

Herbert J. Gans

*News & the news media in the
digital age: implications for democracy*

Modern American journalism considers itself a “bulwark of democracy.” Journalists argue that they report the news so that the citizenry can inform itself and participate in the “conversation” that journalists believe is crucial to a democracy. According to what might be called bulwark theory, being informed also enables citizens to participate in politics, choose their political representatives, and instruct them on how they want to be represented.

The theory expresses journalism’s noblest democratic ideals, but it could stand some rethinking. Being informed is neither a motive nor a requirement for talking about or participating in politics. How well most citizens are informed is a debatable question, and since politics is a divisive conversational topic, precious few participate in the democratic conversation. Some citizens do, but some of them shout and scream. In reality, most political conversing, including that which is heard by elected officials, comes from journalists, commentators, panel talk shows, and journalist bloggers. And it is the news media themselves that offer up the public outlet for this continuing conversation.

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To be sure, some ordinary citizens talk to their elected representatives, write letters to the editor, and email, blog, text, and tweet in political cyberspace. Nonetheless, the public opinion polls continue to be the most visible example of that citizen conversation, even if it is only one way and even if those willing to be polled are merely answering the pollsters’ questions.

Citizen participation has always been limited to a few, motivated mainly by self-interest or membership in a social movement. Consequently, it often generates protest or hard-to-satisfy demands. Politicians are therefore not always eager to have citizens participate, except at election time.

Working journalists are practitioners, not theorists, and do not concern themselves unduly with the shortcomings of bulwark theory. They see their job as supplying the news, leaving others to worry whether the citizenry is properly informed and performs its democratic duties.

Because the future of news is uncertain, it is necessary to go beyond bulwark theory to ask what exactly the news media and journalists do for democracy, and what will happen if the current mainstays – newspapers, mag-

azines, and TV news – undergo drastic change and are replaced by websites and other digital media. However, I also want to ask what more the news media, old and new, could and should do for democracy, and what is beyond their power to do. My answers will deal mainly with the national news media although they would not differ significantly for regional and local news media.

Monitoring the Political Environment and Assuring the Country that the Polity Will Survive. Most members of the news audience are monitors; they use the news to keep up with the parts of society they cannot monitor personally. (The rest of the audience can be divided into “news buffs” and occupational users, that is, professionals and others – including many readers of this journal – who need the news to do their work.) Monitors use the news primarily to learn what is going wrong in the country’s political and other institutions and the world beyond, and to assure themselves thereby that the rest of society is still functioning normally.

Journalists demonstrate political and other societal normalities by reporting regularly that the president, his major colleagues, and others exercising leadership are doing their jobs. Even when they report bad news about corrupt politicians, failed leaders, and unexpected crises, their news stories almost always end with what is being done to restore political and social order.

Demonstrating normality may seem trivial and perhaps unnecessary, but imagine the irregularities that would develop, the rumors that would circulate, and the panics that would be sure to follow if people were not told regularly that the societal sun continues to rise and set every day as predictably as the sun that brings us day and night.

Reporting the Actions and Decisions of Elected Officials. The news media are also messengers for the political leadership so that it can tell the citizenry what it will do and has done for them and the country. Journalists serve as messengers for only a few: the White House and congressional leadership, as well as a handful of cabinet agencies, including State, Defense, and since the start of the Great Recession, the Treasury and the Federal Reserve. Most other government agencies and activities become newsworthy only rarely, generally when they are malfunctioning.

When journalists function as messengers, they are essentially passive reporters, and media critics accuse them of being stenographers for the political leadership. Of course, the leadership, like most other news sources, wants the messengers to be stenographers; that is why a number of the Bush administration’s unsavory domestic and foreign policies that journalists did not report are only now being brought to light.

All journalists prefer to do active reporting, identifying details of political and governmental actions – including those details politicians would prefer to be left out of news stories. When news organizations are economically healthy and news staffs are at full strength, active reporting complements and sometimes corrects the stories of colleagues who must function as stenographers.

Airing Political Disagreements and Conflicts. Most active reporting is devoted to describing the political leadership’s disagreements and conflicts. Moreover, when politicians argue and fight, they are believed to attract the attention of audience members who are “grabbed” by dramatic stories.

The news media as well as much of the audience usually have patience for no more than “both sides” of every argu-

ment – a convenient number in a country with a two-party polity. Two-sidedness also enables the news media to restrict its ideological spectrum. Stephen Colbert once pointed out that reality has a liberal bias, and the news media's reluctance to lean left seeks, among other things, to pacify conservatives who in effect complain about the news media's preoccupation with reality.

Defending Democratic Values. Perhaps journalists' proudest activity is to uphold a particular set of norms and values of a democratic polity, most dramatically by exposing theft, dishonesty, hypocrisy, and other forms of corruption, as well as inefficiency, "waste," incompetence, and other kinds of malfeasance. Although they are not always aware of it, journalists as a profession are advocates of good government or "goo-goo," a business and civic movement that arose concurrently with modern journalism at the start of the twentieth century. Here is the profession's most consistent bias!

In the process, journalists move beyond their strictly professional role to act as the polity's moral guardians and transform themselves from reporters to watchdogs. Elsewhere, I have described them as guarding altruistic democracy, which expects elected officials to devote themselves to a selfless pursuit of the public interest.

Watchdogging takes several forms. *Everyday watchdogging* goes with journalists' very presence at important events. When they are around, even if equipped only with notepads and pencils, politicians have to speak respectfully about the political process, watch what they say about other subjects, and refrain from scandalous acts. Corrupt politicians take their hands out of the till, and the military is careful not to shoot at civilians if the news media are watch-

ing. When journalists are able to be active reporters, they try to ask at least a few questions to remind elected officials that their everyday watchdogging never stops. As a result, journalists drive some activities underground, but that gives them a chance to expose these through investigative reporting.

Investigative reporting is the most active form of journalism, and when it is successful in exposing criminal behavior and the villains involved end up in jail, investigative journalists become eligible for the Pulitzer, DuPont, and other prestigious professional awards. Investigative reporting contributes to democracy mainly by helping identify public officials who act illegally to benefit themselves and their friends at the expense of their constituents.

Although these lawbreakers may not do as much damage to their constituents as the law-abiding leaders who exercise economic or political power over them, journalists mainly guard good government, not economic and political fairness. The news audience is not always as excited about good government and altruistic democracy as journalists, but investigative reporting is thought to sell papers and increase ratings. More important, it reinforces – and enforces – the political standards set by everyday watchdogging.

Journalists working in the traditional print and electronic news media are very worried about the future of the news. They are upset by the arrival of new and competing communication technologies, the decline of the news audience and of advertising revenue, and the resulting closure of several newspapers and a serious downsizing of news staffs in many others.

Consequently, many journalists, media critics, and political observers are

concerned that citizens will encounter difficulties in keeping themselves informed and that representative democracy will suffer as a result. However, investigative reporting, which is very expensive, is expected to suffer even more, resulting in the coarsening of American politics. The most pessimistic observers fear that the country might return toward a level of political corruption, incompetent policy-making, and governmental mismanagement that occurred not only between 2000 and 2008, but also in earlier periods of American history.

Although journalists' pessimism is justified, particularly in the short run, from a long-term perspective, the changes must also be viewed and analyzed as a process: an ongoing technological shift in the country's news media, which is perhaps still in its early phases. At the moment, the traditional news media are still supplying most of the news but losing the audience and the income to pay for it all. Meanwhile, news websites and websites that offer news on their home pages are gaining audiences, but their income from advertising is too small for them to afford their own news organizations. Currently, they are parasites feeding off the economically sick traditional news media.

Nonetheless, the Web is slowly becoming the main home for the consumption of news. The home is still being built and no one knows now what it will look like when finished, but someday people will probably be viewing and reading the news solely on digital or post-digital screens, including perhaps late-stage Kindles and now yet unimagined devices. Eventually, historians will try to figure out why their ancestors tolerated obtaining their news from large pieces of folded paper that had to be delivered to their doors and from electric boxes

that supplied the news only at prescheduled and frequently inconvenient times.

Meanwhile, the Web news media may be evolving, whether as summaries of the traditional news media, or as new outlets invented for the Web, such as *Salon*, *The Daily Beast*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Talking Points Memo (TPM)*. They are Web versions of the old print media, but streaming websites as well as YouTube and its peers are primitive forms of future visual news media. True, none are making money, and for the moment they are being kept alive by hopeful venture capitalists and by mostly young and enthusiastic but underpaid journalists.

No one can now predict which of today's news websites will survive and grow into news media with news organizations that can meet the news needs of a democratic society. If the past offers any precedent, in the long run, most of the news audience will click on a handful of major news websites owned by giant corporations, perhaps even the ones that own today's surviving newspaper chains and television networks. But first someone has to figure out "how to monetize the Web."

Local news media face an even more uncertain future. News about state and local governments and politics never attracted much audience interest, and professionally staffed digital news media may be viable only in larger localities. Neighborhood websites may look forward to a more promising future when and where people are interested in their neighbors and are willing to trust amateur journalists to supply sought-after news about them.

Other changes are taking place that may have more positive effects for the supply of news, even if they do not contribute to the economic health of the

traditional news media or to the employment prospects of professional journalists.

For example, while the paying news audience is declining, the actual audience may be growing. If that audience is counted, not as the number buying or tuned into the various news media, but as the number exposed to the day's major news stories, the arrival of digital news may have enlarged this news audience. True, the total audience is spread across many more news outlets than a daily paper, a TV network news program, and a handful of cable channels and radio stations. Now that the news cycle is 24/7 and even search engines carry news stories, the total amount of news programming available to the audience has risen considerably.

Similarly, the reduction in the number of employed journalists has been counteracted at least partially by the appearance of citizen journalists. In reality, and despite their name, they are amateur journalists resembling the stringers that have reported news, and still do, from places to which news organizations cannot afford to send professionals. If the amateurs are properly supervised or edited by trained journalists, they could increase the total supply of news. To be sure, they are also free or very cheap labor who may further shrink the full-time labor force, a process now occurring all over America, including in the academy.

The new stringers have appeared both in traditional news media and on the Web, in part because, equipped with cell phones and similar technologies, they are sometimes in the right places at the right time, just as newsworthy events are beginning to happen. A handful have already supplied otherwise unavailable news, as from Iran, and unearthed scoops that profes-

sional journalists then turned into major stories. Remember, however, that nearly forty years ago, two young police reporters in Washington, D.C., discovered a story that felled a president.

The most drastic change so far has taken place in the amount of opinion available, as new bloggers continue to appear. In addition, many news websites supply a good deal of opinion, in part because it is considerably cheaper to produce than news. Most of the opiners and their commenting accompanists, though, are not journalists, and they appear on personal and other small blogs that attract tiny audiences.

Nonetheless, in sum, these new opinions contribute to the total amount of democratic conversation. Since many bloggers offer opinions that do not appear on journalist-supervised news media, either for ideological reasons or because they lack a proper factual base, they add, for better or worse, to the diversity of the democratic conversation.

Of course, a public appearance on the Web still lacks the visibility of being on television. Consequently, the digital democratic conversation does not appear so far to have had a significant impact on the output of professional columnists and other opinion-makers who attract large audiences. With some notable but individual exceptions, the amateur commentators have not yet influenced the publicly stated opinions and decisions of the country's major elected officials.

Perhaps the arrival of news and blogging websites contributed to the larger number of young people who voted in the 2008 presidential election. Even so, their post-election impact, if any, is small compared to that of the major political parties or, more important, the array of lobbies that play such a significant role in national political decision-

making. Although organizations like MoveOn that raise money on the Web and use it to lobby elected officials have had some effect on some political decisions, they are not connected to the news media but are the Web successors to the political organizations that once raised money via snail mail.

In addition, the Web's various amateur editorialists are perpetuating two historic shortcomings of the democratic conversation. One, they maintain what Richard Hofstadter long ago called the paranoid style of American politics, spreading conspiracy theories and angry or hateful messages, often about imaginary enemies.

Such opinions have long been part of the oral repertoire of American politics, particularly at the local level, and they have been diffused through whatever communication media were available at the moment. Indeed, they contribute considerably to the general public's low opinion of politics. Cable television news, radio talk shows, and even the network news programs too often turn the paranoid conversation into national news; one must hope that they, and the hateful blogs they help to inspire, do not infect the body of the democratic conversation.

A second, less obvious shortcoming of the public democratic conversation is its class bias, for all the media that engage in it are more accessible to the better off, the more highly educated, and the more articulate parts of the population. What I call "upscale democracy" pervades the polity, and while low-income people without even a high school diploma may add to the oral conversation, they do not often blog or tweet. However, they did not send out mimeographed flyers either, and probably rarely contacted their elected representatives. They have frequently contributed their viewpoints

to the democratic conversation in ways that were considered neither democratic nor conversation by their better-off fellow citizens.

Currently, the major challenge for the news media, for journalists, and, thus, for American democracy is how to deal with the possibility that advertising may never again be able to finance the commercial news media as much as it once did. Perhaps that is all to the good: the democratic cause may benefit if the news is no longer supplied mainly by firms that seek a profit by assembling audiences for advertisers. Why, after all, should informing the citizenry be dependent on whether shareholders, Wall Street financiers, and venture capitalists can profit from it?

Although the financial overseers of the news media do not influence the news as much as is commonly believed, journalists cannot easily distance themselves or what they report from the corporate capitalist system in which they (the public news media, too) are embedded. A new business model may be desirable as well as necessary.

Such a model should be diversified, somewhat like the public news media, which are supported by a combination of commercial, nonprofit, governmental, and audience funds. For the moment, all possible and even some currently impossible alternatives should be explored. If elected officials are eager for stenographic reporting, they could fund a modern version of the party press. If the news media are as essential to the perpetuation of society and the polity as I have suggested, perhaps they should be organized as limited profit utilities.

If the European licensing fee system still cannot be imported to America, a case can be made for user fees, at least for the more detailed and specialized

news sought by news buffs and those using the news media in and for their work. Today, many people pay hundreds of dollars a year in newspaper and newsmagazine subscriptions, and they should be able to afford such fees for the digital news media they need.

And if news is vital to representative democracy, then government can play a role, not only by turning access to the Web into a free public good, but by offering financial support for news that does not attract other funding sources. Thirty years ago I proposed an Endowment for News, modeled on the federal arts and humanities endowments, and I continue to think it is a good idea.

Investigative reporting is most in need of a new business model, and ideally, it should be free both of government and private enterprise, the targets of most of its investigations. Some news websites, like the traditional news media, are already conducting such reporting with funds from a variety of supporters.

The current hope is that foundations will step in the breach if and when extra funds are needed, although even the largest foundations are vulnerable to self-censorship and to pressure from the powerful, especially those on whom they depend for support themselves. Diversity of funding may again be the best solution, for if all funders of the news media contribute, preferably indirectly, to the cost of investigative reporting, it may be difficult to ask individual ones to halt threatening investigations.

Even as a new business model is being developed, journalists, media critics, and others should be thinking about how the news can contribute further to democracy. Most of the proposals for changes in the news, including mine that follow, will likely attract news buffs and occupational users rather than monitors, but

they are also the citizens most actively concerned about the state of the country's democratic institutions. I suggest seven changes.

First, *conduct more active reporting*. Passive stenography has its place, and pooling it, for example in reporting the talks and actions of the political leadership, would save some money. As a result, other journalists would be free to delve into the details of the talks and actions that make the news and also into the socio-political-economic contexts in which they take place.

Concurrently, journalists ought to pay more attention to the now almost totally ignored cabinet agencies and other executive, legislative, and judicial agencies that play important roles in a democratic society and in the everyday life of the news audience. Local and state reporters should follow the same path.

Second, *increase and broaden economic reporting*. American journalism could be characterized fairly as capitalism's attempt to keep an eye on and regulate government for the benefit of capitalist institutions, for except in economic crises, most national news is about government. Economic news is normally relegated to the business pages, but these pages are written mostly for investors.

However, because the country's – and American democracy's – well-being depends on its economy and because economic power holders can exert so much political power, the economy ought to be covered as closely as government. Wall Street, the large corporations and their lobbies, large investors, unions, and others speaking and acting for employees all need to be in the news more often. Indeed, the news ought to be reporting on the political economy.

Third, *cover citizen news*. If journalists want to do more for democracy, they must report on the role that citizens play

– and do not play – in it. Citizens are currently not newsworthy very often, but citizen leaders, citizen lobbies, protesters, and other activists do make news when they are active, when they are prevented from being active, and indirectly even when they are inactive. How elected and appointed representatives – federal, state, and local – serve, service, ignore, and reject citizens is another story told too rarely.

Moreover, citizens become newsworthy if they participate in the democratic conversation, both as regular and irregular contributors. Summarizing the overwhelming number of blogs and other forms of political texting is probably impossible, but a regular overview of those seen by elected representatives would be desirable. Polls asking additional and different questions than those chosen by commercial and mainstream pollsters should be included in the news as well.

Still, the biggest need is for news from or about unrepresented citizens, the people who never vote and are almost never heard from publicly in any way.

Fourth, *report additional perspectives on America*. The unrepresented citizenry is necessary to the news for another reason: their perspective on the country diverges in many respects from the mainstream ones. National news, coming as it does from the political and economic leadership and being reported by mostly upper-middle-class professionals, often looks at the country top down. The newsmakers and journalists, too, are participants in upscale democracy.

Needless to say, newsworthiness is defined also by what journalists perceive to be of interest to their audience, but since that audience is ideologically and otherwise heterogeneous, journalists work hard to report the news with what they consider to be detachment, fairness, and objectivity. The result is a political and

economic centrism that is too narrow to encompass the country's diversity. Consequently, newsworthiness must be broadened to include facts, viewpoints, and opinions – not to mention solutions for the country's problems – advanced by people outside the mainstream.

Fifth, *increase watchdogging*. As noted above, journalists and others are particularly fearful that the news media's technological changes and economic difficulties threaten investigative reporting that results in exposés. Efforts to find new financial and institutional support for it are already under way.

The major need may be for more of what I have called *everyday investigative reporting*: the daily routine of keeping an eye on elected and appointed officials, economic decision-makers, and other influentials. Keeping *them* honest, and reporting their often petty but continuing corruption or malfeasance, is as important as uncovering dramatic misdeeds that result in prize-winning exposés. In fact, extending the sweep of everyday investigative reporting might be the most productive policy for the never-covered and thus never-watched elected or appointed officials who are most likely to ignore or evade the several public interests they are supposed to serve.

Everyday investigative reporters who are always on the scene may also notice continuing systemic deviations from democratic and other norms and can thereby underscore the need for systemic reform. Catching villains without carrying out systemic reform only produces new villains once exposés are forgotten.

So-called citizen journalists can sometimes be helpful in this role. Properly trained stringers who are in or can get to the right places at the right times should be able to conduct simpler forms of everyday investigative reporting, es-

pecially in parts of society that are normally not covered by or are otherwise inaccessible to the news media.

Yet one other kind of watchdogging may be even more necessary: *analytic investigative reporting*, which goes beyond the descriptive reporting of daily journalism and its emphasis on individual actors. Knowing the various social forces, structures, and agents that influence what people in important public positions do and say helps us understand why the country functions as it does. Learning why existing structures malfunction and new initiatives go wrong is required to determine the policies and politics needed to correct them.

This kind of watchdogging is usually reported in journalists' books years after the fact, but by then it is dramatic history rather than useful news. Journalism should be devoted to understanding society and informing its audiences rather than producing first drafts of history.

Many journalists believe that analysis should be left to social scientists and other academics, but they too rarely march to topical drummers. More journalists must be trained to be analytic, even though their analysis will often be instant. Academics can then still follow with their kinds of analyses.

Sixth, *make room for informed opinion*. Journalists are probably the last logical positivists left in the modern world; they will report only what they perceive to be facts. Worse yet, they are complemented by commentators who too often supply opinions with insufficient attention to the relevant facts.

Limiting the news to perceived facts may enable journalists to practice the detachment needed to serve their ideologically diverse audience, but it also deprives that audience of help in drawing conclusions about important issues and problems. Investigative and other

active reporters should therefore be actively encouraged to offer their opinions on subjects which they have reported intensively.

Seventh, *enlarge the news audience*. Although the actual news audience may be larger than the counted one, the news media could make greater efforts to expand it further. Such efforts may need to include some structural changes in the news. For example, people who believe that they need to monitor the news only every few days should be able to find appropriate news media – perhaps even electronic and digital versions of the weekly newsmagazine.

Also, some less educated and older audience members comprehend only a part of what they read, hear, and view, and may require more simply presented stories. Novel forms of news presentation may attract some of the people who now make do without the news.

Even so, many people will not seek out more news unless and until they need it almost as badly as groceries. That is unlikely to happen until people become directly aware that government, the economy, and other major news sources play as central a role in their lives as those groceries. In the meantime, teaching young people about politics and economics beginning in the higher grades of elementary school might help as well.

Moreover, if the news is to play so central a role, the news media need to reinvent national news. If this is even possible in a country the size of a continent, the national news media cannot all be located in the Northeast, as they are now, and they must figure out how to focus regular national attention on datelines other than Washington, D.C., on people other than political elites, and on stories other than theirs.

Many of the above proposals require larger news organizations and are currently too expensive even to be tried. However, they deserve to be tried, if only to determine whether and when the news can have a continuing impact on democratic politics. At present, the news media are clearly necessary for the maintenance of existing forms of democratic politics, but they are insufficient to affect it significantly.

For one, news stories are too brief and superficial to supply detailed information about policy and political decision-making processes. Consequently, the news is also inadequate for serious citizen political activity, other than perhaps voting in elections. Knowledge is said to lead to power, but the knowledge we call news cannot do so. Nor can it bring about the greater participation in power essential to a properly representative democracy.

Turning America into such a democracy requires action on a variety of political and policy issues. Among other things, citizens must somehow obtain enough power to eliminate unrepresentative institutions beginning with the Electoral College; to reform the Senate so as to reduce the excessive decision-making power of senators from the small states; to redraw the boundaries of unfairly drawn congressional districts; and to prevent the presidency from turning into a unitary executive.

Above all, economic power must be disconnected as much as possible from political power. As long as the lobbies and monies of the economically powerful can exert undue influence on elections as well as on elected officials once in office, the citizenry cannot be properly represented. Ultimately, truly representative democracy requires a politically and economically more equal America.

If journalists agree that these issues are relevant to the democratic conversation, they should develop ways of reporting on them. In the process, they would also be building a more powerful bulwark for democracy.

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