



Paint-By-Numbers Journalism: How Reader Surveys and Focus Groups Subvert a Democratic Press

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**PAINT-BY-NUMBERS JOURNALISM:
How Reader Surveys and Focus
Groups Subvert a Democratic Press**

by

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Discussion Paper D-19
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The Joan Shorenstein Center

PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government



INTRODUCTION

There is a large academic literature, some in economics and some in philosophy, about the status of people's *revealed preferences*, their expressed statements about what they desire. For although there are obvious attractions to the idea that we should always respect what people say they want, the issue turns out to be more complicated. At times, what people say they want may not be what they would really prefer in the long term or upon further reflection, as when people ask for a third drink or a second dessert and shortly thereafter wish that their wishes had not been granted. Consider Ulysses, who had himself bound to the mast for precisely this reason. "...but you must bind me hard and fast, so that I cannot stir from the spot where you will stand me...and if I beg you to release me, you must tighten and add to my bonds." (*The Odyssey*). As the current debates about a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution indicate, today as well as in Homer's time we worry that getting what we now say we want may cause us regret in the future.

Even when revealed preferences do reflect what people in fact want, people's wants may not always reflect what is best for them. Even when well-informed of the consequences, people may prefer to smoke cigarettes, to drive cars without wearing their seatbelts, to ride motorcycles without wearing helmets, and to forego higher education in favor of becoming part of the entourage of a rock band.

Yet there is still more to the problem than this. Even when revealed preferences track actual preferences, and even when preferences match interests, giving effect to the preferences and interests of the majority may not always be the right thing to do. The reason we recognize international human rights, and the reason why domestic constitutions protect rights like freedom of religion and freedom from torture, is that sometimes it is simply wrong to fail to recognize the rights that people have, even when recognition of those rights is inconsistent with the actual interests of the majority.

Each of these complications casts doubt on institutions designed exclusively to reflect the revealed preferences and interests of the majority. One of these institutions is a completely laissez-faire market as a way of allocating goods and services. And another is an unalloyed majoritarianism as a way of making political decisions. One of the virtues of a representative democracy, rather than one that relies exclu-

sively on referendums and other forms of direct democracy, is that representatives can often temper the passions of ephemeral majorities, and can often exercise a healthy dampening effect on the wide swings of unchecked majoritarianism. When Madison in *Federalist 10* distinguished a democracy from a republic, and when he advocated representative republicanism as a way of controlling the "mischiefs of faction," even when those mischiefs were produced by factions that were comprised of "a majority of the whole," he recognized the importance of structuring government so that it could, when necessary, limit the abuses of pure majoritarianism. This limitation may come from representative rather than direct democracy, it may come from a system of separation of powers and checks and balances, and it may come from a written constitution with judicial review, but each of these devices is premised on the insight that there is more to governmental design than simply reflecting the revealed preferences of today's transient majority.

It is often thought, and properly so, that the press can (and should) serve as a central component of a well-functioning democracy. The power of the press can at times help to check abuses of official power, and even more importantly it can serve as the forum for public deliberation and communication when the decision-making body is a population of over two hundred million rather than the several hundred of the stereotypical New England town meeting. Yet if the press is to be seen, in part, as one of the devices of democracy, then all of the reasons for thinking carefully about the distinction between a well-functioning democracy, on the one hand, and pure majoritarianism, on the other, are as applicable to the press as to the other institutions that concerned James Madison and his colleagues.

When we think of the press in Madisonian republican, rather than in pure majoritarian, terms, a different conception of press responsibility is before us. And when we recognize the close affinity between the concerns of Madison and the concerns of those who from classical to present times have reflected on the problems accompanying the simple satisfaction of all revealed preferences, we can see as well that a press that measures its responsibilities solely in terms of satisfying the revealed preferences (and passions, as Madison would say) of its readers may fall short of fulfilling the role that the press

can and should serve in a representative democracy. To put it more simply, if democracy works best when majoritarianism is tempered with less majoritarian institutions, then the press may serve democracy best when it sees itself as doing something more than just reacting to the immediate and revealed preferences of its readers. Indeed, given that a desire for profit-maximization may itself be a way of allowing voters to vote with their wallets, a newspaper or magazine that tries to maximize its profits and in addition tries to provide the news that its readers believe they want is likely to be a newspaper or magazine that represents just what Madison and others had sought to avoid in the design of governmental institutions.

The argument I have foreshadowed in the previous paragraph is not mine, but that of Alison Carper, a former reporter for *Newsday* who was a Fellow of the Shorenstein Center in the Spring of 1994. Reacting to the increasing use in contemporary journalism of reader surveys and focus groups to determine what the people "really" want, she worries that this approach to journalism brings with it all of the

risks that Madison saw in pure majoritarianism in 1787, and all of the risks that many people see in excess reliance on referendums and citizen initiatives in the present political climate. For her, this worry is a worry about whether a press that takes its agendas from reader surveys and focus groups is a press that is fulfilling its role in the mediated majoritarianism we call American democracy. The phenomenon that Carper questions is undeniably growing, and her thoughtful and provocative discussion paper should be required reading for all who too quickly think that "what the readers want" is the prescription for effective journalism.

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PAINT-BY-NUMBERS JOURNALISM

How Reader Surveys and Focus Groups Subvert a Democratic Press

I.

Journalism in America has always had two warring halves. On the one side, it is a public service, armed with staunch principles about the people's right to know. On the other, it is a business, invigorated by hearty profits or by profits' allure. Its success has always depended on keeping both halves strong, because a wound to one side — principles or financial strength—debilitates the other.

Yet, in the past 30 years or so, the business side of journalism has assumed an unyielding dominance. Newspapers across the country have been sold by families to corporations. Motivated by the medium's potential for profits, executives of these corporations have strived to make each quarter's earnings exceed the last. They have struggled to please shareholders. They have labored to make circulation figures meet their guarantees to advertisers. They have fretted about the cost of newsprint and delivery.

In more recent years, however, the executives' concerns have changed. Rather than worry about profitability, they have become anxious about their industry's very survival. The reasons for this shift are not hard to discern.

Recessions have undermined the stability of newspapers' advertising base. New sources of information and entertainment have drawn subscribers away. And, most ominously, a declining regard for the written word has eroded the habit of reading. Taken together, these trends seemed to raise the specter of newspapers' extinction. Without drastic reforms, newspaper executives have come to believe that their industry might well disappear.

What to do? Besieged by adverse social and economic trends and plagued by the profit demands of shareholders, newspaper executives began searching for a remedy. They have found a plausible one in a prescription offered by industry consultants: Use market research techniques to find out what readers want and then give it to them. The very same tools that brought prosperity to manufacturers of soap and automobiles—public-opinion surveys and focus groups—could restore the newspaper industry to health.

It has been up to editors to adopt this advice—editors who, at one time or another and to varying degrees, are likely to harbor lofty notions about

the purpose of their profession. Like all journalists, they have been schooled in the traditions of free speech, and they know that this liberty they enjoy is preserved by the Constitution for one reason: Newspapers inform the citizenry, and in a democracy, citizens must be informed in order to fulfill the demands of self-governance.

In recent years, then, these editors have faced a need to reconcile two objectives, the fulfillment of their democratic function, and the assurance of their own survival. As a result, they have found strong journalistic justifications for using marketing techniques to shape the news.

In this essay, I will try to show how the reasoning of these journalists fails to rise above the level of mere rationalization; that, in fact, when their arguments are scrutinized it becomes clear that the goals of marketing are largely in conflict with the role that the press should play in a democracy.

II.

Journalism's adoption of marketing techniques has affected nearly every newspaper in America.

In some cases, editors call upon focus groups for guidance. Sitting behind one-way mirrors, they listen to comments about their newspaper by a dozen or so readers or "potential" readers. An industry consultant, hired by the newspaper, serves as the group's moderator, asking questions and giving shape and order to the discussion. Often, the members of these focus group are randomly selected from the paper's readership area, but not always. Sometimes they are chosen from a particular demographic group to which the paper especially wants to appeal, such as women or young people. In either case, consultants are obliged to warn editors that no focus group speaks for an entire community. Nonetheless, editors are naturally tempted to generalize from the comments they hear.

Editors also use reader surveys to acquaint themselves with the tastes and sentiments of their community. Again, the newspaper itself, or its corporate headquarters, will often work with a consultant to write the survey. The questionnaires are usually mailed to readers or appear as coupons in the paper.

Some newspapers, however, do not undertake research of their own, but use that which has been gathered by others, such as by the headquarters of their parent newspaper chain, or consultants who make the results of their work available to the newspaper industry as a whole.

At Knight-Ridder, one of the country's wealthiest newspaper chains, papers carry out their own research. Each of the corporation's 29 papers probes its readership—using a survey or focus group—at least once every 24 months. The chain has also conducted concentrated campaigns to find out what readers want. When it redesigned its *Boca Raton News* in 1990, it drew upon more than 30 focus groups for guidance.¹

At Gannett, all but one of the company's 83 dailies is required to adopt a detailed strategy that will allow it to find out what its readers want and give it to them. The exception to the companywide program — known as News 2000 — is *USA Today*. Since *USA Today* was the country's first paper to be conceived of and created by market research, it is natural that it be exempted.

Gannett's mandate gives each paper the freedom to execute News 2000's imperatives in its own way. In Washington state, editors at the *Olympian* took steps to satisfy the program's requirements by sending reporters to shopping malls and other public places to pass out surveys that asked readers to rate their news preferences.²

In Little Rock, the chain's *Arkansas Gazette* distributed reader surveys that had two columns, one for hard news, one for soft. From column A, readers were asked to check off whether they wanted more news about Europe, the Middle East, the governor, the legislature or the county. From column B, whether they wanted more advice on infants, teenagers, dating, retirement or single parenting.³

Gannett owns more papers than any corporation in America. Knight-Ridder ranks second. These chains are indeed prominent in the industry. But their embrace of marketing techniques does not encompass the whole movement. Rather, these companies are emblematic of a still larger trend. One can cast a line in any direction to find other newspapers that use marketing methods to shape news content: The *Chicago Tribune*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times*, are three prestigious examples.

While these papers do use surveys and focus groups, marketing has, generally speaking, least affected the content of the country's biggest and most prestigious dailies. Yet, upon inspection, one can see its mark even on some of them. The

Boston Globe, for example, reaches out to readers by periodically asking them a question on the front page and inviting them to call in their responses. The *Los Angeles Times* prints a local news summary on the left-hand column of the front page of its Orange County edition. And the *Philadelphia Inquirer* sandwiches brief story summaries between the headline of an article and the text. Whether or not these features can be traced to specific surveys by each newspaper, the modifications are consistent with recommendations by market researchers who distribute their findings industrywide.

Many market-driven changes in the biggest papers are modifications in format, such as art and layout, rather than in the content of the news. Yet, there are exceptions. At the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, a paper whose Sunday circulation of around 700,000 makes it among the country's largest, a major readership research drive was followed by radical changes in news content, including shorter articles, and more briefs and graphics in place of stories.

But generally speaking, it has been at medium-sized and small papers — and primarily those owned by chains — that market-driven modifications have had the greatest effect. The *Orange County Register*, *Seattle Times*, and the *Olympian*, for example, have been profoundly influenced by market research. Like the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, editors at these papers have shaped news content, and not just format, to cater to the demands of the market.

Adherents of the marketing school say surveys and focus groups produce newspapers that respond to the needs of people. This essay will argue that they have the opposite effect. Gratifying readers' wants is not the same as satisfying their needs, and indeed, I will argue, a preoccupation with the former can disable a newspaper from achieving the latter. I also hope to show that in responding to the wishes of readers, editors produce papers that are rigidly formulaic. Using marketing tools, then, does not produce a creative new kind of journalism, but rather the newspaper equivalent of paint-by-numbers art.

When did the marketing trend begin?

If a single year had to be assigned, it would be 1977. That was when the American Newspaper Publishers Association and the Newspaper Advertising Bureau joined forces to address what the industry saw as an impending crisis of declining readership. Together the associations created a \$5 million Readership Project, and the project turned to market research for its answers.

The first major study that the project commissioned drew upon focus group discussions with newspaper readers and prospective readers in 12 cities. Conducted by market researcher Ruth Clark and distributed to the organization's 3,500 members, the study, called "Changing Needs for Changing Readers," had the effect of legitimizing the use of market research in shaping editorial content. It launched the marketing trend.⁴

The study suggested that newspapers adopt both format and content changes. It suggested greater use of news summaries, briefs, graphic aids, "coping" stories, and "good" news. And it recommended that papers run less national, foreign, and government news.⁵

Clark believed that the future of newspapers lay in the willingness of editors to cater to the demands of the 1970's "me" generation, a generation that wanted to hear less about national and world events and was hungry for "news" about the lifestyle issues of people exactly like themselves. In effect, Clark recommended that newspapers draw a curtain over the window on the world that they had traditionally offered their audience, and hand readers a mirror instead.

In the years since Clark's report, dozens of publications urging newspaper executives to survey their readers were circulated by the American Newspaper Publishers Association and the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Some bore apocalyptic titles, such as, "Keys to Our Survival."⁶ Others were less melodramatic in tone but just as pointed in message, such as, "Readers: How to Gain and Retain Them."⁷

The industry publications *Editor & Publisher* and *Presstime* joined the marketing bandwagon with a parade of articles. They appeared under such headlines as, "Whoever Stays Closest to the Customer Will Win,"⁸ and "Reviving a Romance with Readers is the Biggest Challenge for Many Newspapers."⁹

Conferences, conventions and seminars for newspaper executives also became popular forums for industry consultants to try to persuade editors to use surveys and focus groups.¹⁰

Whether an industry report, article or oral presentation, the formula suggested was the same. It included, on the one hand, more "quick reads," "escape" or upbeat news, entertaining articles, "multiple points of entry," such as graphic aids and sidebars designed to ease the reader into the main news story, and news-you-can-use, or, as communication theorists call it, "immediate-reward news," which generally consists of a health, coping or lifestyle tip that

resonates right away with the reader. And, on the other hand, less foreign, national and government news — indeed, with the exception of crime stories, less "hard news" altogether.

The drive to promote the marketing approach has had its effect — both on newspapers and on the minds of their executives. Over the years, even the rhetoric of executives has changed to reflect the new influence. It is not uncommon to hear editors refer to readers as "customers" now. One often hears the newspaper called the "product."

The following statements from a few of the country's publishers and editors are evidence of the depth of the new marketing mentality:

"We must sell ourselves like Chevrolet and Ivory Soap." — Wayne Ezell, editor of the *Boca Raton News*.¹¹

"We try to listen and tailor our product to the marketplace. Our readers tell us, 'We don't want to work terribly hard, we don't want to struggle through what you're trying to tell us.' They like stories they can use for their coffee-break talk." — John Gardner, publisher of the *Quad-City Times* in Iowa.¹²

"We're trying to put out a newspaper for a whole new generation of newspaper scanners out there who expect to develop a conversational knowledge of what's in the paper based only on reading the headlines." — Dan Hays, editor of the *Quad-City Times*.¹³

"The surest way to editorial failure is to impose upon readers our own sense of what they ought to know. We must judge the value of what we publish in their terms." — Michael Fancher, editor of the *Seattle Times*.¹⁴

"News is what our readers say it is." — Steve Crosby, editor of the *Wausau Daily Herald* in Wisconsin.¹⁵

Two kinds of modifications are urged by marketing enthusiasts, and an important distinction must be drawn between them. The first affects newspaper format, and while such changes have been dramatic in recent years, I will not discuss them here. The second modification affects editorial content, and it is this with which the remainder of this paper will be concerned, because it is the shaping of news content to appeal to an audiences' preferences that conflicts with the historic mission of journalism.

One could turn to any number of newspapers for examples of how editorial content is shaped to correspond to readers' tastes, but the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* offers a portrait that is more vivid than most.

On Sunday, April 3, 1994, there were only 11

pages of local, national and foreign news in the 138-page *Journal-Constitution*. The front page carried only three stories, only one of which was long enough to continue on another page. The dominant story was a feature about local churches' preparations for Easter services. The page's lead story, about North Korea's growing capacity to produce nuclear weapons, was only six paragraphs long.

Dominant stories on the front page recently have also included a feature, on a Sunday, that revealed that baby boomers are going to bed earlier.¹⁶ In May of 1992, after a cyclone hit Bangladesh and killed 125,000 people, the story was found inside while the front page included a piece on the opening of a McDonald's at the city's public hospital and a dispute between the city and caterers who provide food in an Atlanta park.¹⁷

That same year, *Journal-Constitution* editor Ron Martin told the *Washington Journalism Review* that the days when reporters went out, gathered a story and wrote it up are over. Reporters now work as part of a team, along with editors and artists, and together they come up with news "packages."¹⁸

As for government, national and foreign news stories, at the *Journal-Constitution* and elsewhere, these are frequent casualties of the market-driven approach.

At the *Boca Raton News*, editor Wayne Ezell candidly acknowledged his willingness to sacrifice traditional news in an interview with *Washington Post* media correspondent Howard Kurtz. Asked if he would stop carrying foreign news if focus groups said they were not interested, Ezell said, "That would tell me they're not reading it, so why should I have it? If readers said they wanted more comics and less foreign news, in a market-driven economy, I'm going to give them more comics and less foreign news."¹⁹

Newspapers that embrace the marketing approach often find themselves practicing a particular kind of formula journalism — the kind that emphasizes format at the expense of content. At the *Boca Raton News*, the drive to have the news fit into a predetermined format has shifted positions of power in the newsroom. Under the old arrangement, a copy editor was subordinate to a reporter. But when the paper's format took precedence over the content of news stories, it was the copy editor — who "pushes, pummels and pounds the writer's words to fit the format" — who gained the upper hand.²⁰

The marketing approach to news content also has caused some papers to scale down their emphasis on traditional beats, including government coverage, and

create new beats that reflect those topics they believe readers care about most. In Wausau, Wisconsin, editors at the *Daily Herald* consolidated the city, county and suburban government beats and re-assigned the two reporters who lost their beats to general assignments. Steve Crosby, the Wausau paper's editor, said that, in fact, city hall news has become so rare in the *Daily Herald* that "the mayor calls and complains."²¹

In Rochester, N.Y., readers of the *Democrat and Chronicle* also find less government news in their paper now. Editor Barbara Henry says the paper is "not as nose-to-the-grindstone on city hall and the county legislature [as it used to be]. Yes, we still cover them, but we don't do it in the nitty-gritty way we used to."²²

Lou Heldman, who directed Knight-Ridder's remake of the *Boca Raton News*, says that his editors have learned that government stories are more expendable than other types of news. They "tend to be the first thing dropped when the space crunch comes," he said.²³

Meanwhile, at the *Orange County Register*, "shopping malls" and "car culture" beats have been created, as have weekly pet and hobby sections.²⁴ And, while minimizing government stories, the *Boca Raton News* makes an effort to satisfy readers' demands for "good" news with a "Today's Hero" column, which highlights the heroic side of a local resident each day.²⁵

Lou Heldman of Knight-Ridder says he believes that the purpose of the *Boca News* is to do "a good job of explaining the world for people who don't want the world in great depth."²⁶ The paper is replete with opinion columns, sports, a bold front page box that tells readers where the comics are, and is filled with briefs on everything from local to national to entertainment news. Depth is one thing that is not on the *News'* menu of offerings.

It is not surprising, then, to find that the paper has a rigid "no-jump" policy for front page stories.²⁷ Even on the first, dramatic day of the Gulf War, when U.S. forces began bombing Iraq, the lead story did not continue on a subsequent page. As a consequence, it was only 11 paragraphs long.²⁸

III.

When Ezell of the *Boca Raton News* told the *Washington Post* media critic that he would drop foreign news altogether if focus groups so requested, his reasoning was that of a businessman. But what of those arguments editors make from their position as journalists?

I have identified four, and will take each up in turn and challenge it.

Briefly stated, they are:

The Pedagogical Argument, which maintains that marketing tools tell editors how readers learn from the news, and so allow them to craft their newspapers into the kind of products that readers find most accessible.

The Enticement Argument, according to which editors are morally obliged to lure readers into buying the paper, because once readers have the paper in hand, they will read the serious news.

The Democratic Argument, which maintains that surveys and focus groups are highly democratic in that they allow readers to specify what it is they want. Since newspapers, like government, are a service, then readers should be able to "vote" for the content of their paper. And, finally,

The Business Imperative Argument, which holds that if newspapers are in financial trouble, editors must give readers whatever they want, because if they do not, the papers will perish and every opportunity for quality journalism will perish along with them.

IV.

The *Pedagogical Argument* is predicated on theories about how people learn from the news. While editors may base their perceptions of this process on anecdotes, impressions and prejudices, academics have rigorously explored the questions of how this learning takes place. These explorations have resulted in detailed expositions, the best example of which is found in the book, *Common Knowledge*.²⁹ It will be to that book that I will turn to lay out the foundation of the *Pedagogical Argument*.

Common Knowledge begins with the appraisal that traditional newspapers are the least accessible of the news media; that is, people have more trouble absorbing information from newspapers than they do from television newscasts or weekly newsmagazines. But, as the book notes, people's level of difficulty with each medium depends on their cognitive skills. Those with low skills absorb the least from newspapers and, indeed, gravitate toward TV. Those with high skills get the most from newspapers and naturally tend to read them. So, it is primarily for the purpose of capturing those with average skills that the *Pedagogical Argument* is designed. Those in this group can make efficient use of either medium, although in the absence of

papers they find easy to understand, they are inclined to watch TV.

If the goal, then, is to enhance accessibility for those who fall into this middle category, what shall be the means? This is where the authors of *Common Knowledge* and newspaper editors who embrace marketing tools part ways.

The book's authors believe that format changes — more use of color, art, and graphics — and moderate content changes — more detailed background or context to news stories — are the best ways to make an article more accessible. But market-oriented journalists take a different view. When readers responding to surveys or speaking up in focus groups say that they are not very interested in national, foreign and government news, editors conclude that if those stories were shorter, they would be easier to digest. If readers are getting little hard news in any event, the editors conclude, then abbreviated bits of news will at least give them something of value.

What are we to make of this reasoning? It is counter-intuitive at best. It advocates offering less information in the name of assisting the learning process. It maintains that more knowledge will be assimilated if the amount of information available is reduced to accord with the amount habitually absorbed. That is, it argues that the best way to educate is to cut back horizons to meet the field of vision. But how can such an exercise lead to an expanded view of the world?

Cutting back horizons does not promote education, it impedes it. The effect is not an expansion of readers' knowledge of national and world events, but a reinforcement of their provincialism. The truncation and oversimplification of the news also inhibits learning in another way as well. Since the message a newspaper implicitly conveys is that its pages reflect the world's most noteworthy events, its failure to reflect those events encourages complacency on the part of readers. When the "hard news" is abbreviated, readers who are not inclined to turn to foreign and national stories are no longer even forced to be conscious of what they are missing.

Additionally, an oversimplified newspaper prevents readers from "graduating up" to a level where they read and understand more complicated news stories. Some readers who are initially disinclined to tackle pieces that are nuanced or complex could eventually use traditional newspapers to work their way up to those stories, and thus attain a broader vision of the world. Reducing the news content and simplifying stories prevents them from being able to do so.

The *Pedagogical Argument* has a familiar parallel in education theory, namely the view that students should not be expected to perform tasks in which they have not already proved their ability. Central to this philosophy is the idea that the primary purpose of education is not to increase stores of knowledge but to raise self-esteem.

But there is a danger inherent in this view. When the raising of self-esteem becomes the expressed goal of schools, the base on which that confidence is built — mastery of the material — can become something to be sacrificed if it blocks the way. The result is an insecure foundation on which the rhetoric of self-esteem is erected, not a solid one supporting the real thing.

Take the example of the “whole language” approach to teaching reading and writing, a controversial method that is currently in vogue in some schools around the country.³⁰ Teachers who use it refrain from correcting the spelling of children just learning how to write. If a child spells apple, A-P-L, the teacher, who values the child’s self-esteem more than she values her growing store of knowledge, will recognize only the intent behind the misspelled word and praise the child for writing her version of apple.

The teacher’s expectations are cut back to meet the student’s ability; horizons are reduced to accord with present limits of understanding. Just as when newspapers are simplified, learning is not promoted; it is impeded.

Newspaper consultants and editors tend to interpret the results of market research as a call for greater simplification even when the study results are ambiguous. A clear illustration of this is found in a 1991 ASNE readership report, “Keys to Our Survival.” The report identifies two types of people that are not loyal newspaper readers but could become so. The first is the “at risk” reader, a person who dips into the paper a few times a week, scanning it superficially each time. He is someone who feels harried and unable to control his life, tends to retreat into a protected and provincial world, and likes news stories that are short and entertaining, the report said.

The other type is the “potential” reader. This is the reader who is seriously interested in news events and prefer newspapers to TV. She is busy but does not feel harried. She is a “deep” reader and wants more detail and explanation in news stories than her local paper now provides. In short, the reason she does not read the paper now is that it is too superficial for her.

The two types account for equal segments — 13 percent — of the newspaper market, the report said. But it is far easier to attract the at-risk reader than the potential reader. It takes less effort to “package” small pieces of information than it does to provide in-depth news. The report, written for newspaper executives, noted all this, and it recommended taking the easier path.

There is nothing wrong with making newspapers accessible to readers. Indeed, making complex events clear has always been the aim of journalistic narrative. But using market research to this end poses serious problems. First, it encourages newspapers to take the most expedient route to accessibility, namely abbreviating news stories. Second, it tends to screen out the preferences of an important minority of customers, those who are intensely interested in the news. Third, it refashions papers in the image of television, since it is in the light of TV’s success that editors construe the responses to their own surveys. Helping people understand the events of a complex world is a laudable goal, but eliminating all complexity in the name of teaching defeats the purpose.

V.

According to the second argument, the *Enticement* theory, newspapers must give readers what they want in order to lure them into buying the paper. Once the paper is in their hands, the argument goes, they will read the serious news.

There are several objections to this argument. First, it fails to take account of the impact of a simple fact, that is, every frivolous story that is printed takes up space in the newspaper that would otherwise be used for something less frivolous. But advocates of the *Enticement Argument* do not recognize this. In their view, the information that people want — as determined by market research — is merely added on top of the standard news fare. Market research, according to this theory, is only meant to enhance, not to change, the content of newspapers.

But, a glance at any newspaper that has adopted the market-research approach proves the *Enticement* advocates wrong. As we saw with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, stories of the sort that focus group respondents say they prefer — about lifestyle issues and community events — have not been added to the hard news, they have displaced it. In other words, the market-

oriented changes have not been used to entice readers to get the informational nutrition they need, rather they have supplanted the old diet altogether.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* also illustrates the second flaw in the *Enticement Argument*. In order to be lured into reading the serious news, the import of that news has to be clear. In other words, a distinction must be made between stories inserted to gratify readers or get their attention and stories of substance.

Papers have historically maintained this distinction by reserving the front page for the important news, and relegating the less substantial stories to inside sections. But once newspapers begin to promote attention-getting stories self-consciously as an "enticement," the hierarchy of news values is overthrown. As the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* demonstrates, non-news stories get moved to the front pages, while much of the hard news is relegated to subsequent pages, briefs and indexes. In the name of enticement, editors fail to highlight the news most worth reading. The result is that it is no longer clear what readers are being enticed to read.

VI.

According to the *Democratic Argument*, focus groups and surveys are justifiable because they are democratic tools. Like politicians who defend the use of opinion polls on the grounds that they enable them to enact policy that accords with their constituents' will, advocates of the *Democratic Argument* argue that focus groups and surveys allow them to produce newspapers that correspond to their readers' needs and desires.

When George Gallup first popularized the opinion poll, he promoted it as a democratic tool; a "sampling referendum," he called it.³¹ In *The Pulse of Democracy* (1940), Gallup said that the poll, which a telephone in every home had recently made possible, would allow citizens to voice their views on all issues, something that had not been feasible since America's democratic experiment began. For the first time ever, the opinion poll would bring the nation into "one great room," he said.

"After one hundred and fifty years, we return to the town meeting. This time the whole nation is within the doors," Gallup wrote.³²

It was, it would seem, in the interest of democracy — that is, of encouraging journalists to hear the voices in Gallup's great room — that the American Society of Newspaper Editors, in a

1981 report, scolded editors for their general unwillingness to ask readers what kind of news they want. "From time immemorial," the report began, "editors have been blithe spirits — largely untouchable, unteachable, and utterly independent. They listened to the dicta of few except their publishers. Vox populi be damned."³³

The same rebuke is found in a 1992 *Nieman Reports* article by three high ranking newspaper executives. "Who, if not the reading public, should judge the value of a newspaper's service," the authors asked.³⁴

From Gallup's days to the present, polls have become an increasingly acceptable — even respected — guide for leaders to turn to when making decisions. (President Clinton has used them liberally.) The opinion poll, when relied upon to an extreme degree, becomes a referendum on public policy decisions. When polls dictate policy, the boundaries of representational government are breached, and the nation resembles, at least for the moment, a direct democracy. As Gallup predicted, the country is indeed brought into one great room. And, though it is Americans who make up the resulting assembly, the process has a distinctly Athenian flavor.

But, is the Athenian model of government an appropriate one for us? Should our government aspire to direct democracy? There are reasons to believe that such an ideal would be misplaced in the American context.

In order for Athenian democracy to function, one needs Athenian citizens — and ideal Athenian citizens at that.³⁵ What is an ideal citizen of Athens? He is a man whose reason dominates over his passions and for whom the common good takes precedence over his own private interests. Direct democracy demands a nation made up of such citizens. For the Athenian assembly to work, each member must conform his behavior to this ethical ideal.

The American political system, on the other hand, is predicated on a very different idea of the citizen. Rather than rely on an ideal of human behavior, the Framers of the American government set their sights lower; they sought an image of "natural man," that is, of how people would behave if they had been stripped of society's artifices and constraints. Influenced by Hume and Locke, and consulting the record of history, they decided that people do not make natural Athenians. They concluded that we are far too predisposed to place our own interest ahead of the common good.

Whether the Framers' view of human nature

does justice to our full humanity is an open question. Nevertheless, it is clear that the American system of government was designed to function even if the Framers' pessimistic view were largely true, that is, even if most citizens never took account of the public good.

But, of course, even a country such as ours needs trustees to attend to the commonwealth. For any nation to endure, laws must be enacted that are expressly intended for the common good, even if they conflict with the interests of naturally self-seeking individuals. For example, the raising of taxes is always unpopular, but taxes must occasionally be increased to meet government expenses. Likewise, most citizens do not want to make the sacrifices necessary for cleaning up the nation's air, yet laws must be enacted that require expensive anti-pollution devices to be installed on cars and in factories. The list could be extended, but the point is clear. In each of these cases, what is good for society as a whole does not reflect the sum choice of individuals acting only in their own interest.

The Framers were conscious of the potential for conflict between the aggregate of citizens' wishes and the common good. So, they built into the Constitutional system a number of barriers intended to insulate lawmakers — the popularly selected trustees of the commonwealth — from the people's will. For example, they called for senators to serve what then seemed like very long six-year terms, for presidents to be elected indirectly through an electoral college, and for the members of the Supreme Court to serve lifetime appointments. Each of these provisions was designed, at least in part, to give political leaders the space they need to deliberate about and pursue the common good while being at least somewhat protected from popular pressure.

It is this space for independent deliberation that is subverted by politicians' public opinion polls. When lawmakers blindly follow the dictates of the people through the polls, they relinquish their prerogative of assessing when and how the public good varies from the aggregate wishes of self-seeking individuals. In the same way, when editors believe their duty is to gratify the tastes of readers, they are relinquishing their higher responsibility — their *democratic* responsibility — to make sure the public is informed about the vital issues and events of the day.

Just as direct democracy can only work when citizens place their civic duties or societal interests ahead of their private concerns, so too

can reader surveys and focus groups only work to the advantage of the public under those conditions. When they do not exist, readers will ask only for news relating to their private interests and neglect their need for information that will enable them to participate responsibly in the common society, that is, information that will equip them to perform the tasks of a democratic citizen. Rather than ask for more national, foreign and government news, they will tell consultants such as Ruth Clark that they want more news that affects them, the members of the "me" generation.

Where ideal Athenian citizens are not present, a system that seems to be modeled on direct democracy can paradoxically yield less democratic results. When self-interested people are given the kind of newspaper they say they want, the gulf is widened between those who have enough information to participate meaningfully in the democratic process and those who do not. The result is not democratization, but an exacerbated form of elitism. Market-oriented journalism leads, therefore, not to a more equal society, but a more divided one.

The conflict between representative and direct democracy has a corollary in the traditional doctrines justifying press freedom. There are two familiar models of the press that offer justification for the liberties that the First Amendment sanctions, and there are fundamental differences between them. The first is the libertarian model, and the second, the social-responsibility model.³⁶ As with the distinct ideas about human nature that each form of democracy assumes, each model adopts its own vision of the press.

According to the libertarian model, the press resembles an open marketplace of ideas, a public arena from which no views ought to be excluded. Opinions compete for dominance here, according to the libertarian view, and out of the contest, the truth inevitably emerges victorious.

J.S. Mill buttressed the libertarian model with four now classic arguments in favor of press freedom.³⁷ First, he believed that censorship is wrong because in suppressing falsehood, there is always the risk that truth will be silenced. Second, he noted that false opinions, no less than true ones, may be founded on a kernel of truth, and that kernel can lead on to still larger discoveries. Third, he contended that even if a commonly held opinion is true, it is only when those who hold it are forced to defend it that the opinion rises above the level of prejudice and becomes a rationally held belief. And finally, he held that the truth must be challenged from time

to time to keep it from losing its vitality, and thus its effect on character.

The libertarian model promotes a strictly negative conception of press freedom. That is, that in order for newspapers to carry out their function, they must be free from censorship and control. This model presumes that citizens can find truth in the cacophony of press voices, and thus inform themselves about the world. In this way, a high degree of rationality on the part of readers is presumed. Truth can only prevail in the open marketplace of opinions if the public mind is capable of discerning it in a sea of falsity. It is in this respect that the libertarian press resembles direct democracy; the models for both presume that people are guided to their decisions and convictions not by passion, but by reason.

Critics of the libertarian model reject this optimistic view of human nature. Man, they observe, "is capable of using his reason, but he is loath[e] to do so."³⁸ These skeptics doubt that people have the stamina to exercise their rational powers, and indeed, their misgivings seem to find validity in the evidence all around us. The triumph of television is, perhaps, the most vivid proof that we are eager to suspend our powers of reason. TV viewers cheerfully allow themselves to be hypnotized by images — flashes of pseudo-reality that bypass the intellect and directly manipulate the emotions. The rise of docudramas, newsmagazine shows, and programs in which performers "re-enact" sensational news events are evidence of the public's preference for fantasy and entertainment over rational deliberation and discourse.

Critics of the libertarian model reject as unrealistic the notion that people will sort truth from falsehood in the marketplace of ideas. Out of this skepticism emerges the second model of press freedom, the social-responsibility model. This view recognizes that the press has liberties, but it maintains that it also has correlative obligations. While granting that journalists must be free from compulsion, the advocates of this model demand that the press must also make a "contribution to the maintenance and development of a free society."³⁹ In other words, the social-responsibility model requires the press to earn its constitutional protection, not just by speaking its collective mind, but by interpreting the day's events, arranging them for maximum comprehensibility, and instructing the public about the issues that they as citizens must confront in the exercise of self-governance. With its emphasis on journalistic discretion and judgment, the social-responsibility model

resembles the paradigm of representational government adopted by the authors of the Federalist Papers. In both paradigms, the stewards of the community — journalists, in the one case, and legislators in the other — are obligated to deliberate about how best to serve the commonwealth.

While the social-responsibility theory had a prestigious sponsor in Robert Maynard Hutchins — the chairman of a committee which wrote a celebrated report advancing the view⁴⁰ — it was never universally popular among newspaper executives. There has always been a strain of resistance to the model's suggestion that anything — even the burden of a self-proclaimed duty — should compromise the press' autonomy.⁴¹

The general hostility to the social-responsibility model is only reinforced by journalism's recent adoption of the use of marketing techniques to shape the news. By using surveys and focus groups, after all, editors are discouraged from exercising their independent judgment, and encouraged to capitulate to the demands of public taste.

Where, then, can one find a justification for freedom of the press? On the one hand, the libertarian model's presumption that people are guided by reason has been decidedly discredited. On the other hand, the social-responsibility model makes demands that the press is obviously unwilling to shoulder. Journalism's adoption of marketing techniques is further proof of the press's repudiation of those demands.

From this vantage point, one can see that the press's adoption of marketing techniques not only widens the gulf between the well-informed minority and the rest of society, it has another alarming effect as well. The acceptance of these techniques represents a decisive abandonment of the social-responsibility model, the final disposal of that model's tattered remains. Without even the threads of the social-responsibility theory to hang onto, the press is left without a reasonable justification for the unrestrained freedom it enjoys.

VII.

The *Business Imperative Argument* maintains that if papers do not give readers what they want, they will lose money and possibly go out of business, and if this happens, all opportunity for quality journalism will be lost. As Fancher, Criner and Lessersohn put the argument in a question in their *Nieman Reports* article, "What quality of

service can a newspaper provide if it accepts a long-term decline in financial strength?"⁴²

Of the four pro-marketing arguments, editors hold this one most zealously, yet it, too, has significant weaknesses. First, it rests on a tenuous empirical basis. The vast majority of American papers are monopolies in their markets and many are owned by Fortune 500 companies. On the whole, newspaper's pretax profit margins range from 15 to 20 percent. Even throughout the difficult years of the 1980s, profits did not dip below this. Returns in this range make the newspaper business consistently more profitable than most industries.⁴³

Second, the *Business Imperative Argument* substitutes a short-term for a long-term vision. In the short term, it seems to make good business sense to give people what they want. But in the long term, such pandering is likely to be detrimental to a paper's continued commercial viability. Thoughtful readers will perceive immediately that their re-fashioned newspaper has become impoverished. And sooner or later, even less thoughtful readers will perceive that their paper is not offering them anything that they cannot get, more cheaply and easily, on TV. So, the conscious trivialization of newspapers in the name of appealing to readers may ultimately hasten, rather than retard, the demise that the industry itself now fears.

William Hornby, former editor of the *Denver Post*, described the effect of catering to a public that has lost its hunger for the news in an article in *Quill* in 1976 — soon after the trend began. "If the decline in the respect for news spreads, if the hard, spot news of what's happening becomes more and more capsuled in easy doses, between columns of matter on how to take a bath, newspapers will move away from the central human need they particularly exist to satisfy," he wrote. "That can't help but be weakening in the long run. For the truth is — no matter what the marketers of bathing tips say — news is still the basic thing people want from newspapers."⁴⁴

Third, newspaper executives who embrace the *Business Imperative Argument* fail to take into account the value of their most important commodity, namely their credibility. Papers earn and sustain credibility not only by being truthful, but by adhering to the decrees of an unwritten contract between reader and editor, the terms of which state that newspapers must provide an accurate picture of the day's events. This means presenting the news in an order and fashion that reflects a considered assessment of the importance of each story.

It is that credibility that papers which embrace marketing techniques are in danger of losing. Without it, readers' respect for newspapers as a whole will erode. They will eventually turn to other news sources without feeling that they are giving up anything of value.

But, not only do market-oriented changes fail the test of being pragmatically justifiable, they are also often implemented in suspect and unprofessional ways.

To begin with, newspaper consultants charged with carrying out market research work for individual clients, so, like a lawyer representing a party in a dispute, the "truth" that their research leads them to is not objective, but client-directed.

At *Newsday* in Long Island, for example, editors brought in a focus group of women recently to test their hunches about the appeal of a new women's page. Editors sat behind a one-way mirror, in the usual custom, and watched a consultant moderate the group's conversation in an adjoining room. The consultant, who had been told in advance about the editors' plans for a women's page, asked the group questions about their tastes in feature articles and wrote responses on a blackboard. But, as one editor watching the proceedings later reported, only the answers that confirmed the editors' theories about why such a page would be appealing were in fact written down, and it was only these that the moderator pursued in follow-up questions.

Such partiality on the part of the moderator is not uncommon. At the *Orange County Register*, even the pretense of disinterestedness has been abandoned. When focus groups are brought in to discuss the news pages, an outside consultant does not moderate — an editor from the newsroom does.

In addition, market researchers often seek to imbue their findings with an aura of scientific validity that the results do not merit. Often their pretenses to scientific rigor are undermined by their own subsequent pronouncements.

Ruth Clark's reports provide a clear example. Five years after her original study, Clark published a second report whose findings opposed the first. While she was criticized, after the second study was released, for not doing a statistically valid analysis the first time around, Clark maintained that the new findings simply reflected a change in readers' tastes.

Discussing her second report at the American Society for Newspaper Editors convention in 1984, Clark told editors that readers no longer want "coping" stories, they want the news.

Readers, she said, were now calling for "less advice, more information."⁴⁵

"Hard news," Clark declared, "is back in vogue."⁴⁶

But unlike Clark's first pronouncements, these words fell on deaf ears.

The final flaw in the *Business Imperative Argument* is that market researchers (and those who adopt their findings) often seek to extend the results of their research to inapplicable contexts. For instance, the results of a national survey may be applied to a local paper, although the preferences of the local community may differ significantly from those expressed by the American public at large.

For example, when the *Olympian* was refashioned to accord with Gannett's national findings on reader preferences, story jumps were severely restricted and more briefs, graphics and news-you-can-use appeared. Local readers saw it and complained. The paper, they told the *Olympian* staff, lacked the in-depth news coverage they liked.⁴⁷

VIII.

In more ways than one, the newspaper industry holds up a mirror to American culture. Just as the front page is expected to reflect national events, newspapers' use of marketing techniques mirrors popular currents in the larger society.

The first of these currents is the glorification of science. Science has achieved such prestige that our culture makes every effort to bring its methods and presuppositions to bear, even on those aspects of life which seem least amenable to them. In the education and rearing of our children, in the study of society and of human nature, and now also in journalism, "scientific" practitioners, with their statistical methods and claims of infallibility, enjoy the highest authority. Little room is left over for the exercise of independent judgment. The pressure that journalists now feel to conform to the demands of readers — as these have been ascertained with allegedly "scientific" precision by market researchers — is a clear example of the constraints imposed by putatively scientific techniques on individual freedom, including the freedom to judge. Quantitative studies, with their aura of certainty, are a substitute for the exercise of discretion in many fields. In recent decades, journalism has been added to the list.

The phenomenon of running newspapers according to the results of surveys and focus

groups also reflects a second broad trend in American life, the decline in status given to civic responsibility, both among the people at large and the nation's elites. Like politicians, lawyers, doctors, and business executives, editors enjoy a position of privilege in our culture. In the past, it was thought that social privilege carried with it a set of correlative obligations. For politicians, this meant taking the lead in advocating unpopular but necessary programs. For editors, it meant putting out papers that educate and inform the public.

It should come as no surprise that the journalistic establishment is in the process of turning its back on its traditional obligations and viewing itself more purely as a profit-seeking business now. After all, this is what the political, legal, and medical establishments have been doing throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It is part of the *Zeitgeist*.

In blending increasingly into corporate America, journalism — like politics, law and medicine — is relinquishing its special status in society. Newspapers are no longer, in the words of A.J. Liebling, "a privately owned public utility."⁴⁸ Rather, they are commercial enterprises like any other, and as such they have become "more subject to control by managers schooled in profit making than by editors passionate for fierce journalism."⁴⁹

Finally, the specific kinds of changes that newspapers have instituted in response to their market research — shorter articles, more "up-beat" news, more graphics — reflect larger transformations in American society as well. With the printed word ceding power to the televised image, people's capacity for sustained attention to any kind of exposition has radically diminished. Neil Postman has persuasively argued that television has accustomed Americans to expect entertainment rather than argument or information, and has taught them to bring this expectation to every activity, including the reading of newspapers.

"[T]elevision is the paradigm for our conception of public information," Postman writes. "As the printing press did in an earlier time, television has achieved the power to define the form in which news must come, and it has also defined how we shall respond to it. In presenting news to us packaged as vaudeville, television induces other media to do the same, so that the total information environment begins to mirror television."⁵⁰

Newspapers engaged in the act of re-inventing themselves have indeed taken on more and more

of the properties associated with TV.

But acknowledging that newspapers' embrace of the marketing agenda reflects recent developments in American culture does not absolve newspaper executives of responsibility for their actions. Even within the context of the dominant cultural trends, it is possible to be more or less responsible, more or less committed to upholding the traditional standards of one's profession, and more or less honest with oneself

about the role one is playing and the consequences of one's actions.

What I have tried to argue in this paper is that the newspaper industry should frankly explore the harm caused to its traditional mission by its adoption of a marketing mentality. Newspapers are too important to the functioning of democracy for there to be so radical a transformation with so little self-examination and self-doubt.

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