

# MAPPING DIGITAL MEDIA: DIGITAL MEDIA AND INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

By Mark Lee Hunter



# Digital Media and Investigative Reporting

WRITTEN BY

Mark Lee Hunter<sup>1</sup>

The turmoil afflicting traditional media may well lead to a renaissance for investigative journalism in digital media. Whether or not this happens, however, will probably depend on whether journalists can come to terms with profound shifts in both the ethical and the commercial values of their work. This paper argues that objectivity will be increasingly displaced by transparency as an ethical base for journalism. On the commercial side, ubiquity will have greater value than exclusivity.

The first half of this prediction is already clearly emerging in media such as internet forums, and also in the growing prominence of NGOs and of “stakeholder media”. The second half depends on monetizing journalism as a service, more than as a product. The core journalistic service is becoming the provision of solutions to audiences increasingly concerned by threats to their prosperity and liberty.

Critical aggregation and the customizing of investigative content for specific audiences within wider networks are two emerging features of this emerging business model. Digital media are not the only forces driving this shift, but they do enable and support it in ways that traditional media are no longer so capable of achieving.

---

1. Mark Lee Hunter is Adjunct Professor and Senior Research Fellow at INSEAD Social Innovation Centre.

# Mapping Digital Media

The values that underpin good journalism, the need of citizens for reliable and abundant information, and the importance of such information for a healthy society and a robust democracy: these are perennial, and provide compass-bearings for anyone trying to make sense of current changes across the media landscape.

The standards in the profession are in the process of being set. Most of the effects on journalism imposed by new technology are shaped in the most developed societies, but these changes are equally influencing the media in less developed societies.

The Media Program of the Open Society Foundations has seen how changes and continuity affect the media in different places, redefining the way they can operate sustainably while staying true to values of pluralism and diversity, transparency and accountability, editorial independence, freedom of expression and information, public service, and high professional standards.

The **Mapping Digital Media** project, which examines these changes in-depth, aims to build bridges between researchers and policy-makers, activists, academics and standard-setters across the world.

The project assesses, in the light of these values, the global opportunities and risks that are created for media by the following developments:

- the switchover from analog broadcasting to digital broadcasting
- growth of new media platforms as sources of news
- convergence of traditional broadcasting with telecommunications.

As part of this endeavour, Open Society Media Program has commissioned introductory papers on a range of issues, topics, policies and technologies that are important for understanding these processes. Each paper in the **Reference Series** is authored by a recognised expert, academic or experienced activist, and is written with as little jargon as the subject permits.

The reference series accompanies reports into the impact of digitization in 60 countries across the world. Produced by local researchers and partner organizations in each country, these reports examine how these changes affect the core democratic service that any media system should provide – news about political, economic and social affairs. Cumulatively, these reports will provide a much-needed resource on the democratic role of digital media.

The **Mapping Digital Media** project builds policy capacity in countries where this is less developed, encouraging stakeholders to participate and influence change. At the same time, this research creates a knowledge base, laying foundations for advocacy work, building capacity and enhancing debate.

The **Mapping Digital Media** is a project of the Open Society Media Program, in collaboration with the Open Society Information Program.

### **MAPPING DIGITAL MEDIA EDITORS**

Marius Dragomir and Mark Thompson (Open Society Media Program).

### **EDITORIAL COMMISSION**

Yuen-Ying Chan, Christian S. Nissen, Dušan Reljić, Russell Southwood, Michael Starks, Damian Tambini.

The Editorial Commission is an advisory body. Its members are not responsible for the information or assessments contained in the Mapping Digital Media texts.

### **OPEN SOCIETY MEDIA PROGRAM TEAM**

Biljana Tatomir, deputy director; Meijinder Kaur, program assistant; Morris Lipson, senior legal advisor; Miguel Castro, special projects manager; and Gordana Jankovic, director

### **OPEN SOCIETY INFORMATION PROGRAM TEAM**

Vera Franz, senior program manager; Darius Cuplinskas, director

The views expressed in this publication do not represent, or necessarily reflect, the views of the Open Society Foundations.

# Contents

1. Introduction: The Decline of the News Industry and the Second Coming of Investigative Journalism .....	6
2. How Digital Media Change the Collection, Composition, and Distribution of Watchdog News .....	9
3. How Digital Media Changed the Ethics of News .....	15
Bibliography.....	19

# 1. Introduction: The Decline of the News Industry and the Second Coming of Investigative Journalism

When the Watergate affair began in 1972, the fledgling internet was still a closed club of university research centres, and investigative reporting—telling the stories that powerful people do not want to be told—was considered “just good old-fashioned journalism” by most people in the business. Watergate replaced that myth with two others: that investigative reporting is about meeting deep throats in dark places rather than mastering diverse and complex skills, such as analyzing data;<sup>2</sup> and that the revelation of government secrets spontaneously mobilizes an outraged public to demand reform.<sup>3</sup> Most important, Watergate raised the expectation, among both media professionals and the public, that watchdog reporting must be a core mission of the news media.<sup>4</sup>

It isn't—not everywhere, and not always. Brant Houston, a former director of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE),<sup>5</sup> used to say that the owners and managers of the news industry were trying to destroy it, but were too incompetent to succeed. He meant that the news industry, instead of finding vital untold stories, was doing its best to create worthless product. (What does the daily truth about Britney Spears really add to one's life?)

---

2. But not for Ullmann and Colbert (1991). In their classic manual, these authors pointed out that most news reporting neither required nor displayed the slightest investigation, and that many reporters lacked essential skills (in particular, those described in the manual).

3. Breslin (1975) hinted at another narrative: President Richard Nixon's political organization was perceived as extortionist by the business community, and in revenge its members and institutions allowed him to be swept away in Watergate.

4. It is a myth that there was no investigative reporting before Watergate, in the United States or elsewhere. However, except for brief periods like the muckraker era in the United States (roughly 1900–1912), there had never been so much of it as after Watergate, not only in the United States, but also countries like France, where the impact of Watergate on news media has been shown to be profound and persistent (see Hunter, 1997).

5. IRE was founded in 1975 as a non-profit corporation and remains the largest and most influential association of investigative reporters in the world, thanks to its conferences, manuals, and awards programs. Its membership numbered 3,695 in 2009: a 10-year low.

One can debate such opinions, but there is no debate at all on a key point: The global news industry is losing human capacity. Certainly, in fast-developing nations like India, Brazil, and China, the traditional media are expanding. In the United States, however, newspaper employment peaked at 56,400 in 2001, then fell by 14,900 through 2009, a decline of 26 percent.<sup>6</sup> In the UK, after “an overall pattern of relative [job] stability and gradual increases” through the first half of this decade, in the following years up to one-third of journalism jobs disappeared. Some 40,000 remain after 9,500 jobs were cut in 2007–2009 alone.<sup>7</sup>

Do fewer journalists mean fewer investigations? The short answer is apparently “yes.” The *American Journalism Review* reports that “applications for Pulitzers are down more than 40 percent in some investigative categories.”<sup>8</sup> Reporters are becoming more and more dependent on sources who essentially write their stories for them: In the UK, over 60 percent of the content of print and broadcast news items has been shown to be taken mainly or entirely from public relations materials.<sup>9</sup> It can also safely be asserted that the public has noticed that when they pay for news, they get less: In the United States, the Pew Center reports that no major American news media are considered even “mostly” credible by more than one in three survey respondents,<sup>10</sup> and similar data can be shown for other countries.

All of this is bad news for shareholders in media corporations, but not necessarily for those who believe in the value of investigative reporting. First, while the news media offer debases content, significant audiences are looking elsewhere for information, notably on the internet. Likewise, as the news industry disinvests from watchdog reporting, the opportunity to capture that mission along with a share of the news audience becomes a real possibility for innovative media.

Such media are indeed emerging from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-profit enterprises, and communities of practice and interest. The websites and other content created by such groups can be called stakeholder media, to distinguish them from social media like Twitter. The purpose of stakeholder media is to further the goals or values of a particular group of people. At this writing, they are among the main drivers of innovation in investigative reporting.

Consider WikiLeaks.org, which publishes documents or films provided by anonymous sources within governments and companies. One could call it a stakeholder media for people who want official business conducted openly and honestly. The site is famous, but that status is very recent. In March 2010, exactly

---

6. These figures are provided by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), which has conducted annual surveys in newsrooms since 1978. See “U.S. newsroom employment declines,” posted 16 April 2009, available at [http://asne.org/article\\_view.aspx](http://asne.org/article_view.aspx) (accessed 7 November 2010). The year after that report was published, ASNE reported a further 5,200 job losses in newsrooms.

7. F. Nel, “Laid Off: What Do UK Journalists Do Next?,” Journalism.co.uk and University of Central Lancashire, September 2010, available at <http://www.journalism.co.uk/uploads/laidoffreport.pdf> (accessed 18 November 2010).

8. M. Walton, “Investigative Shortfall,” *American Journalism Review*, September 2010, available at [www.ajr.org](http://www.ajr.org) (accessed 18 November 2010).

9. J. Lewis, A. Williams, R. Franklin, J. Thomas, and N. Mosdell, “The Quality and Independence of British Journalism: Tracking the Changes over 20 Years,” Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, undated (last reference in text is 2007).

10. “Survey Reports: Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources,” Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 17 August 2008, available at <http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=1358> (accessed 7 November 2010).

five people showed up to hear the WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange, speak at an investigative journalism conference in Norway, and the year before that WikiLeaks nearly shut down for lack of funding.

A very few major stories put WikiLeaks on the map in spring 2010. The stories migrated to WikiLeaks because it established itself as the safest outlet for the world's whistle-blowers. The site's sources use secure channels to upload documents via email. After verifying the material and commenting on it, WikiLeaks publishes through its own website, on YouTube, or more recently, in partnership with leading newspapers. Similar initiatives have sprung up elsewhere: During the winter of 2009/10, an anonymous Latvian hacker began releasing masses of documents about misuse of public funds by banks and the state in Latvia.<sup>11</sup>

Let us put aside the top-secret aspect of such initiatives, and observe three lessons implicit in their growing impact:

- Various media, digital or traditional, can now be combined into new models of how information is collected, composed, and distributed. WikiLeaks uses email, online print, and video, and partnership with offline print media to get its stories out.
- The roles of content providers and users are mutating, with each becoming more like the other. The audience does not only consume but also contributes information. The role of the professional still includes shaping information into a story, but it also involves coordinating a continual, open process of commentary and revision.
- Transparency is supplanting objectivity as a criterion of value for the public. Audiences suspicious of credibility want to know why something is published. Audiences accustomed to interactive online media do not ask whether the person or organisation that brings them the news is “objective,” or neutral toward the outcome of events. They do ask whether or not content creators clearly disclose their interests in a given outcome.

---

11. “Latvian ‘Robin Hood’ Hacker Leaks Bank Details to TV,” BBC News, 24 February 2010, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8533641.stm> (accessed 7 November 2010.)



## 2. How Digital Media Change the Collection, Composition, and Distribution of Watchdog News

### 2.1 The Low-Hanging Fruit: Aggregation and Interactivity

Thanks to digital media, certain kinds of information have become easier to obtain and publish over the past decade. The forces driving this trend are aggregation (in essence, collecting what already exists) and interactivity, in which viewers become contributors. A common formula heard around new media creators is that a successful website must offer content that is one-third aggregation, one-third user-generated, and one-third original.

#### 2.1.1 Aggregation (and Why it Must be Critical)

In essence, any fact that exists in a public archive or database, or that has been cited in the news media, or has been discussed in an online forum, is now immediately accessible through the internet. (The question of whether the “fact” is merely disinformation is interesting, but does not concern us here.) Put another way, the past of any issue, or of any large organization, can swiftly be documented by anyone who knows how to use a search engine, or better yet, who knows how to program a “scraper” function that will collect any and all pertinent data off the internet. In fact, many stakeholder media function as aggregators on a given subject, creating an archival vision of its past in order to predict its future.

Two examples of stakeholder aggregators are Ethicalconsumer.org, a UK firm that maintains a database of consumer boycotts and protests against businesses, and Kaas & Mulvad, a Danish company founded by two investigative reporters who specialize in data-driven, journalistic analyses of information available on the web.<sup>12</sup>

---

12. See <http://www.kaasogmulvad.dk/english/about/> (accessed 7 November 2010).

However, it is crucial to note that media which merely compile any and all information related to a subject offer little or no value to the end users. Some information must be set aside; viewers go to a source of information not only for what it includes, but for what it excludes. In both these ways, media reduce their search costs, which is no small thing. A second key issue involves interpretation: Viewers do not only want information, they also want to know its meaning. Thus successful aggregation must be doubly critical: it must choose what is worth keeping or throwing away, and then uncover its sense for the viewer.

One of our favourite examples of aggregation is a French website called radins.com, “cheapies.com.” The site aggregates free offers and money-saving tips from sponsors and users. All content is verified by the site’s staff to make sure that the benefits are genuine. As watchdog journalism goes, this is a modest ambition, but it helps to make life better, every day, for the site’s 2 million monthly visitors (and also for the staff, who likewise profit from the tips and offers). The British equivalent is moneysavingexpert.com, run by a financial journalist, Martin Lewis, which claims almost 7 million unique visits per month. Watchdog media activists are not always seen as benefactors, and it would not hurt them to think of more ways in which they can directly help their end users. As the “live better for less” sites show, listening to those users is a first step.

## 2.1.2 Interactivity: How User-generated Content Changes Audience Expectations

### *The Demand to Participate*

One can never say enough that one of the most important differences between digital media and previous media is the possibility for end users to participate immediately in content creation, through propositions or reactions. Interactivity has been a key feature of the internet since the creation of bulletin boards in the 1980s, followed by forums in the early 1990s. These are different names for discussion groups, and as late as 1997 they were estimated to account for 40 percent of all content on the internet (the figure may be an exaggeration, but these groups are nonetheless massive content banks).<sup>13</sup> They remain the prototype for social media like Facebook, which is essentially a collection of forums among people who consider themselves friends. (Readers who do not already belong to an online discussion group might consider joining one simply to experience how they function. The best choice is always a forum that is focused on a subject one cares about, because otherwise one will not visit it regularly and learning will be minimal.)

Online discussion groups are frequently denigrated (not least by news industry executives) as tedious, silly, ignorant, and so on. But this hardly explains their popularity. The truth is that a large number of groups provide their members with detailed and often expert information on the subjects that interest them. This factor is evident in “user forums,” where the owners of cars or cameras discuss the merits and flaws of the products. One of their major functions is to enable new users of specific technologies or devices to access the expert knowledge and problem-solving capabilities of more experienced users. Companies as varied as Microsoft and Lego have monitored these forums to see how users are modifying (and sometimes improving) their offerings.

---

13. The figure is cited in Revelli (1998), without a source.

The current term for these practices is “crowdsourcing,” and it has growing implications for investigative journalism. An early use of it appeared during the “Monicagate” crisis of the Clinton presidency, when a pornography publisher, Larry Flynt, offered large sums of money to anyone who could produce damaging information on Clinton’s Republican adversaries. More recently, an internet activist, Isaac Mao, tapped forum members in China to investigate the phony “discovery” of a rare tiger in a Chinese province, with hundreds of participants each contributing a detail or insight. In the UK, *The Guardian*’s “Investigate Your MP’s Expenses” essentially seeks volunteer labour: participants are provided with MP expense reports, then asked “to identify individual claims, or documents that you think merit further investigation.”<sup>14</sup>

The sites [spot.us](http://spot.us) and [helpmeininvestigate.com](http://helpmeininvestigate.com) likewise ask visitors to contribute information, and also to propose and fund investigations. Not incidentally, Greenpeace’s reliance on individual donations (often targeted AT specific campaigns) and volunteer investigative teams clearly parallels these innovations. In sum, crowdsourcing is popular now in part because it appears as a way to collect revenues and reduce labour costs, and to some extent it can be effective in both these regards.

There are limits to crowdsourcing from an investigative standpoint, however. The most important one is that unlike skilled journalists, most people cannot tell a complicated story in an interesting way. Julian Assange recounts that WikiLeaks assembled citizen panels to transform leaked documents into stories for non-specialists. The work, he recalled, was “like pushing shit uphill.” Put another way, crowdsourcing works best when someone with the requisite skills is driving, guiding, and correcting the process.

### ***The Demand for Personalised Solutions***

Perhaps the most important consequence of these communities is that they are training their members to expect that media will solve their personal problems. Recall that when someone visits a user forum, it is often because he or she is experiencing a problem that requires outside help and counsel. It can be predicted that viewers who have participated in such communities will not be satisfied by investigative stories that merely denounce a problem; they will expect journalists to also provide or point to a solution, and one that is customized to their community’s needs. The news industry is waking up to this nascent demand, as this extract from a US television station’s website shows:<sup>15</sup>

At Channel 13 Action News, we’re working hard to make Southern Nevada a better, safer place for you to live, work, and raise your family. In order to do that, we need your help identifying the problems in this community. That’s why we’ve started a segment on Action News, called *You Ask. We Investigate*. You let us know what issues concern you, and we will do our best to investigate and help solve the problem.

---

14. See <http://mps-expenses.guardian.co.uk/> (accessed 7 November 2010).

15. See <http://www.ktnv.com/global/story.asp?s=12558480> (accessed 7 November 2010).

### *The Discounting of Production Values*

A further effect of interactivity and user-generated content is that it is changing the end user's perception of what constitutes acceptable production values (that is, how beautifully a piece of media is packaged and produced). A video does not have to resemble a Hollywood production to be a hit on YouTube. Nor must a blogger have an elegant literary style in order to gain a following. The explosion of the end user into the foreground of media does not eliminate the advantages of knowing how to produce professional-looking content, but it relativizes those advantages.

This is not an invitation to do a sloppy job. It is a warning that the competition may have lower professional standards, and a significant part of the potential audience may have no objection. Media activists should object, however, because the most demanding part of their audience, which is also usually the most influential, will not lower its standards. This part includes other media professionals, whose decision whether to republish a given story will be based largely on the perceived professionalism of the content and format.

## **2.2 Spreading the News: Building the Necessary Leverage**

### **2.2.1 From Exclusivity to Shared Content**

Prior to digital media the success of a given project was determined by how many people bought the final product—a record album, a novel, and so forth. The rents on such intellectual property have been harshly affected by digital technologies which make rapid, inexpensive copying and redistribution simple. Piracy is unjust for authors and publishers, but it is here to stay, and it is changing the nature of success in the media: Success is no longer determined by the exclusivity and rarity of a product (such that to enjoy it one must buy it), but by the extent to which it is shared among users and other media.

This shift has a direct implication for watchdog media. The best extant research demonstrates that for an investigative story to have impact, it must be distributed by media far beyond its origin, either because public outrage is so great that competing media cannot ignore it, or because a coalition of forces adopts and promotes the cause.<sup>16</sup> The desire to profit from the exclusivity of a story (and conversely, to limit the profits a competitor may draw from an exclusive story) has lessened the impact of numerous investigations. In a time of instantaneous copying and transmission, other distribution strategies are viable, both as activist tactics and in financial terms.

In financial terms, one future for investigative journalism resembles the outsourcing of services, by which one firm provides capacity that another lacks. Focussed operating units can fill the holes created by downsizing in the news industry. For example, the Washington, DC-based print and online newspaper *Politico*, which specializes in in-depth reporting on the operatives who really make politics, covers issues implicating different

---

16. D.L. Protess, F.L. Cook, J.C. Doppelt, J.S. Ettema, M.T. Gordon, D.R. Leff et al., *The Journalism of Outrage: Investigative Reporting and Agenda Building in America*, New York: Guilford Press, 1991.

regions for newspapers that have closed their Washington bureaus. This coverage is paid for by advertising, and participating newspapers share in the revenue. A similar strategy appears to be under exploration at the Center for Public Integrity, the first foundation-supported investigative reporting organization, founded in 1990 by Charles Lewis. Its initial charter called for rejecting advertising revenue; in a recent shift, the institution announced the goal of getting half its funding from content sales and advertising.<sup>17</sup>

Foundation-supported investigative bureaus like ProPublica also provide capacity for commercial news organizations, but as a free public service. There are strong arguments for giving away content free on the internet, but these are strongest when free distribution is active, in contrast to simply waiting for someone to visit a website. Participants in discussion forums regularly post articles they have collected from the web, functioning as occasional news services. NGOs like Greenpeace distribute their reports and articles free, and their campaigns are supported by the sites of other NGOs that reprint this material.

An emerging strategy here is to swarm around a subject, attacking it from numerous angles, and engaging a continually wider circle of stakeholders who generate continuous news. In one case that was studied at the INSEAD Social Innovation Centre, the oil firm BP was forced to revise its Arctic exploration plans when first Greenpeace, then other environmental groups, then activist shareholders, and finally BP's own employees in Alaska pressured the company to restrict and clean up its operations. Each of these groups owned its own media or had access to media owned by stakeholders.<sup>18</sup>

The key principle is that an isolated investigator cannot hope to achieve change, especially when faced with entrenched adversaries. Allies must be actively sought, and content is the currency of these alliances. Information, insight, and analysis can be traded. These exchanges define a wider community of interest for a given subject. They may be a source of influence, of revenue, or of recruitment. They are thus a vital vector of success.

### 2.2.2 Maximizing Value Through Networking

Digital media also enable a strategy of free distribution to promote personal services such as lecturing, training or consulting. These services may likewise be free, or they can be turned into sources of revenue. The first to adopt this strategy were apparently not news media activists, but musicians. Faced with the impact of piracy on record sales, some musicians began distributing their product without charge, in order to promote live appearances. This example was followed by the authors of *Story-Based Inquiry: A Manual for Investigative Journalists*. The text was originally conceived as a manual for Arab journalists. In the Arab world as elsewhere, many people who need such a manual cannot afford to buy it, which pointed toward free distribution. A second goal of the authors was to enable paid work as trainers for themselves and others. They therefore

---

17. J. Coffman, J. Miller, and V. Acquah, "Digital Transitions: Nonprofit Investigative Journalism : Evaluation Report on the Center for Public Integrity," Miami, FL: John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2010.

18. M.L. Hunter, L.N. Van Wassenhove, and M. Besiou, "Stakeholder Media: The Trojan Horse of Corporate Responsibility," Fontainebleau: INSEAD Working Paper, 2010 (hereafter Hunter et al., "Stakeholder Media").

published the manual with UNESCO as a pdf file that could be downloaded free in English and Arab. The day after it was released on UNESCO's site, about 120 other websites posted it for download.

All of these strategies require active networking. Finding communities that share one's values and can use one's materials necessitates research into forums and websites. Direct personal contacts are more influential than virtual contacts, which means one must be physically present at regular intervals in the communities one hopes to influence. Because audiences on the internet are largely organized as communities of practice or interest, outreach must seek to implant news and causes in an ever-expanding ring of sympathetic communities.

Do not underestimate the power of such strategies over time. The movement that forced Nike to humanize its production of shoes began with scattered labour NGOs in Asia in the late 1980s, became a focus issue of NGOs in the United States in the early 1990s, and exploded as a mass student movement with the arrival of the internet in the mid- to late 1990s. In the digital era, few media have great influence taken separately. The combined influence of networked stakeholder media, on the other hand, may be irresistible.

### 3. How Digital Media Changed the Ethics of News

Earlier in this essay, it was argued that digital media have trained audiences to expect that journalists must help to solve their problems. But digital media are also driving profound ethical changes that will powerfully influence the work of media activists.

To appreciate this shift, consider the website [Greenpeace.org](http://Greenpeace.org). Its purpose is not to inform visitors about the environment, so that they can decide whether or not it is an important issue and what might be done about it. According to theories of the news, that is what a good-quality newspaper should do. Greenpeace assumes that visitors already know the environment matters, or they would not be at the website. Greenpeace makes no pretence of neutrality on environmental issues. Moreover, it offers high-quality investigative reports on various environmental issues, establishing its pre-eminence as a source of objectively valid facts. (Greenpeace spends about €10 million annually on investigative reports, which is more than nearly any news organization you can name.) Finally, and not least, Greenpeace tells visitors a number of things (at least 10 per day) that they can do to help solve environmental problems.

Clearly, the business of this media is not the traditional news industry business. It is not objective, and doesn't pretend to be. Fox News is not objective, either, but it nonetheless claims to be fair and balanced in its coverage. It can be argued that Fox is making a strategic error here. Instead of objectivity, the public that follows groups like Greenpeace demands transparency. Online media have thoroughly demonstrated that significant numbers of the public do not care whether or not those who are informing them have a bias. For example, when self-appointed experts in online forums offer advice, they spontaneously declare how much experience they have, and whether or not they work for a given manufacturer. Their public expects bias and doubts the possibility of true objectivity. But they also expect and demand that the bias be made explicit.

Objectivity was hardly a naturally occurring attribute of the news media. In the United States, it developed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as a response to criticism that newspapers were indulging in sensational coverage of crime and scandals for mere profit. No, their owners replied, our reporters are just telling the objective

truth about our society.<sup>19</sup> Objectivity did not become a formal standard in the US news industry until the 1920s. It never took hold in numerous regions; across south-eastern Europe, for example, a large number of news media serve mainly as subsidized power instruments for their wealthy owners. (This has been called the “Berlusconization” of media. It is associated with an editorial mix in which all coverage is cast as entertainment, trivializing the news and distracting viewers from key issues.)

In contrast, objectivity remains an ideal in countries like Senegal (population 12.5 million), where in the wake of the recent democratization, no fewer than 80 daily and weekly journals are competing to be the media of record. In this context, a leading investigative editor, Latif Coulibaly of the weekly *La Gazette*, has been severely criticized for announcing his systematic opposition to the government;<sup>20</sup> in France, the highly successful weekly *Le Canard enchaîné* does exactly the same thing.

Large parts of the public in many societies never believed in objectivity, and diverse leaders of new and traditional media are mutating it. As Greenpeace and Fox show—along with new entrants like Médiapart.fr, a French website that is gaining a large audience through a resolutely aggressive stance toward the government on issues ranging from illegal campaign financing to the unfair administration of justice—an essential condition of journalistic objectivity, namely neutrality toward outcomes, is eroding fast. On the contrary, even in the news industry, viewers are increasingly told how reporters would like a given story to end. However, the objectivity of facts—that is, their existence and veracity, independent of who observes them—remains an essential element of credibility in the digital world. Facts are still powerful, especially facts that were hidden from view until someone exposed them. Their misuse, through omission or outright invention, remains an ethical fault.

A second major shift has to do with the nature of the publics—not the public—that media professionals serve. The rise of stakeholder media implies that communities, and not a mass public, are now the primary (and usually virtual) territory of distribution. The primary mission of media thus becomes the defence and service of the community. Whether the interests of a given community are synonymous with the interests of the larger society is, of course, another matter.

There will be plentiful ethical conflicts between the obligations of media professionals to their communities and causes, and their obligation to tell stories in the most comprehensive and transparent way. This problem was already familiar to anyone, say, who worked for a labour union newspaper where he or she was obliged to support a certain line. It is going to become more general and more acute, because journalists working inside communities will feel pressure not to reveal facts that threaten their communities’ interests. The financial crisis has offered a taste of what is coming: in its early stages, with few exceptions (such as *The Economist*), reporters repeated their wealthy sources’ assurances that prosperity would be eternal, thus sharing in their

---

19. For a classic study of this process, see Schiller (1981).

20. Remarks about Senegal in this article are based on a week-long seminar sponsored by the International Committee for Journalists with 28 reporters and editors from Senegalese print and broadcast media, at Dakar, 11–15 October 2010.



discredit.<sup>21</sup> The experience of embedding reporters in combat units during the Iraq war shows that even professional journalists trained in the canons of objectivity tend to identify with the people around them; in this case the result was a narrower vision of the war and its aims.<sup>22</sup> This will happen often to reporters in stakeholder media, too.

We repeat: this is not a new conflict within journalism. Investigative reporting resides on a subjective desire to reform the world. Its goal is not just to show you the reality of life, but also to change it. This creates enormous tension with the belief that journalism exists to create a faithful reflection of life as it is, and that tension runs throughout the history of news media.<sup>23</sup> At this stage in the development of digital media, it sometimes looks as though the subjective side is dominating in the wrong way. Stakeholder media frequently serve as vehicles for propaganda or disinformation.<sup>24</sup> However, it can be argued that this increases the need for well-documented investigative work, because in a world of virulent opinions, someone must make it possible to agree on certain facts; someone must show that one can work for change while respecting the truth.

Can stakeholder media play that role? They already do, for people within the communities where they operate. For environmentalists, Greenpeace is without doubt a source as credible as the *New York Times*. If the news industry continues to contract, stakeholder media will become more important sources of information and interpretation for growing numbers of people. They are already increasingly independent of the news media, so far as diffusing their content goes.

Their next task will be to create wider networks. (In the United States, the Investigative News Network, a consortium of 18 investigative reporting non-profit news organizations, has hired someone to work on this issue.) In many cases, building larger audiences will require raising standards of veracity and documentation, as investigative journalism centres in central and eastern Europe discovered when they sought global outlets for their work. It will also require discovering themes that matter to diverse communities. In October, a group of Senegalese journalists agreed that such themes will include energy and education, as opposed to politics, which dominates their current coverage. Stakeholder media may be the first to occupy these new grounds, as they were with environmental issues. Finally, larger audiences will require greater disclosure and transparency from content creators, in particular where the finances of stakeholder media are concerned. Media that point to misuse of public funds can expect to be asked how they use their own, and where the money came from.

- 
21. Lionel Barber, editor-in-chief of *Financial Times*, analysed this failure in detail in a remarkable article, "A Flawed First Draft of History," *Financial Times*, 22 April 2009.
  22. J. Lewis, R. Brookes, N. Mosdell and T. Threadgold, *Shoot First and Ask Questions Later: Media Coverage of the 2003 Iraqi War*, Peter Lang Publishing, Bern, 2005.
  23. For a landmark analysis of this issue, see Miraldi (1990).
  24. One example of this misuse of digital media was ExxonMobil's subsidy to a loud and prolific network of activists opposed to the idea of climate change. Their actions included triggering a US Internal Revenue Service audit of Greenpeace. The network was ultimately exposed by a Greenpeace counter-investigation. See Hunter et al., "Stakeholder Media."

Above all, the creators of these media must remember that their key mission is to offer their users the ideas, facts, and solutions they need to prosper—materially, spiritually, socially—in a time of crisis. The news industry failed to do this over a number of years, and a big share of their public discovered that they could therefore live without them. If digital media can profit from that failure to become essential to their users on one or many grounds, they won't fail.

# Bibliography

- Breslin, J. *How the Good Guys Finally Won*. New York: Viking, 1975.
- Coffman, J., J. Miller and V. Acquah. “Digital Transitions: Nonprofit Investigative Journalism : Evaluation Report on the Center for Public Integrity,” Miami, FL: John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2010.
- Hunter, M. *Le Journalisme d’investigation en France et aux Etats-Unis*, Collection Que sais-je?. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997.
- Hunter, M.L., L.N. Van Wassenhove, and M. Besiou. “Stakeholder Media: The Trojan Horse of Corporate Responsibility,” Fontainebleau: INSEAD Working Paper, 2010.
- J. Lewis, R. Brookes, N. Mosdell and T. Threadgold (2005), *Shoot First and Ask Questions Later: Media coverage of the 2003 Iraqi war* (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing).
- Lewis, J., A. Williams, R. Franklin, J. Thomas, and N. Mosdell, “The Quality and Independence of British Journalism: Tracking the Changes over 20 years,” Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, undated (last reference in text is 2007).
- Miraldi, R. *Muckraking and Objectivity: Journalism’s Colliding Traditions*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.
- Nel, F. “Laid Off: What Do UK Reporters Do Next?,” Journalism.co.uk and University of Central Lancashire, September 2010, available at <http://www.journalism.co.uk/uploads/laidoffreport.pdf>.
- Protest, D.L., Cook, F.L, Doppelt, J.C, Ettema, J.S., Gordon, M.T., Leff, D.R. et al. *The Journalism of Outrage: Investigative Reporting and Agenda Building in America*. New York: Guilford Press, 1992.
- Revelli, C. *Intelligence stratégique sur Internet*. Paris: Dunod, 1998.
- Schiller, D. *Objectivity and News*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.
- Ullmann, J. and J. Colbert. *The Reporter’s Handbook: An Investigator’s Guide to Documents and Techniques*. New York: St Martin’s Press, 1991.
- Walton, M. “Investigative Shortfall,” *American Journalism Review*, September 2010, available at [www.ajr.org](http://www.ajr.org)

**Mapping Digital Media** is a project of the **Open Society Media Program** and the **Open Society Information Program**.

## Open Society Media Program

The Media Program works globally to support independent and professional media as crucial players for informing citizens and allowing for their democratic participation in debate. The program provides operational and developmental support to independent media outlets and networks around the world, proposes engaging media policies, and engages in efforts towards improving media laws and creating an enabling legal environment for good, brave and enterprising journalism to flourish. In order to promote transparency and accountability, and tackle issues of organized crime and corruption the Program also fosters quality investigative journalism.

## Open Society Information Program

The Open Society Information Program works to increase public access to knowledge, facilitate civil society communication, and protect civil liberties and the freedom to communicate in the digital environment. The Program pays particular attention to the information needs of disadvantaged groups and people in less developed parts of the world. The Program also uses new tools and techniques to empower civil society groups in their various international, national, and local efforts to promote open society.

## Open Society Foundations

The Open Society Foundations work to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens. Working with local communities in more than 70 countries, the Open Society Foundations support justice and human rights, freedom of expression, and access to public health and education.

For more information:

Open Society Media Program  
Open Society Foundation

4th Floor Cambridge House, 100 Cambridge Grove  
London, W6 0LE, United Kingdom

[mappingdigitalmedia@osf-eu.org](mailto:mappingdigitalmedia@osf-eu.org)  
[www.mappingdigitalmedia.org](http://www.mappingdigitalmedia.org)  
[www.soros.org/initiatives/media](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/media)

Cover Design: Ahlgrim Design Group  
Design and Layout: Judit Kovács | Createch Ltd.

