



Beyond News: The Case for Wisdom Journalism

Citation

Stephens, Mitchell. "Beyond News: The Case for Wisdom Journalism." Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper Series 2009.D-53, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, June 2009.

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Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

Discussion Paper Series

#D-53, June 2009

Beyond News: The Case for Wisdom Journalism

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PRESS • POLITICS



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I. Introduction

Recent waves of technological change and economic contraction have left traditional news organizations floundering. Most are cutting back — often drastically. Some will fold. One particularly chilling result is that the number of reporters covering city halls, statehouses¹ and Baghdad is dropping. Our ability to be informed on public affairs seems at risk. “There is a diminishing supply of quality journalism,” warns Bill Keller, the executive editor of *The New York Times*.²

The question now echoing through journalism schools, opinion pages and, most urgently, newsrooms, is how that apparent decline might be slowed or even reversed. With a desperation characteristic of people whose livelihoods are at stake, journalists have been forced to rethink how “quality journalism” might be distributed and how it might be funded. Most have not, however, been rethinking what in these changing times “quality journalism” might be.

In an online dialogue with readers, Keller supplies a definition with which the bulk of his fellow journalists might agree: “By quality journalism I mean the kind that involves experienced reporters going places, bearing witness, digging into records, developing sources, checking and double-checking.” This, Keller tells his readers, is journalism that provides “the information you need to be an engaged citizen.” But is “quality journalism,” so defined, really the journalism citizens today require?

For “diminishing supply” can sometimes be a sign of diminishing need. And definitions of quality, like means of distribution and funding, are vulnerable to obsolescence. Consider — to jump fields and centuries for a moment — the case of Ernest Meissonier.³

Meissonier, who died in 1891, was long the most respected painter in Paris and, therefore, the world. His painstakingly accurate recreations of great events dominated the most important expositions and commanded the highest prices. But in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this notion that quality in art was dependent upon precision and verisimilitude faded. Ernest Meissonier's reputation tumbled after his death to the point where one major two-volume history of French art in the nineteenth century did not mention his name. The Louvre eventually exiled a marble statue of Meissonier from its halls.

This change in tastes can be attributed in part to a new technology: photography made producing painstakingly accurate recreations of just about anything easy and, therefore, cheap. Have technologies today, particularly technologies introduced in the past couple of decades, done the same with the painstaking gathering of information on current events? Have they outdated aspects of the kind of journalism championed by Bill Keller and most other traditional journalists? This paper argues that they have.

Information about almost all major news events now appears fast and free on Google, Yahoo or a hundred other websites — journalistic and not obviously journalistic. Witness on many major events of public interest is borne by cable news networks, wire-service reporters and others who were there and have access to a laptop, as well as by viewers of live feeds and YouTube, themselves. Facts, records, sources and (often aggressive) questioning of those facts, records and sources abound on the Web.

Issues of accuracy, bias, depth, accountability and professionalism may remain. Certainly — at special times, in special places — “bearing witness” can reveal and expose. Certainly, much can be uncovered by “digging into records” and “developing sources.” However, mere stenographic recording of great, public events has lost much of its value. Probably the Associated Press, Reuters

and a few additional news organizations will be able to make a go of supplying written or video accounts of such events to websites fast and in bulk. However, it is difficult to see many others basing a business model on the fruits of such run-of-the-mill reporting. Journalists need to sell something else.

The answer, this paper argues, is “wisdom journalism”: an amalgam of the more rarified forms of reporting — exclusive, investigative — with more informed, more interpretive, more explanatory, even more impressionistic or opinionated takes on current events.

This would require substantial changes in journalism as currently practiced: If providing insight rather than gathering facts is to become a main mission, traditional methods of hiring and promoting might no longer apply. The assignment structure would have to change. Evenhandedness might no longer be a dominant value. Original perspectives would push widely available information from whatever passes for a front page.

To survive in a world where news is plentiful and essentially free, journalism, the point is, requires a loftier definition of quality — not so much a newer definition as an older one.

II. Earlier Conceptions of Journalism

Perhaps because they are so focused on the here and now, journalists tend to avail themselves less of the lessons of their forbearers than presidents, say, or painters. But if in their current crisis they were disposed to consult history, our journalists might discover that their view of “quality journalism” is a relatively new one.

Many of those who mulled over the subject in the past saw, as most of us do today, the importance of good journalism to an engaged citizenry. “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers

or newspapers without a government,” writes Thomas Jefferson, famously, in a letter in 1787, “I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” Jefferson speaks in that letter of the importance of giving the people “full information of their affairs thro' the channel of the public papers.”⁴ But it is hard to see how, for him, that might have involved “experienced reporters going places, bearing witness, digging into records, developing sources, checking and double-checking.” In Jefferson’s America there were no such reporters.

Newspapers were, in those days, the products of individual printers, who culled out-of-town papers for interesting or important items; reprinted letters, speeches and transcripts; and then added disquisitions of their own or of their acquaintances. They rarely undertook excursions beyond their print shops. In 1731, in an early edition of his *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Benjamin Franklin had explained “that the business of printing has chiefly to do with men’s opinions, most things that are printed tending to promote some or oppose others.”⁵ The “business of printing,” although its main product was the *newspaper*, was not primarily the dissemination of news.

Humans, as I have argued elsewhere,⁶ have a basic thirst for news. But the news that has traditionally mattered most to most of us — news of our towns — still was monopolized in Franklin’s and Jefferson’s day by the oldest news medium: word of mouth. It was exchanged in taverns and coffee houses, on front porches and on the streets of places like Boston, New York and Philadelphia. No printer and no weekly could scoop neighborhood busybodies on an intriguing local political development or crime.

In 1791, Jefferson, then secretary of state, himself played a major role in the founding of a newspaper, *The National Gazette*. Yes, it contained information, including transcripts of congressional debates, but this newspaper was far from a mere witness to events. The paper was unabashedly pro-French and anti-British,

as was Jefferson, and it crusaded against the policies of the leader of the rival faction: Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, who had his own newspaper with which to crusade back. “The public papers” in Jefferson’s day were partisan publications. (They had quite a bit in common, it might be noted, with some of our blogs.)

In a later letter Jefferson argues again that “the only security of all is in a free press,” but then explains that what must be “permitted freely to be expressed” is “public opinion.”⁷ Writing in *The National Gazette* a couple of years after he helped draft the First Amendment, James Madison also emphasizes how important “a circulation of newspapers through the entire body of the people” is “to liberty.” Why? Because it “facilitates a general intercourse of sentiments”⁸ — *i.e.* opinions.

Opinions — in newspapers and pamphlets — rallied the American colonies against the British. Opinions then helped shape the new democracy. It is hard to imagine anyone at the time having anything glorious to say about mere news.

III. The Business of Selling News

It is almost impossible to speak of journalism today without using the word “news.” Our journalists work in “newsrooms,” for “newspapers,” “newscasts” or other “news organizations.” We lack alternative terms for these locales or enterprises. A “journalism room”? A “journalism-cast”? A “journalism organization”? Yet, it may be time to begin disentangling journalism from news.

The word “news,” in its current usage, is very old. However, “journalism” meant only the keeping of a private journal in Jefferson’s day. Its meaning morphed somewhat earlier in French, but, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “journalism” was first applied to work on newspapers in English in

1833.⁹ It was defined that year in the *Westminster Review* as “the intercommunication of opinion and intelligence.”¹⁰ “Intelligence” is an interesting synonym for news here, but a synonym nonetheless.

By then in London (more than in France or anywhere else) increased energy was being applied to the gathering of that “intelligence.” Many papers had begun employing “reporters” — a word that was itself making a transition: from teller or recorder of an event (perhaps using shorthand¹¹) to gatherer of news. London newspapers, now generally publishing daily, had begun hiring reporters and had become a place to look not just for clippings and opinion but for the information, the news, these reporters gathered. Newspapers on the outskirts of the English-speaking world, in North America, eventually followed suit.

And it was at about this time that two inventions arrived that would begin to tip the balance in “journalism” — this “intercommunication of opinion and intelligence” — further toward the latter, toward news: First came the steam press, which enabled “journalists” to distribute their newspapers quickly and widely. Then the telegraph arrived, giving “journalists” quick access to news from afar. Amateurs on the street began to have difficulty competing with these daily, steam-powered, wired, news behemoths. If you could obtain it quickly enough, if you could distribute it fast and far enough, you could make a business out of selling what humans had always exchanged for free.

It took the better part of the nineteenth century in the United States; it took the desperate hunger for “intelligence” occasioned by an unbelievably bloody war; it took the spread, in many endeavors, of a mindset that emphasized unvarnished facts; but “the business of printing” increasingly became the gathering and dissemination of news.

It wasn't necessarily the most distinguished of businesses. An 1869 magazine article on journalism by the American essayist Richard Grant White gives an idea of the status of the mere reporter of news: "Of the two branches of journalism, which are the gathering and the publication of news and the discussion and explanation of the events thus made public, the former is the more essential, the latter the more important." White ends up dismissing the former occupation, "essential" as it may be, as "almost purely mercantile and clerical."¹² In 1881, the English essayist Leslie Stephen (Virginia Woolf's father) characterized the "reporter of ordinary events and speeches" as "a bit of mechanism instead of a man."¹³

Only in the second half of the twentieth century did reporting news — not just "the discussion and explanation" of it — begin to gain real cachet.¹⁴ Ivy leaguers (enamored with the excitement and Hemingway) replaced high-school graduates (enamored with the excitement and the regular paycheck) on the White House beat, at city hall and soon, even, on the police beat. By "bearing witness, digging into records, developing sources" they brought down a president, exposed a massacre in Vietnam and shined a light on a wide variety of miseries and corruptions. Fact-obsessed reporters became heroes in a fact-obsessed age. (Indeed, "naïve realism," as the postmodernists call it, preserved its hold on journalism long after art and literature had moved on.) Journalism had *become* the painstakingly gathering of information on current events.

Journalists in Europe often maintained a more interpretive perspective on events — *The Telegraph* and *Le Figaro* from the right, for instance, *The Guardian* and *Le Monde* from the left. But in the United States, "intelligence," as quarry, was generally revered to the point where it was considered sinful to sully it by any "intercommunication" with opinion. The standard of "quality journalism"

before which Bill Keller and his cohort genuflect had been raised. All hailed the reporter.

IV. The End of the News Business

But then that period — perhaps, a century and a half long — during which it was possible to make a business out of selling news ended. It feels as if it has been sudden. It has not been that sudden.

By the 1920s, radio had begun disseminating news before the papers, even with their extras, could hit the streets. And radio arrived free. Newspapermen recognized the competition. They fought to retain their exclusive hold on Associated Press reports. They failed. Per capita newspaper circulation had begun its descent in the United States. Television news, too, was fast and free and awfully pleasing to the eye. Cable made it available around the clock. That descent accelerated. Extras and afternoon papers disappeared. Newspapers achieved their greatest respectability in the last third of the twentieth century as — and isn't this the way it goes — they were beginning to lose their audiences.

Then something rather sudden did happen. From nowhere, with hardly any advance warning, humankind stumbled upon probably the greatest information distribution machine in history, greater even than the printing press: the personal computer plus the Internet plus the World Wide Web. And within a decade and a half it seemed anything newspapers could do with news, websites, many of them subsidized by newspapers, could do better — for free. Websites are currently beginning to demonstrate the ability to outdo radio and television newscasts, too.

Consider, for an example, coverage of the agreement reached by the leaders of the world's largest economies — the G-20 — in London on April 2, 2009, at the height of the global financial crisis. (That was the day my researcher,

Angela Flores, and I decided to monitor a broad swath of news coverage.) British Prime Minister Gordon Brown began announcing the agreement at 11 a.m., New York time. CNN was among those broadcasting much of that announcement live.

Within three minutes of the beginning of Brown's talk, *The Guardian* newspaper in Britain, which was "live blogging" the event online, posted a quote from Brown that included the most newsworthy element of the agreement: a commitment by the members of the G-20 of about one trillion dollars mostly to the International Monetary Fund. *The Guardian*, unfortunately, made that one trillion *pounds*. By 11:10 the paper's live blogger published a brief list of all six of the group's pledges — with the space in front of one trillion now properly occupied by a dollar sign. At just about the same time — to pick a purposely obscure example — a live blogger, who may have been peeking at *The Guardian's* efforts, weighed in on a site called "Entangled Alliances." Entangled Alliances — the world's 938,076th ranked blog, according to Technorati — characterizes itself as emanating "from the keyboards of four young left-wing Brits." It published a similar, though not identical, summary of the G-20 pledges ten minutes into Brown's statement — with the currency denomination spot on.

USA Today, in a Web feature called "On Deadline," reprinted an Associated Press alert on the announcement by 11:16. The AP, Reuters and other news services quickly began reporting and updating the story. Fuller accounts, wire-service accounts, were up on the websites of — and this is just a tiny sample — MSNBC, *Huffington Post*, the Drudge Report and Yahoo by 11:50. Google News was tracking the G-20 agreement by 12:03. Six minutes later, *Politico* joined those linking to the full communiqué. And, of course, within the next couple of hours details of the agreement rapidly spread over the rest of news-inclined

radio, television and, in particular, websites. Video clips of Brown's statements could even be found on YouTube.

In other words, the whole world has become one big tavern, coffee house, front porch or street — through which news races, mostly for free. Major news organizations no longer obtain most news faster than anyone else: it was easy enough, for example, to watch Brown's speech live or read the actual agreement more or less when the reporters there read it. And major news organizations no longer distribute news faster than one of those "four young left-wing Brits" can.

The Associated Press, Reuters and some others still have a role here. They employ trained reporters and editors and are, thus, in a better position to get the facts right than a lonely harried, live blogger — even one employed by *The Guardian*. Moreover, they can — working with audio, video or written words — take the event, chop it up and package it, according to the old formulas, as a condensed, clear news story. Google News can then link to that — paying for the privilege either directly in the case of the AP or by sending lots of eyeballs to their sites.

But where does this leave the American network newscasts, which air at 6:30 in the evening? Wouldn't a good portion of their audiences have already known about the G-20 by then? And where does this leave *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*? By the time they appeared in print the next morning, what would it have taken *not* to have already learned what happened at that meeting of world leaders? It would have helped if you managed to avoid most of the available electronic communication in the previous nineteen or so hours (a talent more commonly displayed by the old than the young). Or it would have helped if you were rather uninterested in news. (Here the young may have a leg up.) These are not, however, audiences normally prized by major news organizations. Other more alert readers might have been forgiven a bit of a yawn

when they opened their newspapers over breakfast Friday morning only to be told, yet again, that “the leaders of the world’s largest economies agreed Thursday to....”¹⁵

One response to the now instant distribution of news would be for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to jump into the crowded competition to get the story if not first then at least as fast on the Internet — to, in essence, help scoop their own print editions. They have been doing this. Their reporters, increasingly outfitted for multimedia, trudge off to the major press conferences and disasters and attempt to do what the Associated Press, Reuters and everyone else does — only at greater length, with more thoroughness, employing more sophisticated writing and reporting: AP-plus.

The New York Times was posting and updating its own story on the G-20 agreement by 11:32 a.m. on April 2. *The Washington Post* was just a little tardier. The *Times* story, in a testament to the skills of its reporters, did present a particularly solid explanation of the agreement. It highlighted the failure of the Americans and the British to get other countries to agree to further stimulate their own economies. *The Times* and *The Post* then regularly beefed up their stories over the next few hours.

However, it is not clear that these stories, well reported as they may have been, did all that much to distinguish nytimes.com or washingtonpost.com from huffingtonpost.com or any of the other sites carrying the Associated Press story, which did a perfectly reasonable job of summarizing the announcement and noting the absence of agreement on further stimulus. And many dozens of other news organizations were slapping their own versions of the G-20 story up on their websites that day — from *The Financial Times*, to Bloomberg, to foreignpolicy.com, to NPR. Some of these were also eminently solid.

Fortunately, there is another tack our better journalists might take in the face of this oversupply of rapid, reasonably reported news. They could respond the way weeklies mostly responded when dailies arrived: instead of getting faster they could get wiser. Our major “news organizations” could pull back from the race for breaking news and attempt to produce — at daily, not hourly, speed — the most insightful interpretations of that news.

V. Adding Value

It is a question of value.

The Internet has proven a great and rapid depleter of value. The cost of making available anything that can be transformed into bits has fallen to essentially zero. Hordes of Internet entrepreneurs, interested parties and young left-wing and right-wing Brits, Yanks and residents of Tehran have, consequently, joined the world’s journalists in making accounts, transcripts, pictures and recordings of news events available. Supply has exploded, and news is now something people expect to get for free — like water out of a tap. Indeed, news now appears on so many Web pages that it is difficult to charge much for ads on those pages.

Journalists must, therefore, offer something less common, less cheap. A few of the more traditional and respected ways of adding value to a news publication or newscast still apply in this world of information excess. They have one thing in common: they are exclusives.

Exclusives are few and far between when a pack of hungry reporters descends on an event like the G-20 summit in London. Indeed, since most news is announced rather than uncovered, they are hard to come by on many major stories. Still, sometimes a reporter does manage to secure a vantage point webcams and other reporters do not occupy — at the scene of some atrocity

somewhere, perhaps. In such circumstances “going places, bearing witness” certainly can add journalistic value, even moral value.

And sometimes a source does pass on something eye-opening to just one, trusted reporter. Or an exclusive may, in fact, be the result of “digging into records, developing sources.” On the same day the front page of *The New York Times* featured its day-old account of that G-20 agreement, it also carried an exposé on the death of a Pakistani immigrant who had been detained in a New Jersey jail.¹⁶ This is investigative reporting. It, too, is original. It, too, has nobility. It, too, expands our store of knowledge. This is news that truly qualifies as “intelligence.” It should, no doubt, be part of any value-added approach to journalism.

News organizations cannot, however, depend exclusively on such exclusives. There aren’t enough of them. Even with their battalions of veteran reporters, even with their reputations as destinations of choice for leaks, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* can’t come close to filling their front pages each day with major scoops.

But interpretative articles, if they’re smart and interesting enough, are also exclusive — wire services reporters are unlikely to be peddling the same perspective all over the Web. And they can add something of significant civic and commercial value: new understandings.

VI. Current Efforts at “Analysis”

The front page of *The Washington Post* on March 6, 2009, caused a bit of a stir. A blog sponsored by *Washingtonian* magazine attacked it for supposedly carrying “no news.”¹⁷ “Welcome to the new age of daily newspapering,” writer Harry Jaffe protested on that blog, “where the actual news of the day has migrated to

the Internet or TV or radio or the inside pages of the paper. Bye-bye to the old ‘who-what-when-where-why.’”

What Jaffe had spotted was that none of the six stories on page one that day had a traditional five “W”s lead paragraph. All were important stories: about a sinking economy and plans to improve it (four of them), about Rush Limbaugh and Republican politics, about hunger in North Korea. But instead of just reporting what happened yesterday — though there was a fair amount of that, too — they considered; they characterized; they investigated; they measured effects and looked behind the scenes. They were doing quite a bit, that day, of what this paper argues they should do a whole lot, every day.

This is one sign that my argument isn’t as radical as it may seem (or that it isn’t as revelatory as I want it to seem). More and more interpretation is already appearing in newspapers and on newscasts. Not just in editorials — remnants of the era when the “business of printing” was “opinions.” Not just in columns and “op-ed” pieces — carefully walled off from the news stories that contemporary journalists consider to be their main business. Interpretation is appearing on news pages themselves.

“Analysis” is the journalist’s preferred word for such efforts to go beyond mere reportage — probably because it sounds clinical and, therefore, objective. Some stories in some papers even earn a special designation: “news analysis.” *The New York Times* ran one on the front page the day after the G-20 summit concluded,¹⁸ though it didn’t seem much more analytic than the news story on the summit agreement that ran above it. In part that’s because such “news analysis” pieces are limited by the traditional journalist’s almost inescapable reluctance to express a strong point of view. Too often these articles emit, consequently, the squishy, methodical sound of toothless rumination. “News

analysis” pieces also fail to stand out because reporters have been granted increased leeway to characterize, not just transcribe, in news stories themselves.

One quick, limited survey may help demonstrate that. In the main *New York Times* story reporting on the first speech given before a joint session of Congress by Presidents Truman through Carter, somewhere between 18 and 37 percent of the words were direct quotes from the speech.¹⁹ In those same stories on Presidents Reagan through Obama, 17 to as few as 8 percent of the words were taken by *The Times* reporter directly from the speech. This rough measure confirms, the point is, what careful newspaper readers may already have noticed: news stories are somewhat less stenographic than they used to be. If you look through news articles from Truman’s day to Obama’s, wordings that imply some sort of reportorial judgment, such as “thinly veiled swipe,” begin to appear more, direct verbs of attribution — “declared,” for example — are found less.

What is called “analysis” has also burgeoned on television news. On the evening newscasts of the three traditional networks presumably nonpartisan commentators take a seat beside the anchor and then are asked to step back for larger meanings or step up with inside dope; the late Tim Russert established the type. But the big change has come on cable. After a major news story has been introduced on CNN, it generally does not take long before an anchor turns to “our panel” for some perspective upon it — often partisan perspective. And on Fox, now MSNBC and a CNN show or two, as on talk radio, the anchors are often quite prepared to supply the partisan perspective themselves.

“Analysis” may not, in fact, be the best term for this phenomenon, since the word’s primary meaning is to break down into component parts in search of understanding. The *Oxford English Dictionary* supplies an unpretty example of this usage from 1667: “I tryed some Analysis of Bodies by letting Ants eat them.” Journalists hardly confine themselves to letting loose the ants. Sometimes they

synthesize rather than analyze. Sometimes they offer context, background or a peek behind scenes. Sometimes, unembarrassed by the *ad hominem*, they connect policy to style. Sometimes they explain, predict or conclude. The most partisan celebrate or, more commonly, bemoan.

“Interpretation” — coming up with a “meaning,” an “explanation” or a “significance” — seems better able to encompass the broad repertoire of tunes such commentators sing. But “interpretation” apparently sounds more subjective. It makes some traditional journalists uncomfortable.

Indeed, this whole business of moving beyond the mere telling of news makes traditional journalists uncomfortable. That explains why *The Post* could be attacked for its “newsless” front page and why the paper’s relatively new executive editor, Marcus Brauchli, felt called upon to respond to the charge that he lacked proper devotion to news. The way he phrased that response is instructive.

Brauchli professed a commitment to “tell our readers...why it’s happening, how it might affect them and what’s likely to happen next.”²⁰ He acknowledged — in other words, mine not his — that interpretation should be part of the paper’s mission, its front-page mission. But before he said that, Brauchli had to establish his bonafides as a “newsman.” He had to pay obeisance to the mission that had dominated the old, and romanticized, “age of daily newspapering.” “We tell our readers what’s happening,” Brauchli insisted — as his predecessors would have insisted. No matter, apparently, that most of those readers often already know what happened.

The discomfort traditional journalists continue to feel with providing interpretations also helps explain why they don’t always do such a good job of it.

On cable TV the talking heads* can seem a little shrill, unfair or uncomprehending. On the other hand, in newspapers and on network newscasts efforts to go beyond description can seem a little timid, predictable or flat. Too often they echo the consensus on the beat or at dinner parties. Sometimes, as in that *Times* “news analysis” on the G-20 summit, they rely just as heavily on quotes or paraphrases from newsmakers as do standard news stories. The word “wisdom” does not always come to mind when considering current efforts to chew over the news: with or without fangs.

And the appearance in newspapers of these more interpretive articles remains sporadic and unpredictable — even, so far, at Brauchli’s *Washington Post*. Sometimes a more “analytic” piece illuminates the major news event of the day (actually, in print, the major news event of yesterday) — sometimes readers must make do with only the traditional account. And there’s no guarantee in a newspaper that a columnist, an op-ed contributor or an editorial will bother to take up the subject on that day; these personages and pages operate by their own more leisurely schedules — their own whims.

The efforts of mainstream American journalism to explore the territory beyond plain reporting of news have, in other words, been tentative, spotty and unreliable. So bloggers have stepped into the gap. Indeed, that is surely among the explanations for the rapid success of bloggers — opinionated, snarky, smart — like Andrew Sullivan, Markos Moulitsas, Josh Marshall, Mickey Kaus, Ana Marie Cox, Ezra Klein and others. They are not restricted by “walls” between news and opinion and other vestigial remnants of an earlier journalism. They have a relatively clear view of where the value in journalism now lies: in

* It is also unfortunate that edited video and the other visual tools that can elevate television news tend to disappear when the “analysts” come on. We are left, instead, with extended images of the moving mouth of a Sean Hannity, Rachel Maddow or George Stephanopoulos.

exclusives, when available, but more often in intelligent, well reasoned interpretation, in attempts at wisdom.

VII. A Role as Teacher and Guide

Writing as American journalists were first saying hello to “the who-what-when-where-why,”²¹ Richard Grant White insists that a journalist, who “has any other purpose in life than to make money,” should aspire to the role of “teacher and guide.”²² It is in this role, White states, that the journalist “deserves respect.” White assumed that this judgment was shared. It is not widely shared by mainstream American journalism today, despite those hesitant, often unenlightening forays into “news analysis” and (mostly) walled-off opinion. Teachers and guides marshal accumulated learning and good sense in order to help us better comprehend something. We have come to expect less than that from our most respected journalists.

Contemporary American journalists are disposed, by instinct and training, to leave the teaching and guiding to expert sources. The *Times* news story on the G-20 agreement quotes an economics professor from Harvard and an economics professor from MIT.²³ Smart commentators, no doubt, but they are presumably being asked — as is usually the case in such interviews — to expatiate on complex subjects extemporaneously. And their unpolished comments, often part of extended arguments, are then sliced by the reporter into short quotations. These standard and accepted journalistic practices hardly encourage coherent and thorough interpretations. Why shouldn't the journalists writing the stories themselves be smart commentators?

“When my young friends consult me as to the conditions of successful journalism,” Leslie Stephen writes in 1881, “my first bit of advice comes to this:

know something really; at any rate, try to know something; be the slaves of some genuine idea, or you will be the slaves of a newspaper.”²⁴ Is there not need for journalists who themselves “really” know a lot? Might readers searching for some extra value not appreciate the more frequent flickering of a “genuine idea?” Aren’t journalists who fail to pursue ideas enslaving themselves to an increasingly unremunerative, unrewarding view of what journalism might be?

One reason mainstream reporters hide behind sources is to protect themselves against accusations of bias (which may be why *The Times*, trying to make a vaguely critical point on the G-20 agreement, fell back upon the sometimes disingenuous but always serviceable “some critics said”).²⁵ Accusations of bias are, to be sure, prominent in the complaints that pour into American news organizations. As long as journalists are seen primarily as collectors of news, as mere witnesses, they will be judged by the evenhandedness with which they collect, by the faithfulness and dispassion of their witness. Opinion will have to be suppressed, and journalists will end up putting considerable energy into disguising whatever point of view they may have achieved. However, if the goal of journalism is seen, instead, as imparting understanding of events, then accuracy and fairness still, of course, are crucial, but they are not all. Doesn’t insightfulness often benefit from a point of view — from a fair and well founded, but pointed, perspective?

Opinions, if they are held without reflection, can interfere with learning. But an opinion can also provide an impetus and a framework for learning. If we use opinions to sort out to whom we will deign to listen, they can narrow our perspectives. But turning to someone with a like mind can be useful in adapting old principles to new situations.²⁶ Why must most mainstream journalists work so hard to disguise the fact that they might be blessed with an opinion?

More interesting, more insightful, sometimes more opinionated perspectives on the G-20's doings did appear in the hours after the announcement. Some writers praised the willingness of rich countries to support so much additional IMF aid to developing countries — particularly in hard-hit Eastern Europe; others pondered the worthiness of the IMF, with its history of imposing tight strictures, as dispenser of such large sums. One raised the question of whether all this money being lent out by the IMF wouldn't in fact come from the sort of Keynesian money-printing stimulus the Americans and British supposedly had failed to secure in London. Don't such provocative perspectives contribute more to "our ability to be informed on public affairs," to recall Keller's phrasing, than just another outline of an increasingly familiar agreement?

These commentaries appeared on the websites of, for example, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*; in the blog Ezra Klein writes for *The American Prospect*; and even in a business column on page A12 of the next day's *Washington Post*.²⁷ Nothing like them appeared on the front pages of *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* the next morning. Why not?

VIII. Contemplating a World with Fewer Traditional Reporters

Many American journalists, it should be noted, believe that a move from "shoe-leather" reporting to what they dismiss as "thumb sucking" would be a disaster.

They have a point. We don't want "intelligence" overwhelmed by "opinion" — as it can be on some of our more impassioned radio talk shows, cable-news programs and websites. Nor do we gain from unsupported interpretations — points for which a case has not been made. Much continues to depend, therefore, on the marshalling of cold, hard facts — the raw materials out of which persuasive interpretations might be constructed.

In many ways the raw materials on current events are more easily obtained now than they once were. Cameras are increasingly aimed at rooms where news is made. Minutes, statements, records and transcripts appear on the Web. And swarms of gadflies note, kibitz, question, dissect, deconstruct and kvetch on their own blogs. News sources from around the world are now easily available, to those fortunate enough to have access to a computer, around the world. Given this flood of data it is hard to argue that our ability “to be informed on public affairs” is in decline, even in the traditional sense. Still, a certain amount of shoe-leather reporting — particularly for those hard to find facts, in hard to reach places — remains, as Richard Grant White put it, “essential.” Journalism’s teachers and guides can’t function without it. Who will supply this reporting?

Some newspaper journalists and their cheerleaders have been chanting, “If we don’t do it, nobody can.”²⁸ I suspect they are wrong. The wire services, to begin with, can supply us with accounts of the press conferences, the murders, the statements after G-20 summits. Web journalism — in the initial decade or two of its existence — may not yet have come up with a way to uncover much of what is now uncovered by the accomplished fact chasers of *The Times* and *The Post* but that doesn’t mean it won’t. It took the purveyors of newspapers a couple of centuries to develop reporting systems. We can allow bloggers a few more years before we conclude that it will never occur to them to put on a pair of pants and go see what’s going on.

Until Internet journalism matures, or if it remains in part in the hands of amateurs, we will have to remain alert for lapses in accuracy, accountability, fairness or ethical standards. (Although, to be fair, its hair-trigger feedback mechanisms have made this medium extraordinarily responsive to criticism and correction.) And if reporting of events ends up in part in the hands of the

sponsors of those events, then we will have to work hard to correct for lacunae, tilts and excesses of cheeriness.

Even after Internet journalism matures, some aspects of society may end up being more poorly reported than before. Support from nonprofits may be necessary to fill in the holes — in local or statehouse coverage, perhaps. But some aspects of society likely will end up being better reported. And not all forms of reporting will retain their value. With the volume of available information ever increasing, digesting, indexing, ordering and highlighting newsworthiness gain importance; transcribing and collecting lose importance. But the greatest value, as I have been arguing, lies in bringing wisdom to that huge pile of reported information. Which brings us back to the role not of the wire services or some diligent bloggers but of our best journalists.

IX. Creating a “Journalism Organization”

At most American news organizations the career ladder is as encrusted with tradition as are the stories. You work your way up through a series of beats — from covering a suburban town, say, to city politics to Washington. Such a resumé, or a stint at a wire service, might still be appropriate for the portion of wisdom journalists who specialize in exclusives or investigations. Experience exposing kickbacks at a local department of transportation would be good training for exposing kickbacks at the Defense Department.

However, it is not clear that the talents nurtured allotting the “allegedly”s on the police beat or developing sources at city hall necessarily translate into an ability to pen front-page news analyses or a column. Indeed, it is a demonstration of sorts of the “Peter Principle” that a position in which a point of view is of use should be the reward for a career of suppressing evidence of such a point of view.

If you were to construct from scratch an organization capable of discussing the major events in the nation and the world each day, wouldn't you want to hire individuals who, to use Leslie Stephen's wording, "know something really" — who have earned the right to interpret? Yes, of course, they would have to be able to write — to write well. (The value of engaging prose has, perhaps, not been well enough exploited in newsrooms consumed by a fever for facts.) And, of course, they would have to be attuned to the contemporary world — ready to go out and observe, ask, listen and test their ideas, ready to talk to sources (though not to depend entirely on sources). Nothing said here is meant to imply that these new wisdom journalists have leave to retreat to ivory towers while producing their deeper understandings. News is still best understood in the places where it is made and where its impact is felt.

But wouldn't it be useful if, instead of a background sparring with mayors and police chiefs, four or five of these hires brought an expertise on macroeconomics, for instance, and another four or five were well versed on the Middle East?

I don't pretend such individuals would be easy to find. I do believe they could be found. Academics who can write — some of whom are already maintaining respected blogs — certainly might be recruited for these distinguished and influential positions. If journalism programs insist, as some are now doing,²⁹ that their students master a subject matter not just techniques, they could supply candidates. But the requisite expertise would not have to be certified by a degree. It might come instead from private study or life experiences. Some years having reported on business or in the Mideast certainly wouldn't hurt. However, instead of fact-oriented generalists who are dependent upon expert sources, the idea would be to hire idea-oriented specialists who know as much as the expert sources.

And then you would make sure one of these commentators was assigned each day to shed some light on each of the major stories of the day. Editors and producers now go to great trouble to include accounts of those stories — although much of their audience no longer depends on them for such accounts. The argument here is that our top journalistic organizations should instead be working, with similar diligence, to make sure they include an interesting interpretation of each of those stories — probably with a brief recap of the news a few paragraphs down in the article, for those who haven't been keeping up.

Can serious, mind-expanding interpretation be fashioned fast — to meet daily deadlines? It requires a deep familiarity with a field. It requires a deep involvement with the latest developments. But some did prove able to accomplish this within hours of the conclusion of that G-20 summit.

X. Conclusion — The Five “I”s and an “O”

This is a call, then, for a major reworking of journalism — of its purposes and its structures. Quality journalism, the point is, should be defined not by the ability to bear witness, to pursue facts, to array the five “W”s, but by the ability to write stories that are interpretive, informed, intelligent, interesting and insightful. This list of goals should also include a word beginning with another letter: original.

Achieving the five “I”s and an “O” will require more of journalists — more education in a subject, probably, more study, more thoughtfulness, fresher thinking. It will require the ambition not to recount, not only to uncover, but to explain, illuminate and enlighten.

Audiences for journalism will also have increased responsibilities — as audiences for art did after the easily intelligible recreations of events of Ernest Meissonier were replaced by impressionism and all that followed. Readers and viewers will be asked to grapple with shifting and sometimes unexpected

perspectives upon the news. They may, at times, be left to brief themselves more thoroughly on the who-what-when-where-why. However, education levels have risen dramatically since the heyday of the old just-the-facts, descriptive journalism. Other forms of media — films, television programs, even videogames — have grown increasingly complex, even difficult.³⁰ I suspect many of those who partake of journalism — the best journalism — are ready to be more consistently challenged.

Journalists have long leaned toward simplicity and straightforwardness: hyper-clarity, elemental narrative structures, uncontroversial political perspectives and easily verifiable depictions. No one is suggesting that they indulge in obtuseness or irrelevance. But they might aim — in this new environment, I believe, they *must* aim — significantly higher.

Endnotes

- ¹ See Jennifer Dorroh, "Statehouse Exodus." *American Journalism Review*, April/May 2009.
- ² "Talk to the Newsroom: Executive Editor." NYTimes.com, January 30, 2009.
- ³ See Ross King, *The Judgment of Paris*. New York: 2006.
- ⁴ Thomas Jefferson, letter to Edward Carrington, January 16, 1787. In Joyce Appleby and Terence Ball, ed., *Jefferson: Political Writings*. Cambridge: 1999.
- ⁵ Benjamin Franklin, "An Apology for Printers." *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 10, 1731. In Nathan G. Goodman, ed., *A Benjamin Franklin Reader*. New York: 1945.
- ⁶ See Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News*. Third Edition, New York: 2007.
- ⁷ Thomas Jefferson, letter to the Marquis de La Fayette, November 4, 1823. In Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, *Memoir, Correspondence and Miscellanies: From the Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. Charlottesville: 1829.
- ⁸ James Madison, "Public Opinion." *National Gazette*, December 19, 1791. In Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The Writings of James Madison*, VI. New York: 1906.
- ⁹ The word "journalist," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, made the transition earlier. Voltaire, for example, used "journalist" in 1737 to mean "contemporary historian." Voltaire, "On History: Advice to a Journalist." In Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*. New York: 1956.
- ¹⁰ This article itself was translated from the French. *Westminster Review*, Volume XVIII. London: January-April, 1833. "Du Journalism," *Revue Encyclopédique*. Paris: September, 1832.
- ¹¹ Isaac Pitman's book is entitled, *The Reporter: Or, Phonography Adapted to Verbatim Reporting*. Bath: 1846.
- ¹² Thanks to Brooke Kroeger for bringing this article to my attention. Richard Grant White, "The Morals and Manners of Journalism." *The Galaxy*, December 1869, VIII, 6. American Periodicals Series, 840.
- ¹³ Leslie Stephen, "The Duties of Authors." In Leslie Stephen, *Social Rights and Duties*, II, 154-6. London: 1896.
- ¹⁴ War reporting gained cachet earlier, with dashing reporters like William Howard Russell, Richard Harding Davis and Stephen Crane. However, they were known for their literary and interpretive abilities, and their courage, more than for their adeptness with facts.
- ¹⁵ Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, "World Leaders Pledge \$1.1 Trillion to Tackle Crisis." *The New York Times*, April 3, 2009.
- ¹⁶ See Nina Bernstein, "Immigrant Detainee Dies, And a Life Is Buried, Too." *The New York Times*, April 3, 2009.
- ¹⁷ Thanks to Maralee Schwartz for directing me to this story. Harry Jaffe, "Flash: Front Page of Washington Newspaper Contains No News." Capital Comment Blog, Washingtonian.com, March 6, 2009. Jaffe, to be fair, has interesting, nuanced views of *The Post's* situation.

¹⁸ Helene Cooper, "On the World Stage, Obama Issues an Overture." *The New York Times*, April 3, 2009.

¹⁹ For a different reading of historical coverage of presidential messages to Congress, see Michael Schudson, "The Politics of Narrative Form: The Emergence of News Conventions in Print and Television." *Daedalus*. 111, 4, Fall 1982, 97-112.

²⁰ "Brauchli Responds to Jaffe 'No News' Claim." *FishbowlDC*, mediabistro.com, March 6, 2009.

²¹ See David Mindich, *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism*. New York: 2000.

²² Richard Grant White, "The Morals and Manners of Journalism." *The Galaxy*, December 1869, VIII, 6. American Periodicals Series, 840.

²³ Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, "World Leaders Pledge \$1.1 Trillion to Tackle Crisis." *The New York Times*, April 3, 2009.

²⁴ Leslie Stephen, "The Duties of Authors." In Leslie Stephen, *Social Rights and Duties*, II, 156. London: 1896.

²⁵ Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, "World Leaders Pledge \$1.1 Trillion to Tackle Crisis." *The New York Times*, April 3, 2009.

²⁶ I owe this point to Thomas Patterson.

²⁷ "G-Force." Economist.com, April 2, 2009. Dean Baker. Guardian.co.uk, April 2, 2009. Ezra Klein, "IMF FTW." Prospect.org, April 2, 2009. Steven Pearlstein, "A Rare Triumph of Substance at the Summit." *The Washington Post*, April 3, 2009.

²⁸ Here's John S. Carroll, a former editor of *The Los Angeles Times*: "Newspapers dig up the news. Others repackage it"; Mitchell Stephens, "Beyond the News." *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 2007.

²⁹ To pick my own program as an example, New York University's Carter Institute of Journalism now offers specialized masters programs in, among other subjects, science, health and environmental journalism; cultural reporting; and business and economic journalism. And all undergraduate journalism majors are also required to complete another major in the liberal arts.

³⁰ See Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You*. New York: 2006.