

The News About Democracy

Information Crisis in American Politics

As almost everyone knows, the economic foundation of the nation's newspapers, long supported by advertising, is collapsing, and newspapers themselves, which have been the country's chief source of independent reporting, are shrinking—literally. Fewer journalists are reporting less news in fewer pages.

—Leonard Downie Jr. and Michael Schudson

. . . only an overheated 24/7 infotainment culture that had trivialized the very idea of reality (and with it, what was once known as "news") could be so easily manipulated by those in power.

—Frank Rich

The headline for this edition of *News: The Politics of Illusion* cuts to the core of public information in a democracy: "Independent Journalism Is Collapsing. Who Will Tell the People?" One might add: "Will the People Care?" Many observers view the collapse of healthy news organizations as creating an accountability crisis for democracy because there are fewer journalists examining what those in power are doing. Moreover, there are fewer news organizations with the prestige and audience pull to focus public attention on abuses of the public trust, whether they occur in government, business, or other social institutions, such as schools and churches.

The most visible cause of this accountability crisis is economic: The commercial underpinnings of the news business are collapsing, as discussed below. Beyond economics, however, there are even deeper challenges to the journalism regime that has served American democracy for the last century. For example, digital technologies now enable individuals to be both producers and consumers of information, to share it across large social networks and to attend to it selectively according to personal tastes. These changes are creating new models of information production, organization, and consumption. Old media formats typically involve packaging generic bundles of heavily edited "authoritative" information about diverse topics into newspapers or TV news programs. Such "department store" information offerings hold less appeal for digital citizens who now have a dazzling array of new technologies to assemble and share a wider, yet more personalized, array of political content, from comedy and blogs to Twitter streams and eyewitness videos of actual events. A notable feature of this emerging public information order is that political content can be transmitted directly to large audiences often without passing through news organizations. For better and for worse, the official sources and independent editorial gatekeepers of the old news order are being challenged by crowdsourced information of more diverse origins.

Yet, even as these changes are occurring, the news remains important to politicians and those in power for several reasons:

- Managing the news becomes a measure of who controls the flow of information to high-level audiences—the circles of power—in government, business, and society.
- The contests among viewpoints promoted by various interests in the news constitute the central public arena of democracy. Although these viewpoints are overwhelmingly generated by elites, they are typically represented (by those same elites) as the will of the people.
- Even though coherent audiences and public credibility have eroded, the news remains one of the most important channels for reaching publics. When news messages are repeated often and loudly enough by politicians—and echoed by cable pundits, talk radio personalities, and bloggers—they can shape the polls on important issues in policy arenas and elections.

The rest of this chapter explores the tensions among the key forces that are changing the nature of news and political information in American society: the erosion of accountability journalism, the distraction and disdain of publics, the growing adoption of new information technologies, and the continuing importance of making the news for elite political communication strategies.

THE ECONOMIC COLLAPSE OF THE NEWS BUSINESS

First, let's take a brief look at the surface level of the "accountability journalism" crisis: the collapse of the business model that has long enabled commercial organizations to use the news to lure audiences to advertisers. News

organizations in modern America they produced a public good (the news) involving selling audiences to advertisers. Professional journalism maintained a balance between journalism and the advertising side. Advertisers had minimal direct control over the news. At the same time, advertisers generally cared little for the news. To report a news bureau in Berlin, or pay attention to climate change in Bolivia. When more precise means of targeting audiences began to drift away from commercial news, it itself as an odd piece out in the media landscape. What story on climate change? Who would pay for such a valuable public good by providing public subsidies, much in the way that other public services have been variously supported? The viability of a democratic society

Going into this century, news organizations faced extreme pressures from corporate America. The media profit wave of the 1990s into the early 2000s left staff to sustain inflated profit margins. By 2010 left little more to cut, since the news had closed international bureaus and invested in the coverage of state and local government. Advertisers far cheaper channels for reaching consumers. Newspapers were simply closed. Other news organizations cut buyers. And those that survived cut staff by half or more. In the newspaper industry, circulation shrank from 60,000 in 1992 to around 30,000 yet in sight.⁴ Most of this decline occurred in the newspaper industry lost roughly 25 percent of its revenue.

Many observers see the issue of news as a public good. Information that citizens need to make informed decisions in business and various social institutions. Relatively few citizens seem deeply engaged in "accountability journalism." Part of the problem is the affection of Americans from the past. The news is stronger and more independent than ever. It investigates and challenges those who are in power. That this capacity was not being used to its full view, the chase for profits and easy money. The public broadcasting system, the desire to have the news watered down to a daily stream of entertainment for powerful insiders. To complicate matters, the fanned public perceptions that the

organizations in modern America were unusual businesses in the sense that they produced a public good (the news) through commercial transactions involving selling audiences to advertisers.¹ Until fairly recently, the ethics of professional journalism maintained something of a "firewall" between the journalism and the advertising sides of the business, with the result that advertisers had minimal direct control over what the news side did. At the same time, advertisers generally cared little about whether their money helped support a news bureau in Berlin, or paid for reporting a story about the effects of climate change in Bolivia. When the Internet suddenly offered cheaper and more precise means of targeting ads to audiences, both advertisers and audiences began to drift away from conventional media formats, leaving the news itself as an odd piece out in the media picture. Who would pay to produce that story on climate change? Who would pay to consume it? Most other democracies (including America in earlier times) better understood the value of protecting such a valuable public good by figuring out how to support it through public subsidies, much in the way defense, public safety, education, and health care have been variously supported or subsidized as public goods essential for the viability of a democratic society.²

Going into this century, news organizations were already suffering extreme pressures from corporate owners and investors who rode the great media profit wave of the 1990s into the ground, forcing cutbacks in reporting staff to sustain inflated profit margins. The economic downturns from 2000 to 2010 left little more to cut, since the profit taking of the 1990s had already closed international bureaus and investigative units, and eaten into core coverage of state and local government.³ As the maturation of the Internet offered advertisers far cheaper channels for targeting audiences more effectively, many newspapers were simply closed. Others plunged into bankruptcy, looking for buyers. And those that survived cut still more newsroom staff—in many cases by half or more. In the newspaper industry alone, journalism-related jobs shrank from 60,000 in 1992 to around 40,000 in 2009, with the bottom not yet in sight.⁴ Most of this decline occurred between 2001 and 2010, when the industry lost roughly 25 percent of its workers.⁵

Many observers see the issue here as gathering and distributing the information that citizens need to monitor powerful leaders in government, business and various social institutions, and hold them accountable.⁶ Yet relatively few citizens seem deeply worried ~~worry~~ about this loss of "accountability journalism." Part of the problem here is a longer-term disaffection of Americans from the press system. Even in earlier days, when stronger and more independent news organizations had the capacity to investigate and challenge those who abused power, many Americans sensed that this capacity was not being used regularly or very effectively.⁷ In this view, the chase for profits and easy stories (or, in the case of the fragile public broadcasting system, the desire to avoid political reprimand) has left the news watered down to a daily stream of public relations (PR) spun by powerful insiders. To complicate matters, pundits and partisan politicians have fanned public perceptions that the press has somehow taken sides against

them, no matter what their side may be. This widespread impression of press bias is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Despite these perceived limitations, a case can still be made that independent journalism is the only hope for regular and reliable information about what those in power are doing.⁸ Without it, the lights go out on democracy, meaning that government is left to police itself while illuminating its own activities through the haze of public relations, propaganda, and spin.⁹

Perhaps the imminent death of the old press system does not worry most people because there appear to be so many outlets for information that it is hard to keep up with them. One only needs to enter a topic in a search engine to find hundreds or thousands of sites with information about it. Yet many of these blogs, webzines, and online news organizations are merely recycling the shrinking journalism content produced by increasingly threatened news organizations. Consider a revealing study of one news microcosm: the “news ecosystem” of the city of Baltimore. The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism conducted a study of where information about politics, government and public life came from in that city.¹⁰ The study looked at various media, from newspaper, radio, and television, to blogs and other online sites. Although this information system seemed rich and diverse, with some 53 different outlets for news, tracking the origins of actual news showed that 95 percent of stories containing original information “came from traditional media—most of them from the newspaper.” Even more distressing was a look back in time showing that the sole surviving paper, the *Baltimore Sun*, reported 32 percent fewer stories between 1999 and 2009, and 73 percent fewer than in 1991.

The Baltimore study raises the important question: “. . . if newspapers were to die . . . what would that imply for what citizens would know and not know about where they live?” Media historian Paul Starr has argued that if this trend continues, the growing ignorance of the citizenry and the lack of accountability of officials will surely be accompanied by a great wave of public corruption.¹¹ Indeed, many citizens already see corruption in government as a major problem. For example, a 2008 poll on the roots of the financial crisis showed that 62 percent strongly agreed with the statement that political corruption played a major role in the crisis, and another 19 percent agreed “somewhat” with that statement.¹² An international survey of perceived government corruption ranks the U.S. just 19th in the world list of clean governments.¹³

Despite evidence that problems with accountability or watchdog journalism had begun long before the business model collapsed, many journalists and news organizations continue to focus on fixing the business model with remedies such as putting up “pay walls” for access to online information. While this solution may work for specialized publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, it does not seem destined to save journalism in general. The immediate problem is that as long as there are free news outlets, those charging for the same information will not likely attract many paying customers. Whether or not there is truth to the popular Internet mantra that

“information wants to be free,”¹⁴ it is hard to produce quality, independent information.

Beyond the economics of the existing system, there are larger problems with “saving” the system. For particularly younger citizens, increasing access to information through social media is more engaging with the world than newspapers or television newscasts. As a result, it, consumers “are not interested in serious news,” a challenging, according to Shirkey, is the challenge of networks according to a very different model of media: “the audience for news is now largely made up of other members of the audience.”¹⁵

WHO NEEDS JOURNALISTS? YOUTUBE AND TWITTER?

For increasing numbers of citizens, information is being distributed through mass distribution processes in which people do not subscribe to a newspaper, although some information comes from an array of sources not dependent on a newspaper, and it travels over social networks that are accessed through many devices. The networks are accessed through interests with their friends and friends of friends. This means that the sourcing of the information is often automatic ways. It is not always necessary for a journalist to reach a large audience.

Consider in this light what at first seems a story about an accident that happened in Germany. The *Reuters* article was headlined **stunt fails**. The opening line read: “Pink was taken to a hospital when the harness support failed. Nuremberg instead sent her shooting star to the hospital. This information was not produced in a press conference with her publicity agent, but rather on her way to the hospital. This information was before journalists did, and they got it from Pink herself. Moreover, Pink’s 1,765 followers got more detailed and timely updates on her whereabouts than audiences assembled via the conventional media story based on her tweets.

Want to know Sarah Palin’s foreign policy views? (At the time of this writing) Facebook friends, Twitter followers, and activities will arrive in your inbox or on your screen, suggesting new pathways for making the

"information wants to be free,"¹⁴ it is also equally true that those who produce quality, independent information want to be paid.

Beyond the economics of the existing model of journalism, there are far larger problems with "saving" the so-called legacy press system. The public, particularly younger citizens, increasingly prefer different forms of information access than engaging with the lumpy collections of content delivered in newspapers or television newscasts. As digital media scholar Clay Shirkey put it, consumers "are not interested in single omnibus publications." Even more challenging, according to Shirkey, is the fact that content flows through social networks according to a very different audience logic than defines the mass media: "the audience for news is now being assembled not by the paper but by other members of the audience."¹⁵

WHO NEEDS JOURNALISTS WITH FACEBOOK, YOUTUBE AND TWITTER?

For increasing numbers of citizens, information does not reach them through mass distribution processes in which people tune into a scheduled program or subscribe to a newspaper, although some still do. Information increasingly comes from an array of sources not designated by journalists as authoritative, and it travels over social networks that enable access any time, any place, and through many devices. The networks grow or shrink as people share their interests with their friends and friends of friends in loosely structured ways. This means that the sourcing of the information is changing in often very dramatic ways. It is not always necessary for a newsmaker to go through a journalist to reach a large audience.

Consider in this light what at first glance appears to be a normal news story about an accident that happened to performer Pink at a concert in Germany. The *Reuters* article was headlined: **Pink rushed to hospital as stunt fails.** The opening line read: "Pink said she was fine after being rushed to a hospital when the harness supposed to lift her into the air at a gig in Nuremberg instead sent her shooting off stage into a barrier."¹⁶ However, this information was not produced in a press interview with Pink or at a press conference with her publicity agent. Pink tweeted it from the ambulance on her way to the hospital. Thus, Pink's followers likely got the news before journalists did, and they got it directly from the most credible source: Pink herself. Moreover, Pink's 1,765,841 Twitter followers, received far more detailed and timely updates on her condition than likely reached news audiences assembled via the conventional news organizations carrying the story based on her tweets.

Want to know Sarah Palin's foreign policy positions sooner than they appear in the news and in more detail? Just join her nearly 2 million (at the time of this writing) Facebook friends, and the latest on her political thought and activities will arrive in your inbox or on your own Facebook pages.¹⁷ Suggesting new pathways for making the news, the *Huffington Post* wrapped a

story around Palin's foreign policy posts on Facebook, proposing that Palin was using social media to shape the Tea Party policy agenda for her 2012 presidential run. In many ways, the story resembled a conventional news report and even included a sound bite from a wonk at the American Enterprise Institute.¹⁸ What differed was that the source of information about Palin's policy positions was her Facebook page, not a direct interview conducted by a journalist. Indeed, Palin's uneven and often parodied encounters with journalists during her 2008 vice presidential candidacy may have left her with the sense that she can better communicate directly to her social networks through Facebook and Twitter.

Journalism seems to be recognizing its uneasy relationship with social media in growing numbers of similar reports, such as a *New York Times Magazine* feature on the "digital diplomacy" of two members of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's policy staff, Jared Cohen and Alec Ross.¹⁹ Each had several hundred thousand Twitter followers (including, one imagines, many journalists) who learned directly about where they and Secretary Clinton were in the world on a given day. One of their tweets raised eyebrows (and generated news stories) with a remark about "the greatest frappuchino ever" at a university outside Damascus.²⁰ Whether such incidental information was appropriate for an official pronouncement seemed best judged by their legions of followers who numbered more than for anyone else in government at the time besides President Obama and Senator McCain. Indeed, they had far more followers than their own boss, whose official Twitter stream (@statedept) had less than one-tenth of either of their following. Journalists musing about this trend asked if this was ~~this~~ some sort of new "digital diplomacy," the wanderings of twittering bureaucrats, or a sneaky channel for propaganda masking as news?²¹ Perhaps direct communication over social media is all of the above; it is also clearly a growing source of political information that reaches networked publics sooner than conventional journalists can turn it into regular news reports.

One of the most dramatic examples of direct online information distribution online involved the leak (more like a flood) of more than 90,000 classified U.S. government documents on the war in Afghanistan through a site called wikileaks.org.²² These documents raised questions about the possible double role of U.S. ally Pakistan in supporting U.S. enemies al-Qaeda and Taliban forces while taking billions in American aid to fight those same threats. The documents also described the details of U.S. military attacks that killed civilians. At the same time, the landmark WikiLeaks signaled a continuing role for conventional news media, as the site coordinated the release of the documents with major news organizations in the U.S. (*The New York Times*), Germany (*Der Spiegel*), and the U.K. (*The Guardian*), assuring an amplified impact on international audiences, while enlisting the help of prominent journalistic organizations in sorting through and interpreting a mountain of information that the small staff of WikiLeaks could not do alone.

A sure sign of the changing times occurred when an anonymous personal video posted on YouTube and viewed by millions around the world won the

prestigious Polk Award for journalism following the Iranian election protest following the Iranian election. A young protester named Neda Ahgar became the focus of the story in the news. The video that was viewed by millions became the focus of the story in the news. The Polk Awards, Robert Darnton pointed out, is the most prestigious journalism prizes to an anonymous news outside of the usual journalistic in the history of news: "The award celebrates a brave bystander with a cell phone camera working sites to deliver news."

An important question at this point is whether the reliably political information—particularly the video of Neda's death—will reach a wider audience than day engagement with conventional journalism consumption.

WHO FOLLOWS THE NEWS

As more people follow newsmakers, it may assume that fewer are reading information in conventional news. A national task force studying the current news habits of teens (12–17), young adults (18–29), and adults (30 and over 30). The findings included dramatic changes in how young adults consume news on a daily basis. Of both groups say they watch national news on television, but 50 percent of those over 30. As for young adults, 70 percent follow the news on a daily basis for all three age brackets: 20, 22, and 24. 50 percent of teens who do get their news online are browsing, compared with 50 percent of young news consumers who posefully seek it out. This suggests that the populations of young news consumers are reading headlines as they pass through their lives, fan sites, or games.²³

Perhaps the attention overload problem is not just for young people. They are faced with rising education costs, a more competitive media environment than past generations, and the news deficit just has to do with being young people grow up and take on more

prestigious Polk Award for journalism in 2010. The video was taken during a protest following the Iranian elections and showed the shooting death of a young protester named Neda Ahga-Soltan. Since Western journalists were banned from the country, and the distant events were hazy and chaotic, the highly personal video of a protester who died for the cause of fair elections became the focus of the story in the mainstream media. The spokesperson for the Polk Awards, Robert Darnton pointed to the newsworthy significance of the video that was viewed by millions and became "an iconic image of the Iranian resistance."²³ Darnton also noted that awarding one of the most prestigious journalism prizes to an anonymous citizen who produced important news outside of the usual journalistic processes²⁴ signaled an historic moment in the history of news: "The award celebrates the fact that, in today's world, a brave bystander with a cell phone camera can use video-sharing and social networking sites to deliver news."

An important question at this critical juncture in news history is how reliably political information—particularly when it is less graphic than the video of Neda's death—will reach audiences as they turn away from everyday engagement with conventional journalism via regularly scheduled news consumption.

WHO FOLLOWS THE NEWS?

As more people follow newsmakers directly on Facebook and Twitter, we may assume that fewer are reading or watching the repackaging of this information in conventional news formats. Consider the findings of a national task force studying the current crisis in the news. Using in-depth surveys, researchers for the Carnegie-Knight task force were able to probe the news habits of teens (12–17), young adults (18–30), and older citizens (over 30). The findings included dramatic evidence that few teenagers or young adults consume news on a daily basis. For example, only 31 percent of both groups say they watch national TV news daily, compared with 57 percent of those over 30. As for young people moving to the Internet, the number who follow the news on a daily basis online were roughly the same for all three age brackets: 20, 22, and 20 percent, respectively. And 65 percent of teens who do get their news online just happen to run across it while they are browsing, compared with 55 percent of those over 30 who purposefully seek it out. This suggests that earlier studies claiming large online populations of young news consumers may be counting those who see a few headlines as they pass through their Internet portals en route to Facebook, fan sites, or games.²⁵

Perhaps the attention overload problem is greater for young citizens who are faced with rising education costs, unstable job situations, and a richer media environment than past generations. Casual observers often assume that the news deficit just has to do with being young and that it will change as young people grow up and take on more adult responsibilities, such as starting

careers and settling down. Here again, the evidence does not seem optimistic. Martin Wattenberg's careful look at comparable generations of news consumers going back as far as data permit (nearly a century in the case of newspapers) show that each generation of young people over the past 40 years has dropped substantially in news consumption. For example, 70 percent of Americans born in the 1930s read newspapers on a daily basis by the time they turned 20, compared with just 20 percent of those born in the early 1980s. Equally steep declines mark parallel age groups with respect to TV news consumption in later decades. These trends are not unique to America. Most of the advanced democracies report similar declines in news consumption across the age range of their citizens.²⁶

Why does this matter? Not surprisingly, it turns out that there is a connection between tuning out the news and not knowing what is going on in the world of politics. Wattenberg also analyzed correlations between age and political information among Americans at different points in time. In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, for example, citizens under 30 were about as well informed as older age groups. After the 1970s, each decade saw younger generations become increasingly less informed and less likely to follow political issues and events (with a few notable exceptions such as 9/11). These trends are also true for most other democracies. He concludes that, "... today's young adults are the least politically knowledgeable generation ever in the history of survey research."²⁷

SCARE THEM AND THEY MAY PAY ATTENTION: COMMUNICATING WITH ELUSIVE AUDIENCES

Politicians who still seek to reach people through the news seem to have overreacted to their diminished relevance in people's lives by relying on public relations teams to reach people with increasingly shrill messages. The stunning national health care debate of 2009-2010 contained numerous examples of how the communication process has ramped up the PR and hype to reach elusive audiences. One episode began with a press release by House Minority leader John Boehner claiming that a provision in the proposed legislation would lead the country down the road to government-encouraged euthanasia.²⁸ Soon the talk radio echo chamber, blogosphere, e-mail lists and YouTube videos²⁹ turned this into chants of how "Obamacare" would "kill your grandma." Talk radio personality Rush Limbaugh likened Obama's plan to Hitler and the Nazis,³⁰ which provoked Republican columnist David Brooks on NBC's *Meet the Press* to call the attacks "insane."³¹ The hyperbole was continuously amped by prominent Republicans, both members of Congress and by Sarah Palin, who talked about "death panels" in her Facebook page, and tweeted: "R death panels back in?"³² And so the "kill yer granny" messages cycled through the mainstream news media, as they were too tempting to resist for news organizations seeking cheap sensationalism, while covering what prominent politicians were saying.

When the news is consumed with absurd sensationalism (the government every politician running as an outlandish audience who are often running away from the truth), led many politicians to poison the well by ing and railing against government. citizens about people like themselves. forced to hire Madison Avenue-style public relations firms to sell their ideas back to an even larger audience. performances often appear forced and artificial. and young citizens are among the most skeptical. TV and political comedy may seem more entertaining than news. ances made for news.³³

The hallmark of contemporary news is the second quote opening this chapter: "The news is a packaged reality form." News that resembles entertainment has become a staple of communication scholars. The difference between news and entertainment programming often seem less sympathetic to the young and vulnerable characters starved for attention in the news business (discussed in chapter 2). The entertainment media, makes produce and report. News events scripted by public relations spin-doctors are cheap and predictable. "The news is a hole" more economically than serious news. In later chapters, the mayhem of the news business, the formula driven, displacing local political news with threatening weather, and bizarre happenings. The dramatic tone of infotainment news attracts a younger demographic: younger market, all, watch it with remote in hand.

The irony of the way the news is consumed is because of—the often shrill and dramatic tone of the news. citizens are driven away. Many others, while, political insiders watch the same news, lobbyists, public relations professionals, and the attention of sports fans to sports. The daily struggle for image control. The communication professionals who spend the process going, creating what Robert Snow call a "media logic" that

From the standpoint of those who consume the news, this strange media logic, the shrill voice of the news, fully crafted sound bites in news reports, opinion itself.³⁵ Not surprisingly, many are concerned that the news is more for