most independent in the world—the Ben Bradlees, the Robin MacNeils, the Anthony Sampsons, the Punch Sulzbergers, there is no shortage—and commit yourself to publish that review," urged Goldmark.

Goldmark pointed out that Shell and Dow are among the companies that now publish annual social and environmental audits to accompany their financial reports. "Are you willing to invite the discipline of an independent audit on the health and independence of your news organization?" asked Goldmark. "What reason would you have not to? Are you afraid of what it might say? Is the subject not important enough?"

One of the most valuable impacts of such an audit committee, said Richard Smith of *Newsweek*, would be its chilling effect—its ability to highlight the importance of journalistic values in the face of corporate decisions that might otherwise undermine them. But David Talbot of *Salon* wonders if an audit committee is gratuitous: "By the time a discussion about journalism comes before the board, in my experience, the barn is already burning. What you need is someone in the trenches, day to day, getting feedback from readers and making sure that ethical and other issues are being brought up internally."

Gerald Levin said that he recently created a "values committee" at Time Warner that is co-equal with the finance committee and charged with articulating the company's values, including its journalistic independence. But he conceded that this audit committee at the board level is no substitute for a more operational, day-to-day auditing of journalistic practices, of the sort that now occurs at CNN.

The problem with a board audit committee, said Robert Decherd, is that it will not have teeth. “It is going to depend upon the individual company’s leadership at the board and CEO level, and its collective sense of what’s valuable to that company.” Financial audit committees are required by the Securities and Exchange Commission, Decherd noted, and have highly specific rules. But a journalistic audit committee will make far more subjective judgments without the law to enforce its findings.

4. Fund an independent council to track, promote, examine, and defend the “independent news function” in America and in the world at large. “We have a National Academy of Science,” said Goldmark, “and National Endowments for, you name it—arts, democracy, education, humanities, and probably a dozen others I’m not familiar with. But we have no prestigious national, institutionalized advocate for the independence and vitality of the most distinctive non-governmental tradition in our democracy.” Goldmark proposed the creation of a privately financed council with a budget of at least five million dollars a year to give multi-year grants and sponsor programs that would promote the vitality of journalism.

Perhaps because this idea was once tried—and failed—in the form of the National News Council, there was little discussion about this idea. Certainly one impediment has been the reticence of major news organizations to subject their work to the scrutiny of an independent body of outsiders.

Moving beyond Peter Goldmark’s suggestions, conference participants offered a number of other worthwhile proposals for helping improve the quality of mainstream journalism.

5. Improving internal communications within news operations. A common denominator of many of the ideas mentioned above is improving internal communications, particularly between the business and journalistic sides, and between the entire enterprise and readers/viewers.

There are perils when the business and journalistic sides of a news operation are not talking with each other, said Paula Madison, vice president and news director of WNBC in New York (now president and general manager of KNBC in Los Angeles), citing the *Los Angeles Times*’ handling of the Staples Center advertising supplement. That episode, in

fact, was one reason that the head of the NBC television station division objected to a proposal to make executive producers of interactive editorial content report to general sales managers, Madison said. "Discussions don't go on very often between management and employees about journalism, or even about the values of journalism," Madison said. She noted that many journalists tend to be more interested in breaking a great story and in advancing their careers than in addressing the quality or ethics of journalism.

"There is not a newsroom in this country that doesn't face all these issues, no matter how wise their management is," said Merrill Brown, editor-in-chief of MSNBC on the Internet. "We shouldn't be naïve about it." In an attempt to reach down to the operational levels of CNN, Gerald Levin meets every month in Atlanta with all parts of the newsroom. The kind of internal dialogue that is generated on such occasions, said Richard Smith of *Newsweek*, "is the most effective way to educate CEOs who may not have come out of the journalistic tradition, and to help them balance the needs of our audiences and our desire for public service with the demands of the bottom line."

6. Giving readers a voice within the news operation. Many conference participants stressed the need to make journalistic decision-making more transparent to the public, so that news enterprises could cultivate greater trust among the people.

"All media companies depend upon a very mysterious social thing called trust," said Professor Jay Rosen. "Trust is actually very intricate and difficult to understand. When we reduce trust to 'credibility,' as measured in polls, we're vastly underplaying the importance and subtlety of the subject," he said. "You don't build trust just by hiring trustworthy journalists; it's actually something that you have to structure into the company and the institution... As companies become more global and supersede national boundaries," Rosen continued, "the question of trust and accountability grows in importance because a lot of the old ways that we had for making these companies accountable don't apply. And if corporations don't come up with new forms of accountability, of creating trust, they are highly vulnerable."

Rosen speculated that the American news business might some day be jolted by "its own Seattle," similar to the street protests against the World Trade Organization in 1999. "My reading of the Seattle protests

is that a governing elite thought that they didn't have to worry about its own legitimacy—that its legitimacy was given to it by law, or by institutional structures, or by the simple fact that it had power. And it found out, to its surprise, that it was regarded as illegitimate by people who were willing to break windows and break heads in order to make their point. It came as a shock. I just think it is possible for media companies to suffer the same fate. What Gerry Levin calls 'moral authority' is extremely important if you also have power—because power without authority is an extremely unstable, fragile institution."

Much of the fuel for anti-media sentiment, Rosen argued, may come from the "under-valuation of journalism within media empires"—that is, their unwillingness to support journalism as a constructive force in our democratic culture, as envisioned by the First Amendment. "As media companies operate at a greater distance from local communities and face-to-face relationships," said Rosen, "so it needs to rebuild the mechanisms for assuring their moral and social legitimacy. This isn't just a question of idealism or social value. It is an extremely practical, hard-headed, realistic fact."

"Transparency is the key, I believe," said Bill Kovach of the Committee of Concerned Journalists. "That means transparency to the public, so it can understand what journalism is all about and why it is important to them. Transparency is also about news organizations showing journalists that they value the hard work and ethical standards of journalism."

One of the most valuable instruments for assuring transparency, many agreed, is the ombudsman. Most news organizations have not rallied around the idea of an independent reader advocate and mediator—the equivalent of an internal affairs unit within a police department. But Geneva Overholser, a former ombudsman for the *Washington Post*, believes that the position offers a valuable way to reach out to the public and make its voice better heard within news organizations. "It would help CEOs sense more of the concern on the part of the public than they really are able to sense," said Overholser. By speaking to a company's board of directors, an ombudsman can also help educate top business decisionmakers about the concerns of both readers and journalists.

"You've got to let the public behind the curtain," advised David Talbot. And the Internet is uniquely adept at doing that. It's the most

democratic medium we've created at this point." Talbot cited his own vehicle for *vox populi*, the "Table Talk" section of Salon, which garners 20 percent of its website's overall traffic. While the site has mediators, they are generally overwhelmed by the voice of readers themselves, said Talbot: "It's a very raucous, very intelligent, very living-and-breathing 'letters to the editor' section that runs 24/7. I think it's very invigorating for the top people at a company to be exposed to that kind of rigorous feedback from the public."

Happily, the presumption that news organizations can carry on direct, candid dialogues with the public seems to be growing. National Public Radio now has a standing ombudsman, and *Brill's Content* recently made prominent use of Bill Kovach as a wholly independent ombudsman. Brian Lamb is a popular figure among many CSPAN viewers precisely because he speaks directly to them, without glitz or pretense. The appeal of such vehicles is that they let the public see into the journalistic process, giving the sort of confidence that only transparency can provide. Transparency not only nurtures public trust, it helps build public awareness about the ethical standards of a news organization. This, in turn, helps bolster peer pressure within the profession, said Bill Kovach.

Conclusion

Only a few years ago, the journalism profession was dogged by an edgy fear that the Internet would cannibalize its economic base, laying waste to the proud traditions and values that have served our society well. Those anxieties have abated somewhat in recent years. Cocky upstarts like Matt Drudge have lost their appeal. The dot-com revolution has begun a sobering retrenchment, and even some media companies are paring back their Internet investments. Quality news organizations, meanwhile, have regained some measure of confidence in their future even in the face of unprecedented economic pressures.

Yet even in this interregnum in the media revolution, competitive pressures on newsrooms remain fierce. In a multi-media environment, the boundaries of markets are not entirely clear or well defended. Nor is it certain which business models and journalistic genres will prevail over the long term, or how cross-media partnerships and branding will

develop or wither. The cost-efficiencies and synergies of media consolidation remain to be tested in a marketplace that sometimes favors guerilla insurgents armed with new technologies.

Also unclear is whether news organizations will take the initiative to reach out to the public and develop new mechanisms of accountability and trust, or whether, as some fear, they will suffer their own “Seattle” of angry public protests. It may be hard to evaluate social intangibles, but the moral authority and public trust of media companies are likely to be important factors in the future.

In a time when the market ecology is changing so rapidly, the best hope may lie in news organizations being supremely alert and flexible—not just to shifting paradigms of technology and market competition, but also to the social and moral values that sustain any business enterprise in a democratic society.

Notes

1. ABC News was faulted for having actor Leonardo DiCaprio interview President Clinton on environmental issues; the Hearst Corporation drew fire for its controversial role in making San Francisco a one-newspaper town; and the *Los Angeles Times* was widely criticized for sharing in profits from a special editorial supplement celebrating the newly opened Staples Center.

APPENDIX



The Fourth Annual Aspen Institute
Conference on Journalism and Society

August 23-25, 2000
Aspen, Colorado

List of Conference Participants

David Bollier

*Independent Journalist
and Consultant*

Merrill Brown

*Editor-in-Chief
MSNBC on the Internet*

Henry Catto

*Vice Chairman
The Aspen Institute,
Board Member
National Public Radio,
and
Former Director
United States Information Agency*

Jessica Catto

*Former Publisher
Washington Journalism Review
and
President
Crockett Street Management,
LLC*

Robert W. Decherd

*Chairman, President, and
Chief Executive Officer
Belo Corp*

John Dotson

*Publisher
Akron Beacon Journal*

Charles M. Firestone

*Executive Director
Communications and Society
Program
The Aspen Institute*

Peter C. Goldmark

*Chairman and
Chief Executive Officer
International Herald Tribune*

Walter Isaacson

*Managing Editor
Time Magazine*

Rick Kaplan

*President
CNN US*

Bill Kovach

*Chairman
Committee of Concerned
Journalists*

Jim Lehrer

*Executive Editor and Anchor
The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*

Note: Titles and affiliations are as of the date of the conference.

Gerald M. Levin
*Chairman and Chief Executive
Officer*
Time Warner

Paula Madison
Vice President and News Director
WNBC (New York)
and
Vice President for Diversity
NBC

Geneva Overholser
Syndicated Columnist
The Washington Post Writers Group

Eugene Patterson
*Former Chairman and
Chief Executive Officer*
St. Petersburg Times

Steve Rattner
Managing Principal
Quadrangle Group, LLC

Robert Rivard
Editor and Senior Vice President
San Antonio Express-News

Barbara Rodgers
Anchor/Reporter
Eyewitness News
CBS-KPIX-TV (San Francisco)

Jay Rosen
Chair and Professor
Department of Journalism
New York University

Sandra Mims Rowe
Editor
The Oregonian

Saskia Sassen
Centennial Visiting Professor
London School of Economics
and
Professor of Sociology
Department of Sociology
University of Chicago

Richard Smith
Chairman and Editor-in-Chief
Newsweek

David Talbot
*Founder, Chairman, and Editor-in-
Chief*
Salon

Staff:

Amy Korzick Garmer
Director of Journalism Projects
and
Associate Director
Communications and Society
Program
The Aspen Institute

Sunny Sumter-Sana
Senior Program Coordinator
Communications and Society
Program
The Aspen Institute

Note: Titles and affiliations are as of the date of the conference.

About the Authors

Peter C. Goldmark, Jr. was named chairman and chief executive officer of the *International Herald Tribune* on March 1, 1998. From June 1988 to December 1997 he was the eleventh president of The Rockefeller Foundation based in New York City. Prior to this appointment, he was senior vice president for Eastern Newspapers for the Los Angeles based Times Mirror Company. Before joining the Times Mirror Company in 1985, Mr. Goldmark was executive director of The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. From 1975 to 1977 he was Director of the Budget for the State of New York and for four years prior to that, served as Secretary of Human Services for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Mr. Goldmark also served in the budget office of New York City for four years, and was Assistant Budget Director for Program Planning and Analysis before becoming executive assistant to the Mayor in 1971. Earlier in his career, he was on the staff of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity in Washington, DC and taught history at the Putney School in Vermont.

David Bollier is an independent journalist and consultant with extensive experience in electronic media, consumer advocacy, public policy, and law. A long-time collaborator with television writer and producer Norman Lear, Bollier works closely with The Business Enterprise Trust, the nonprofit organization that examines socially innovative business leadership. He also writes frequently about the civic and social implications of emerging electronic media. Bollier wrote the previous three reports for the Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society. The author of five books, including *Aiming Higher* (1996), Bollier is a graduate of Amherst College and Yale Law School.

The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program

The overall goal of the Communications and Society Program is to promote integrated, thoughtful, values-based decision making in the fields of communications, media, and information policy. In particular, the Program focuses on the implications of communications and information technologies on democratic institutions, individual behavior, instruments of commerce, and community life.

The Communications and Society Program accomplishes this goal through two main types of activities. First, it brings together leaders of industry, government, the nonprofit sector, media organizations, the academic world, and others for roundtable meetings to explore the political, economic, and societal impact of communications and information infrastructures. Second, the Program promotes research and distributes conference reports to local, national, and global decision makers in the communications and information fields, and to the public at large.

Topics addressed by the Program vary as issues and the policy environment evolve. In recent years, the Communications and Society Program has chosen to focus on the issues of Internet policy, electronic commerce, information literacy, digital broadcasting, international and domestic telecommunications regulation, journalism, the role of the media in democratic society, and the impact of new communications technologies on democratic institutions and practices.

Charles M. Firestone is executive director of the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program. Prior to joining the Aspen Institute in 1989, Mr. Firestone was director of the Communications Law Program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and an adjunct professor at the UCLA Law School. He was also first president of the Los Angeles Board of Telecommunications Commissioners. Mr. Firestone's career includes positions as an attorney at the Federal Communications Commission, as director of litigation for a Washington, D.C. based public interest law firm, and as a communications attorney in Los Angeles. He has argued several landmark communications cases before the United States Supreme Court and other federal appellate courts.

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