

NEWS

THE POLITICS OF ILLUSION

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W. LANCE BENNETT

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HOW JOURNALISTS REPORT THE NEWS

Dear Glenn: We come at journalism from different traditions. . . .

Journalists in [the impartial] tradition have plenty of opinions, but by setting them aside to follow the facts—as a judge in court is supposed to set aside prejudice to follow the law and evidence—they can often produce results that are more substantial and more credible.

—Bill Keller¹

Dear Bill: There is no question that journalists at establishment media venues . . . have produced some superb reporting. . . . But this model has also produced lots of atrocious journalism. . . . A journalist who is petrified of appearing to express any opinions will often steer clear of declarative sentences about what is true, opting instead for a cowardly and unhelpful “here’s-what-both-sides-say-and-I-won’t-resolve-the-conflicts” formulation. That rewards dishonesty on the part of political and corporate officials who know they can rely on “objective” reporters to amplify their falsehoods without challenge.

—Glenn Greenwald²

Bill Keller is one of the most distinguished journalists in America, having spent most of his career at the *New York Times* as a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, the Moscow bureau chief, and executive editor. His side of this exchange with Glenn Greenwald staked out the ideal case for neutral, impartial or objective journalism. Those standards continue to motivate journalists in leading news organizations despite the erosion of the economic model and audience base that once supported them. Greenwald is a leading representative of a resurgent public interest journalism that operates largely online, with leaner organizations, a narrower topic focus, and funding from private individuals and foundations. The Keller-Greenwald discussion of the nature of good journalism appeared in the *New York Times* under the title “Is Glenn Greenwald the Future of News?” At the time of this exchange, Greenwald, along with filmmaker Laura Poitras, had just broken the bombshell revelations about the US government’s elec-

tronic spying on its own citizens and on people and leaders around the world. This National Security Agency surveillance program was revealed in a massive leak of top-secret information from Edward Snowden, who worked as a government contractor for the NSA. At the time, Greenwald worked for the UK newspaper the *Guardian*, and he later went on to join *The Intercept*, an online investigative operation funded by eBay billionaire Pierre Omidyar. This exchange between the old guard and the new reveals a deep divide in contemporary journalism. On one side are legacy news organizations that largely report official accounts of events by “indexing” their coverage to the balance of views among powerful sources. On the other side are growing ranks of more critical journalists who attempt to sift evidence and draw conclusions independently of official claims. Swirling around these two poles are many hybrid sites that blend blogging, citizen reporting, content aggregation, social media distribution, and new syndication models. We explore some of these information hybrids such as *Vice* and *Vox* in chapter 7 but keep the focus in this chapter on the tensions between legacy journalism and the rise of new online investigative organizations.

One of the interesting features of the new online investigative journalism is that it has a political agenda, much like the muckraking journalists of a century ago who sought to expose political and corporate corruption, abuses of workers and consumers, and problems with democracy. Even when such reporting is supported by evidence, it is often labeled as partisan because it is at odds with the views of prominent political officials and powerful interests. Journalists like Greenwald respond that they are trying to hold officials accountable to democratic values by exposing deception and corruption. These different standards of journalism represent a kind of political warp in which legacy journalism that follows the official line is labeled objective, and journalism that attempts to hold officials accountable to evidence and democratic values is often accused of being biased. Viewed from the perspective of journalists such as Greenwald, the legacy press often seems little more than a communication branch of government.

Beyond the debate about whether the press should report neutrally on the government or hold it accountable, there are other aspects of the contemporary press system that also shape our public discourse. For example, an interesting aspect of the legacy press involves occasions when it gets caught up in *news frenzies* that result in intensive bursts of reporting on things like shootings, natural disasters, scandals, crime waves, tragedies, and political blunders. Some of these episodes are event driven, as when a political figure is assassinated or a terrorist attack occurs. In other cases, as Robert Entman has shown in his work on scandals, intensive news cover-

age is orchestrated by political factions who stage government actions such as congressional hearings and investigations aimed at damaging political opponents.³ Other frenzies are introduced through more stealthy PR techniques such as stories planted with friendly bloggers that act as tempting bait for journalists. Some of these frenzies can end up as “feeding frenzies” (discussed later in this chapter) when journalists begin dissecting the political target and pronouncing him or her wounded or politically dead.

Even when they are of dubious importance, sensational stories generate public attention and political buzz, taking on lives of their own as they travel through online and conventional media. In these cases, social media, blogs, video platforms, and the legacy press become integrated into a densely networked echo chamber that keeps a story going. An earlier example of this involved the rumors about President Obama being born outside the United States, thus disqualifying him to be president. This persistent story rode the waves of social media, and surfaced in the mainstream news for a number of years, fed by statements from conservative politicians and other public figures. Just when the story seemed to die down, none other than Donald Trump brought it back as a key theme in his short-lived bid for the presidency in 2012. Trump displayed an uncanny grasp of media logic, becoming a one-man brand by living large in the media through well-publicized romantic escapades, staged publicity events for his business ventures, starring in his own reality show, and being a presidential candidate. In 2012, Trump secured his moment of media fame when he launched his campaign by joining the “birther” conspiracy and challenging President Obama’s American birth. Although there was no evidence for the attack on Obama, the mainstream media could not ignore the charge because it came from a “newsmaker.” This circular news logic is what enables newsmakers to continue to get into the headlines, often with baseless claims.

In 2016, Trump topped his earlier performance with a series of inflammatory statements that rallied the Far Right and activated social media spheres, making him a dominant news story in the conventional press as well. Trump launched his 2016 campaign with a scathing speech about Mexican immigrants crossing the border, saying: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending the best. . . . They’re sending people who have a lot of problems. . . . They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists, and some, I assume, are good people.”⁴ That line immediately put Trump in the lead in media coverage of a large Republican field. After several US and Mexican television networks and sponsors canceled their relationships with him and some of his products, many pundits assumed that his campaign would burn out or that the Republican Party might discipline

or disown him. However, the party feared that he could run as an independent, costing them the election. And so his harsh talk gave him a bump in the opinion polls over the rest of the candidate pack. Buoyed by public support and media coverage, Trump next launched a salvo against Republican senator and past presidential candidate John McCain, who was shot down, captured, and tortured as a navy pilot during the Vietnam War. After McCain criticized Trump’s remarks about Mexican immigrants as “firing up the crazies,” Trump appeared at an Iowa forum and dismissed McCain by saying, “He’s not a war hero. He was a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren’t captured.”⁵ Despite predictions that these unedited remarks would end his campaign, Trump continued to rise in the polls and receive the lion’s share of attention on social and conventional media, reaching nearly 2 million mentions across all media in the week after the McCain blast, compared with the next closest candidate, Democrat Hillary Clinton who received around 500,000 mentions.⁶ And so, in the early months of the campaign, Trump became his own publicity machine, dominating the news and sending his public approval ratings soaring over a crowded field of comparatively dull Republican primary candidates.

In many ways, this is the best of times and the worst of times for journalism. On the plus side, the rise of new investigative online organizations has revived a long-hibernating strain of American public interest journalism. With so much information now stored in electronic formats, hackers and leakers are able to release it to independent journalists for broader distribution through hybrid networks of conventional news organizations and online platforms. At the same time, the high volume of PR spin keeps legacy journalism producing official versions of events that often fly in the face of the evidence produced by the public interest press. And cutting through this information system are the news frenzies that burst into the headlines and continue as long as they are fed by a combination of spin and social media buzz. The overall effect is a kind of babel of information that leaves many citizens discouraged or confused.

As discussed in chapter 3, people have various strategies for dealing with the information overload: selecting sources they tend to agree with, deciding how to balance facts and values in their information diet, seeking perspective in political comedy, throwing up their hands in dismay, or simply disconnecting from politics altogether. Yet despite all the signs of disruption and discontent, the core of the US news system remains the legacy press with its dependence on official sources, and its tendency to avoid taking sides, even when evidence points to which version of a story is closer to the truth. In this system, the frenzies and scandals provide fig leaves for

independence. Why does the legacy press prevail despite the many signs that it is in trouble? One reason the legacy press remains dominant is because it remains an important outlet for those with power. Even though most people who follow the news think that both politics and the press need fixing, they still want to know what those in power are doing. And the legacy press continues to provide free content for the growing numbers of blogs, aggregation platforms, and social media networks outside the mainstream. And so, despite its flaws, the curious dependency of the press on official spin continues to make the news go round.

How Spin Works

It may be obvious why politicians attempt to control the news, but the journalistic response to news control is more complicated. As already explained, the ideal of impartial or objective journalism results in reporting what dominant power players are saying without issuing rulings on their inaccuracy or deception for fear of being accused of taking sides. When news management operations by officials are competent and journalists are heavily spun, the mainstream press often has trouble reporting independently on stories, with the result that the news sounds much the same no matter which mainstream outlet one consults. True, the *New York Times* may have more stories on more subjects and contain more detail than *USA Today*, but neither strays far beyond official messages and spin. Even Fox News and MSNBC, with their distinctive political angles, simply focus more on one side of the official spectrum than the other.

The spin fills the news more easily as shrinking news budgets restrict investigative reporting and squeeze the space for hard news. In addition, the quest for “balance” and fear of being charged with bias result in reporting spin to balance a story even when there is little evidence to support it. As noted in the case study in chapter 4, this results in an information system in which publics can simply choose the “facts” they like best, creating confusion and political paralysis on pressing problems such as global warming and other environmental issues. The quest for balance can be so ritualized that news organizations may impose it even when investigative reporters reveal situations that seem to have the evidence clearly stacked on one side. For example, Ken Silverstein, an investigative reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, told of his experience doing a solid piece of investigative reporting on Republican efforts to use influence in St. Louis to disqualify African American voters in the 2004 presidential election. He found that the Republican abuses in Missouri might have been significant enough to affect the outcome of the election, while alleged transgressions by the Democrats were

comparatively minor. Despite this finding, his editors chose to run a more “balanced” story about the parties charging each other with dirty practices. In such cases, the game frame is the default plot option for writing stories. In Silverstein’s view, creating artificial balance out of political spin rather than reporting the actual independent findings was anything but balanced. He went public with his frustrations, saying: “I am completely exasperated by this approach to the news. The idea seems to be that we go out to report but when it comes time to write we turn our brains off and repeat the spin from both sides. God forbid we should . . . attempt to fairly assess what we see with our own eyes. ‘Balanced’ is not fair, it’s just an easy way to avoid real reporting and shirking our responsibility to readers.”⁷

The greatest irony of this system is that considerable competition exists among journalists for what generally amounts to a pretty homogeneous result—with the notable exception of the marketing of partisan content on Fox and MSNBC. Perhaps the next greatest irony is that so much antagonism between journalists and politicians also exists, even though they frequently end up serving each other’s mutual interests. What keeps this system from looking too much like the more managed press systems of authoritarian regimes are the regular frenzies in which journalists turn against politicians at the hint of a slip, a rumor, or an accusation from an opponent. Thus, politicians may suddenly find reporters biting the hand that feeds them (recall “feeding the beast” from the last chapter) if they slip or indulge in a spontaneous moment that can be interpreted as a problem. As a result, the press is often kept at a distance from the officials it covers. The result is that journalists seldom have much to distinguish their stories from one another. Former White House correspondent for CNN Charles Bierbauer has described the intense scramble for some nugget or nuance that makes a report different, something that leads someone else’s editor to call and say, “Bierbauer’s got the story. Where’s yours?”⁸

This strange American news pattern alternates between publicizing patent political spin and trying to trap politicians in slips and scandals. Far from enhancing public respect, the press politics game conveys an air of smug insiders often struggling over little of substance while ignoring gaping realities. Indeed, this conformist reporting that often misses the larger story gives political comedy programming its daily material. When the press pack attacks, the adversarial behavior appears largely ritualistic. This “gotcha” journalism often comes across to audiences as posturing—as a game that journalists play to make themselves appear independent and adversarial. Again, providing a steady supply of comedy material.

This chapter explores why so much journalism falls into the two broad

categories of (a) reporting the official lines of the day and (b) playing personal “gotcha” games, often with the same officials and newsmakers. Both of these tendencies of the legacy press present serious problems for citizens and their relation to government. The tendency of the press to open the gates to officials and their carefully managed messages is hard to reconcile with the common assumption, as advocated by Glenn Greenwald above, that the media should be more independent, and even adversarial, in their relations with news sources. The problem of a free press relying so heavily on what officials and their handlers feed it is so perplexing that the reasons have been explored by a number of researchers in the fields of communication (e.g., Jay Blumler, Michael Gurevitch),⁹ sociology (e.g., Herbert Gans, Gaye Tuchman),¹⁰ and political science (e.g., Bernard Cohen, Timothy Cook).¹¹

The countertendency of the press to bite the hand that feeds it is in many ways equally puzzling because the resulting adversarialism is more often personal than substantive. As Thomas Patterson has pointed out, the resulting news content is an odd mix: a narrow range of political ideas, interspersed with cranky criticisms by journalists of politicians and the games they play. Patterson describes the rising levels of journalistic negativity as follows: “Negative coverage of politics has risen dramatically in recent decades. Negative coverage of presidential candidates, for example, now exceeds their positive coverage. . . . By 1990, negative coverage of Congress and its members was over 80%. Each president since 1976—Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton—has received more negative coverage than his predecessor. Federal agencies have fared no better; in the 1990–1995 period, for example, not a single cabinet-level agency received more positive than negative coverage. As portrayed by the press, America’s public leadership is universally inept and self-serving.”¹²

Thus, the game framing of politics is more about winners and losers, and their inside strategies, and not enough about the issues or the reasons why the options often seem to narrow. Although different researchers propose different specific reasons for why the news comes out in this odd way, all seem to agree that the general answer is a combination of three factors: (a) the economics of the news business, (b) the dependence of journalists on sources who control the information that journalists need, and (c) the routine news-gathering practices of reporters and their news organizations (along with the professional norms and codes of conduct that grow up around those organizational routines). Since two of these factors (the political economy of the news and the information management strategies of news sources) are discussed extensively in other chapters, this chapter

and the next look inside journalism itself. We begin with the organizational news-gathering routines that keep reporters and officials locked into their strange dance.

Journalistic Routines and Professional Norms

Organizational routines are the basic rules and practices that journalism schools and news organizations train reporters and editors to follow. These routines help in deciding what to cover and how to cover it. Journalistic routines give the news its reassuring familiarity and create a steady supply of news product about particular topics. *Professional norms* are those moral standards, codes of ethics, and guidelines about inserting voices and viewpoint into stories. Both work routines and professional norms are shaped strongly by the industry business practices and pressures explained in chapter 7. The recent wave of economic change sweeping the news industry not only introduced changes into reporting practices, but also created serious strains in important journalistic norms, such as objectivity, as discussed in chapter 6.

These everyday work routines inside news organizations bias the news without necessarily intending to do so, resulting in the information biases described in chapter 2. In addition to explaining how reporting practices bias the news, it is important to understand why these habits persist and why neither the press nor the general public seems to grasp their true political significance. For example, many members of the press continue to defend their reporting habits as being largely consistent with the professional journalism norms of *independence* and *objectivity*. These standards may go by different names, such as “accurate,” “fair,” “unbiased,” or “nonpartisan,” but the point is that a surprising number of American journalists continue to espouse some notion of objectivity. The peculiar nature of objectivity is so important to understand that the next chapter is devoted primarily to its origins and its defining consequences for American news.

A word of clarification is in order here about the intent of this critical discussion. In many instances, the practices and professional standards of American journalism have been commendable. In a few celebrated cases, reporters and editors have waged legal battles and even risked going to jail to protect the confidentiality of sources or to defend the principle of free speech. Moreover, when it comes to the many moral divisions that trouble the nation—our struggles over abortion, guns, or race—journalism has done a good job of presenting the issues and the reasons for impasses. However, on matters of economic, environmental, or foreign policy, political reporting becomes an insider game subject to the limitations of a def-

erential press. In such key areas, American journalism may have become trapped within an unworkable set of professional standards, with the result that the more objective or fair reporters try to be, the more official bias they introduce into the news.¹³ A five-nation study of political journalists by Thomas Patterson and a group of international colleagues produced a startling finding: although the American press is arguably the most free or politically independent in the world, US journalists display the least diversity in their decisions about whom to interview for different hypothetical stories and in what visuals they chose for those stories. Patterson concluded that the strong norm of political neutrality or independence among American journalists actually homogenizes the political content of their reporting. By contrast, reporters in countries such as Italy, Britain, Sweden, and Germany (the other nations studied) are more likely to regard political perspectives as desirable in covering events. As a result, journalists in other nations tend to cover the same events differently—that is, by interviewing a broader range of political sources and using different visual illustrations.¹⁴

HOW ROUTINE REPORTING PRACTICES CONTRIBUTE TO NEWS BIAS

Much like any job, reporting the news consists largely of a set of routine, standardized activities. Despite some obvious differences involving the nature of assignments and personal writing styles, American reporters (as noted earlier) tend to cover news events in remarkably similar ways. A fascinating example of how these work routines affect news content was discovered by Timothy Cook in a study of international crisis coverage in the United States and France during the first Iraq War in 1990–1991. In the months after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, crucial international diplomatic efforts attempted to prevent the looming war. When news of these efforts broke, television networks in both countries assigned their reporters to get reactions from key sources. American newscasts flipped through the “golden triangle” of Washington news beats: the White House, State Department, and Pentagon. Even though there was no official US reaction to be had, the reporters were pressured to say something, and they effectively invented the kinds of vague pronouncements that one might expect from officials in sensitive political posts at the early stage of a world crisis. By contrast, French reporters (who do not operate with a US-style beat system) interviewed various political party leaders and generated a comparatively broad range of political views about the meanings and implications of the diplomatic talks.¹⁵

The existence of standardized reporting behaviors and story formulas is

not surprising when one considers the strong patterns that operate in the news environment. For example, the events staged by political actors tend to reflect the predictable political communication goals outlined in chapter 4. In parallel, news organizations tend to impose constraints on reporters in terms of acceptable deadlines and story angles. Those organizations watch each other, further standardizing coverage and making the official spin the common denominator. In short, reporters confront three separate sources of incentives to standardize their reporting habits:

- Cooperation with, and pressures from, news sources
- Standard work routines and pressures within news organizations
- Daily information sharing and working relations with fellow reporters

Each of these forces contributes to the development of standardized reporting formulas that favor the incorporation of official political messages in the news, interspersed with the feeding frenzies that may undermine those same officials when they make mistakes or become targets of scandals organized by their opponents. These reporting patterns also lead reporters to write personalized, dramatized, and fragmented news stories. The spice of those stories typically comes in the form of insider analysis of the political games their official sources are playing. We will now explore each source of everyday pressure on journalists.

REPORTERS AND OFFICIALS: COOPERATION AND CONTROL

Most political events are so predictably scripted that reporters can condense them easily into formulaic plot outlines: who (which official) did what (official action), where (in what official setting), for what (officially stated) purpose, and with what (officially proclaimed) result. For example:

President _____ met at the White House today with Prime Minister _____ from _____ to discuss mutual concerns about _____. Both leaders called the talks productive and said that important matters were resolved.

It does not take a careful reading to see that such a formula is virtually devoid of substance. The pseudo-events that provide the scripts for such news stories are generally designed to create useful political images, not to transmit substantive information about real political issues. Because such events are routine political occurrences, reporters quickly develop formulas for converting them into news whenever they occur. Compounding the temptation to report official versions of political events is the fact that re-

porters live in a world where the “divide and conquer” mentality is ever present. Careers are advanced by receiving scoops and leaks and are damaged by being left out in the cold, excluded from official contact. Like it or not, reporters must depend on the sources they cover.

In view of the patterned nature of political events combined with the spin tactics of politicians, it is not surprising that the news seems to emerge from formulas that virtually write themselves.¹⁶ Of course, there are occasional departures from these scripts. However, in a workday world filled with short deadlines, demanding editors, and persuasive news sources, the formulas become the course of least resistance. In the illusory world of political news, the seal of official approval becomes a substitute for truth and authenticity, which in turn makes the formulas seem legitimate.¹⁷ Robert Scholes developed these ideas a bit further when he said: “Perhaps the credulous believe that a reporter reports facts and that newspapers print all of them that are fit to print. But actually, newspapers print all of the ‘facts’ that fit, period—that fit the journalistic conventions of what ‘a story’ is (those tired formulas) and that fit the editorial policy of the paper.”¹⁸

The formulas used to select and arrange facts in the news are produced through mutual cooperation between reporters and newsmakers. These partners may not share exactly the same goals or objectives, but together they create information that satisfies each other’s needs. It is all in a day’s work. Perhaps that famous slogan of the *New York Times* (All the News That’s Fit to Print) should be changed to “All the News That Fits, We Print.”

THE INSIDER SYNDROME

In addition to developing work habits that favor official views, reporters are also human beings. It can be heady to feel like an insider in the game of politics. When officials court favor and understanding from reporters, they are often paid back with sympathetic coverage that sticks close to the officials’ political lines.¹⁹ Journalists who cooperate with powerful officials often receive recognition and flattery and are taken into the confidence of those officials. In the intensely political environments in which most of our news occurs, nothing is valued as much as power. If one cannot possess power (and there always seems to be a shortage), then the next best thing is to be on the inside with the powerful—to be seen with them, to be consulted by them, to socialize with them, and perhaps even to have them as friends. As Tom Bethell puts it, “To be on close terms with elite news sources is to be an ‘insider,’ which is what almost everyone in Washington wants to be. It is interesting to note how often this word appears on the dust jackets of memoirs by Washington journalists.”²⁰ Even in the current era in which

journalists tend to be kept at a distance from officials, they can create the aura of being insiders by pontificating on the game of politics, talking about the players and their moves as though they were privy to the view from the inside.

Whether being friends with the powerful they cover, or just being in the know about them, there are dangers to the insider syndrome. Ellen Hume, a journalist and scholar of the press, says that she has come to feel that journalists can be “more powerful than any elected official” and that something “urgently” needs to be done to “dynamite” the insiders out of their privileged positions.²¹ Steve Goldstein, Washington correspondent for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, suggested term limits for Washington journalists. If news organizations would agree to rotate their stars out of Washington, the power of the “unelected media elite” might be diminished. Even more important, says Goldstein, media term limits “might counteract the potential for disconnection, whereby the correspondent suffers a loss of understanding of issues that Americans really care about. Federal policy-making and the impact on the folks at home is supplanted by the view from Washington. There is a difference between Here and There. In Sodom-on-the-Potomac the political culture is secular, while most of America is religious. Here the character issue is often framed as: Did he/she sleep with her/him/it? Out there, the issue is often one of fairness, justice, integrity. All the sleaze we print doesn’t fit.”²²

NEWS ORGANIZATION PRESSURES TO STANDARDIZE

If the daily spin from officials breathes new life into news formulas, the norms inside news organizations reinforce the use of those formulas. Novice journalists experience constant pressures (subtle and otherwise) from editors about how to cover stories.²³ Those pressures are effective because editors hold sway over what becomes news and which reporters advance in the organization. Over time, reporters tend to adjust their styles to fit harmoniously with the expectations of their organizations.

In many cases, these organizational expectations are defended by journalists as simply preserving the “house style” of the news organization—the tone, editorial voice, and format that makes one news outlet distinguishable from another. This level of formula reporting is inevitable in any kind of organization that has standard operating procedures. However, at a deeper level, there are industry-wide norms about story values that define what news is and that, in turn, open the news to the kinds of biases outlined in chapter 2. For example, one young reporter serving an apprenticeship with a major big-city newspaper talked about the somewhat mysterious process

of having some stories accepted and others rejected without really knowing the basis for many of the decisions. Equally mysterious were the conversations with assignment editors in which the editor seemed to know what the story was before it had been covered. Over time, the socialization process works its effects, and young reporters learn to quickly sense what the story is and how to write it.

Beyond the style of this or that news organization, the whole media system begins to emulate particular formats, themes, and news values. Bending news genres to fit commercial values and socializing reporters to recognize how potential stories fit the familiar formulas are the roots of the news biases discussed in chapter 2. In all their variations, however, organizational pressures result in news that typically fits a formula.

WHY FORMULAS WORK

Standardized news is safe. Managers in news organizations must constantly compare their product with that of their competition and defend risky departures from the reporting norm. As Edward Epstein observed in his classic study of television network news, even TV news assignment editors look to the conservative wire services for leads on stories and angles for reporting them.²⁴ The wires cover the highest portion of planned official events and stick closest to official political scripts. Following the daily lead of the wires becomes the most efficient way to fill the daily need for news, particularly in economically strained organizations that find syndicated content more affordable than hiring their own reporters.

Other organizational arrangements also strongly influence standardized reporting. Among the most powerful standardizing forces are daily news production routines. Newspapers and news programs require a minimum supply of news every day, whether or not anything significant happens in the world. Perhaps you have seen a television news program on a slow news day. In place of international crises, press conferences, congressional hearings, and proclamations by the mayor, the news may consist of a trip to the zoo to visit a new “baby,” a canned report on acupuncture in China, a follow-up story on the survivor of an air crash, or a visit to the opening of baseball spring training in Florida. Slow news days occur during weekends or vacation periods when governments are closed down. News organizations run fluff on slow days because their daily routines report official happenings from the news centers of government. Whether the news day is slow or fast, the same amount of news must be produced to fill the “news hole.”

FILLING THE NEWS HOLE

For a news organization to function, it must fill a minimum “news hole” every day. Producing a large amount of cheap, predictable news normally means assigning reporters to events and beats that are sure to produce enough acceptable stories to fill the news hole by the day’s deadline. During normal business periods, the public relations (PR) machinery of government and business fills these organizational needs by producing events that are cheap, easy to report, numerous, and predictable.

With the advent of 24-hour news channels and websites that are linked to papers and broadcast organizations, or that stand alone (such as the *Huffington Post*, *Vox*, or the *Daily Beast*), the news hole has become a canyon. Pressures increase to update stories many times a day, in contrast to once or twice a day in the old era of morning and evening news. The journalistic credo of “advancing” a story has become an obsession for many organizations. Reporters learn to ask leading or challenging questions, often based on little more than trying to elicit a reaction from a newsmaker in an effort to generate new material to report. “The president denied rumors today . . .” becomes a familiar lead in a news age with an ever-larger news hole to fill.

BEATS

Filling the daily news hole on time means that news organizations must figure out how to make the spontaneous predictable. The obvious solution to this problem is to anticipate when and where the required amount of news will happen every day. Because this task is made difficult by the size of the world and the smallness of reporting staffs, the solution is to implicitly adjust the definition of news so that things that are known to happen on a regular basis become news. Reporters can be assigned to cover those things and be assured (by definition) of gathering news every day. As a result, the backbone of the news organization is the network of beats, ranging from the police station and the city council at the local level to Congress, the Supreme Court, and the presidency at the national level. Beats produce each day’s familiar run of murders, accidents, public hearings, press conferences, and presidents entering helicopters and leaving planes.

BUREAUS

In addition to beats, large news organizations also have geographically assigned crews. For example, television networks have news crews stationed in large cities and locations around the world where news is expected to happen. The assumption is that enough news will be generated

from these areas to warrant assigning personnel to them, and these crews will get the news faster and with more local knowledge than would teams dispatched from the home office. The locations chosen for these bureaus naturally become more covered. As Epstein discovered in his study of television network news, almost all non-Washington news originates from the handful of places where the networks station their crews.²⁵

To an important extent, the reliance on bureaus has decreased in recent years because of budget cuts that eliminated many of these branch offices. As the profit imperative has been felt at both print and broadcast organizations, expensive bureaus are often the first things to be cut. Among American television news operations, only CNN has retained a substantial network of worldwide information-gathering outposts—in large part because CNN also runs an international channel that demands serious world coverage. However, all major news organizations have dropped bureaus and reporting staff. The result is that ABC, CBS, and NBC have increasingly settled for buying their raw product secondhand from a variety of world TV wholesale news suppliers. In the newspaper business, pressures to cut luxuries such as remote bureaus have been equally intense. Many big-city papers have been purchased by large conglomerates, which feed all the papers in the chain the same material from centralized bureaus. The few remaining independent big-city papers increasingly rely on secondhand suppliers, such as the Associated Press, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, which continue to maintain extensive bureaus and sell their stories to smaller organizations. The overall trend is an increasing consolidation of the information channels on which media organizations rely for their daily supply of news. All of this produces more limited news coverage in the legacy press.

Reporters as a Pack: Pressures to Agree

As a result of the routine nature of news gathering, reporters tend to move in packs. They are assigned together to the same events and the same beats. More than most workers, they share close social experiences on the job. Together they eat, sleep, travel, drink, and wait, and wait, and wait. They also share that indescribable adrenaline rush of “crashing” a story—hurtling through those precious minutes between the release of key information and the deadline for filing the story. As a result of such intimate social contact, reporters tend to develop a sense of solidarity. They learn to cope with shared pressures from news organizations and news sources. They come to accept news formulas as inevitable, even though they may cynically complain about them in between mad scrambles to meet dead-

lines. They respect one another as independent professionals but engage in the social courtesies of comparing notes and corroborating story angles.

As discussed in the last chapter, Timothy Crouse called the reporter's social world—particularly on the campaign trail—“pack journalism.”²⁶ He concluded that reporters come into such close contact while under such sympathetic conditions while covering such controlled events that they do not have to collaborate formally in order to end up reporting things in much the same way. Once a reporter has been assigned to a routine event for which news formulas are well known, there is a strong temptation to produce a formula story. Added to this are a tight deadline and an editor who will question significant departures from the formula used by other reporters; as a result, the temptation to standardize becomes even stronger. Finally, put the reporter in a group of sympathetic human beings faced with the same temptations, and the use of formulas becomes easily rationalized and accepted with the social support of the group.

So strong are the pressures of the pack that they were felt by a trained sociologist posing as a reporter to study journalism from an insider's perspective. While working as a reporter for a small daily paper, Mark Fishman was assigned to the city council beat. He quickly fit into the routine of writing formula stories that mirrored the council's careful efforts to create an image of democracy in action—complete with elaborate hearings, citizen input, serious deliberations, and formal votes. In a rare case when an issue before the council got out of control and turned into a hot political argument, the reporters at the press table reacted strangely: they ignored the disruption because it did not fit the mold of what counts as news. And they had to work together to classify the event as not being newsworthy. As Fishman described it: “The four members of the press [including Fishman] were showing increasing signs of impatience with the controversy. At first the reporters stopped taking notes; then they began showing their disapproval to each other; finally, they were making jokes about the foolishness of the debate. No evidence could be found in their comments that they considered the controversy anything other than a stupid debate over a trivial matter unworthy of the time and energy the council put into it.”²⁷

Fishman noted the strength of group pressure operating against independent news judgment: “Even though at the time of the incident I was sitting at the press table [as a reporter] making derisive comments about the foolishness of the council along with other journalists, it occurred to me later how this controversy could be seen as an important event in city hall.”²⁸ Just as Fishman succumbed to the pressures of the pack while still recognizing them at a conscious level, most reporters are aware of group

pressure but seem unable to escape it. In a study of the Washington journalism corps, the nation's reporting elite, Stephen Hess found that reporters regarded pack journalism as their most serious problem.²⁹ As Hess noted, however, pack journalism will persist as long as news organizations establish their routines around the predictable actions of officials. Although the pack generally feeds on the handouts offered by spin doctors and political handlers, it can also turn on the unprepared or vulnerable politician, resulting in a *feeding frenzy*.

FEEDING FRENZY: WHEN THE PACK ATTACKS

Although the political content of the mainstream press may be remarkably uniform, it does not always follow the scripts of politicians. What is often mistaken for a critical, independent press is a phenomenon popularly known as the "feeding frenzy."³⁰ When politicians become caught up in personal crises, scandals, or power struggles, the news media may descend like a pack of hungry dogs or sharks to devour the political prey. Add the hint of a sex scandal or produce the proverbial smoking gun of political corruption, and the frenzy can bring down the high and mighty.

Cases of the pack devouring its political prey are legendary: Lyndon Johnson fell to a feeding frenzy over the Vietnam War; Richard Nixon lost control of the press during the Watergate crisis; Jimmy Carter was himself held hostage in the Oval Office by the press for 444 days during the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979–1980; the first George Bush plummeted from his standing as the most popular president in the history of modern polling as the press pack followed the Democrats in attacking him for an economic recession; and Bill Clinton saw the customary presidential honeymoon period curtailed prematurely by feeding frenzies over a series of minor "scandals" in White House operations. The growing chaos and criticism surrounding the Iraq crisis provided openings for the press pack to turn on George W. Bush, but those openings were balanced against the somber fact that the country was at war. And, as discussed in chapter 2, the press pack reached consensus early in the Obama administration that the president had lost control of his "narrative."

Few politicians have felt the sting of the feeding frenzy as repeatedly as Bill Clinton. The news was spiced during the 1992 election by charges of Clinton's extramarital affairs, pot smoking, draft dodging, and other personal issues. Clinton's character became a major preoccupation of the press during the campaign.³¹ The resulting challenge for the Clinton communication team was to reassure voters about the character defects raised in the news and reinforced by opponents during the primaries and the gen-

eral election. The fact that Clinton survived the nearly nonstop negative news and then won the election struck one Republican media consultant as something close to a miracle. He likened Clinton to the crash test dummy of American politics: "I've never seen anybody come back from being attacked in that fashion. It's like going through a car crash with no seat belts and then going through the window and hitting a wall and walking away. It's absolutely astounding."³²

After the election, Clinton and his staff remained bitter about their treatment by the press during the campaign. When they came to Washington, it seemed as if they felt that they could govern much as they had won the election—by going over the heads of the press through electronic town halls, controlled news events, and heavy polling and image construction. The daily world of Washington politics proved different than the campaign trail, where paid advertising and controlled events stand a better chance of countering press attacks. The now-famous decision to close the corridor between the pressroom and the White House Office of Communications amounted to a declaration of war on journalism's elite corps. The icy relations left the press pack surly and ready to pounce at the hint of a scandal or personal failing. Clinton's run of personal incidents continued after the inauguration, and the press pounced on such items as Clinton's expensive haircut aboard an idling Air Force One on a Los Angeles International Airport taxiway and a scandal in the management of the White House travel office that was quickly dubbed "Travelgate" in the media.

One analysis of this nonstop feeding frenzy opened with the observation that "twelve days after President Clinton took office—with *only* 1,448 days left in his term—Sam Donaldson of ABC *News* was on a weekend talk show saying 'This week we can all talk about, Is the presidency over?'"³³ Another reflective piece was titled "The White House Beast" after the derisive nickname given the press corps by George Stephanopoulos, who was Clinton's early (and disastrous) communications director, and who now serves as a pundit and anchor for ABC *News*. As *Washington Post* correspondent Ruth Marcus put it in that article, "The White House press corps is like this large, dysfunctional family. It's weird. It's not normal. Half the time I'm at the White House, my attitude is: No one would believe this."³⁴ Influential *New York Times* correspondent (now an influential columnist) Maureen Dowd listed numerous instances of poor press handling during a European trip commemorating the 50-year anniversary of D-Day. She recounted a reflective moment at a British pub after a missed deadline: "Sipping champagne ordered by the *Paris Match* reporter, I fantasized about replacing the corner dartboard with the head of one of Clinton's prepubescent press-minders."³⁵

Several lessons can be drawn from the series of feeding frenzies that plagued the Clinton presidency. As these factors often contribute to other feeding frenzies, they are stated here in more general terms:

- Cooperative relations between the president's communication staff and the press had broken down. (See the discussions of press-politician cooperation earlier in this chapter and in chapter 4.)
- The communication staff seemed to think it unnecessary (or beneath the dignity of the office) to follow the basic rules of news management in response to the initial outbreaks of negative coverage, as outlined in chapter 4. They had no apparent game plan to spin the incidents that kept the feeding frenzies going.
- Opponents in Congress converted the incidents into hearings and investigations that resulted in numerous uncontrolled news situations.

The lessons from the Clinton years apply equally to the Obama presidency. Even though Barack Obama took office facing large challenges at home and abroad, he was unable to spin his circumstances to his political advantage, and spent most of his presidency fending off attacks from Republicans and rumors bubbling from deep social media networks. Even his signature health care program became a frenzied press problem as he displayed little ability to sell it to the public, and poorly defended attacks from critics who sought to kill it. And so, as discussed in chapters 1 and 2, President Obama lost his narrative, and opposing Republicans were ever ready to supply theirs to the press. The Republican opposition managed to capture a substantial portion of the news by threatening to filibuster Obama initiatives in the Senate while echoing various birther and other slurs on his character from Tea Party activists in the streets. Meanwhile, the administration seemed unable to generate or stay on messages of its own, preferring to continue to communicate directly with supporters through social media networks, which worked far better to mobilize public support during the election campaign than in the governing process. The Obama years were an odd mix of orchestrated opposition spin interspersed with frenzies stirred by online attacks and the Tea Party movement.

Ever a popular target for scandalmongering from the Right, Hillary Clinton launched her 2016 presidential campaign amid waves of scandal promoted by Republicans in Congress. Using hearings and investigations to attract ongoing media coverage, political opponents continued to raise questions about Clinton's use of a private email server as secretary of state, and her handling of security at the US diplomatic compound in Benghazi,

Libya, where an attack resulted in the death of the American ambassador. In between bouts of damage control on these scandals, Clinton was trying to get press coverage for her positions on the economy and the environment. With opponents spinning the press, and the pack poised for attack, maintaining control of the news narrative was tricky.

During a week in which Clinton issued major policy announcements on the economy and a sweeping solar energy proposal, her statements were swamped by a *New York Times* front-page story that the Justice Department had launched a criminal investigation into her use of a private email server during her time as secretary of state. That set off another media frenzy as the story ran through other news outlets and echoed back again as political opponents such as Donald Trump piled on and made news of their own. Trump fueled the news frenzy by claiming that storing official email on a private server was clearly criminal activity that should disqualify her from running for president.³⁶ The only trouble is that the story was not true. There was not a criminal investigation, and Clinton was not specifically named as the target in what turned out to be a less-focused bureaucratic investigation to determine whether classified information had been handled properly. This detail was lost in the press frenzy as Twitter erupted and other news outlets ran the *Times* story and politicians commented on it.

When officials in positions to know about a criminal investigation were asked for confirmation on the record, they stated that no such investigation had been called for. It is impossible to know, of course, whether the officials who denied the story on the record were the same ones who planted it off the record. Even more embarrassing for the *Times* was that since no such investigation had been called for and there was no clear legal charge to be found, the original news report awkwardly avoided any clear discussion of what the specific legal problem might be. After several days of changing the headline and attempting to correct, or "skin back," the story in back-page correction boxes, the *Times* eventually had to retract it. What now exists in the paper's digital record is a much more benign story with two vague corrections at the bottom stating that revisions were made in other versions.³⁷ Kurt Eichenwald, a former *New York Times* writer, published an analysis in *Newsweek* dissecting the *Times* story based on documents released under Freedom of Information Act requests covering the same events that were framed as a criminal investigation in the *Times* story. He concluded that those events were low-level bureaucratic examinations of State Department handling of classified material. Accusing the *Times* of reckless distortion, Eichenwald concluded: "This is no Clinton scandal. It is no scandal at all. It is about current bureaucratic processes, probably the biggest snooze-fest in

all of journalism.”³⁸ However, the lasting impression in the minds of many citizens who follow the news casually was that Clinton engaged in some kind of criminal activity. The political impact of the months of scandals and recurring feeding frenzies was that Clinton suffered eroding trust levels among voters polled in key states.

Many big stories in recent years, including the Bush administration rationale for the Iraq War, have been based on rushing to publish scoops handed out by anonymous sources that may either have poor information or political motives for spinning the press. This kind of journalism is commonly criticized, as in Glenn Greenwald’s remarks at the start of this chapter, yet continues to be widely practiced. Among the many critics in the Clinton case was the *Times*’ own public editor (ombudsman) who wrote a column noting that the paper’s editors had defended the problematic story based on the information given them by trusted sources. The public editor noted that accepting information from anonymous sources should always raise caution flags, and that rushing to publish before other organizations got the story only compounded the chances for error. In her words, the postmortem editorial discussion inside the paper should have been less defensive and more focused on “the rampant use of anonymous sources, and the need to slow down and employ what might seem like an excess of caution before publishing a political blockbuster based on shadowy sources. I’ll summarize my prescription in four words: Less speed, more transparency.”³⁹

The Paradox of Organizational Routines

Whether being spun, joining the pack in feeding frenzies, or some combination of the two, the press ends up reporting much the same news across different mainstream outlets. The paradox is that because there are so many different papers, radio programs, and television broadcasts from which audiences can receive the daily news, it is hard for competing organizations to establish a competitive edge in the news market. As a result, routine reporting may be efficient, but it limits the share of the market that any media source can capture. Thus, efficiency may impose an unintended ceiling on audience share, which limits the growth of profits in the news organization—and news is, after all, a business. The ways around this dilemma involve marketing strategies, budget cutting, and the various other business moves described in chapter 7—none of which improve the quality of news.

Breaking out of the news routine toward more independent, less sensational news has not been attractive to legacy news organizations because it is not clear what the alternative would look like even if it were profitable

enough to worry about. For example, television executives may point to the *NewsHour* on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) as an example of how more in-depth reporting only drives audiences away. Some critics argue, however, that PBS news, while more detailed and more likely to broadcast hard news over soft, is otherwise very similar in content to that available on the commercial networks. Why should audiences seek a bigger dose of the same product? Indeed, the ratings suggest that far more people prefer the news on ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox.

Because news is largely the result of convenient conventions between politicians and reporters, it is not clear where to look for guidance in reforming the product. Any new format would surely draw criticism from politicians and other news organizations, and it might startle the public, risking the possible loss of audience share. As a result, the media do not like to think too much about tampering with the standard news-gathering routines. Instead, the competition in most news markets tends to be waged in terms of marketing strategies, brand images, and other matters of style over substance.

Should marketing and delivering key demographics to advertisers rule the news? Such questions are dodged by news doctors and media executives, who reply simplistically that they are only interested in making the news more relevant to people. It is doubtful that marketing surveys really measure popular demand at all.⁴⁰ For example, most media surveys are designed with the assumption that formula news is a given. Audiences are not asked whether they would prefer alternatives to news formulas; they are simply asked which news formulas they like best. Thus, the standard excuse that the news reflects what the people want might be stated more properly as “the news reflects what people prefer among those choices that are profitable and convenient to offer them.” This is not the same thing as saying that the news is responsive to popular demand.

One thing that seems clear is that the emphasis on marketing to generate revenues has opened the content of news organizations to more economical fare such as recycled exploits of reality TV celebrities; fluffy features on fashion, health, and food; and dramatic scandals and political clashes that resemble food fights. In addition, the Internet keeps bubbling up with tempting rumors and wild claims that newsmakers can use to get publicity. All of this points to an erosion of the legacy press as the arbiter of what is most important in society and as the most reliable judge of authoritative sources and information. These hallmarks of *journalistic gatekeeping* are eroding in a changing media system.

The End of Gatekeeping and the Challenges of Change

During the heyday of the legacy press, the reigning assumption was that the leading news organizations set the tone for what was important for the country to think about. Legendary CBS anchor Walter Cronkite ended his nightly newscast with the authoritative tag line "And that's the way it is." Even though the press during the mass media age also relied mainly on official definitions of events, there was a much clearer capacity to mind the national information gates to keep out much of the hype, frenzy, fake scandals, and game framing that fills the news today. *Gatekeeping* is a term often used to refer to *whose voices and what messages get into the news*.

Journalists and their news organizations make choices about what to cover and how to report it. In an ideal world, journalists might find the sources representing the most credible, insightful, and diverse points of view. These ideal news sources would try to engage their opponents in convincing debate aimed at helping the public decide the best course of action. And the ideal public would want to take the time to learn about different approaches to important social issues. In the real world, many factors work against these ideals of a democratic press, from business pressures in news organizations to lazy citizens and deceptive politicians. The growing importance of spin, and the rise of tempting rumors on the Internet have undermined the capacity of news organizations to mind the gates with uniform or high-minded standards. Stories easily spill back and forth between news and entertainment programming in ways that seem to further diminish the capacity of the press to authoritatively develop perspectives on what is important and why it matters.

Communication scholars Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini suggest that for many stories, the news has become a secondary information source behind talk shows and late-night comedy monologues. They argue that the mass media news regime once dominated by the nightly news on the three broadcast networks is ending. Along with its demise, the once-hallowed gatekeeping function of journalism is dissolving. Politics now spills outside the bounds of news and throughout other media formats from political comedy to YouTube mash-ups that are better suited to telling dramatic and entertaining stories.⁴¹ Williams and Delli Carpini describe the emergence of a much more chaotic public information order. In their view, the new order gives rise to questions such as: Is there a difference between comedian Tina Fey and news anchor Katie Couric?⁴²

Journalists and the academics who study them are acutely aware of these signs of change. Yet it is very hard for established press institutions to change in creative and adaptive ways. More often, change is a slow corrosive pro-

cess resulting in replacement of archaic institutions with new and disruptive ones. Indeed, even when staring at their own demise, many journalists cannot abandon the values of their profession that establish their identity. The exchange between Bill Keller and Glenn Greenwald at the opening of this chapter is a good illustration of this point. Keller is bent on upholding the ideals of a profession and pointing to some iconic moments such as Watergate when brilliant reporting brought those ideals to life. And so those ideals persist even as the iconic moments become few and far between.

Indeed, the leading organizations of the legacy press have become easy prey to comedians and to the new breed of critical journalists who lampoon the legacy media's often slavish reporting of official spin and practice of safeguarding the identity of the officials who did the spinning. For example, Glenn Greenwald dissected a prominent *New York Times* article in which high-level officials granted anonymity claimed that the NSA leaks revealed by Edward Snowden had directly helped ISIS and other terrorist groups figure out how to evade US efforts to monitor them.⁴³ Greenwald then showed that there is no evidence for these claims, either in the *Times* article or in subsequent media rehashes of that report. Moreover, he showed evidence suggesting that the claims were false. However, since the official government sources were anonymous, there was no way for other journalists to question them. Perhaps most damning, since the claims appeared in the prestigious *New York Times* (which got the scoop by promising anonymity to the sources), other media outlets reported the story as the gospel truth. And so the spin cycle of the legacy media goes on, aided by journalists clinging to ideals that blind them to the realities of their daily practices. Greenwald noted that similar deference to official spin, compounded by granting the sources anonymity, aided and abetted the deceptions and falsehoods in the Bush administration PR campaign to sell the Iraq War through the mainstream press. Despite promises by prestige news organizations to be more critical in the future, the same practices continue to this day, as illustrated in the NSA story discussed here and the Clinton email scandal discussed earlier. Established press organizations that are locked into dependency relations with those in power simply cannot change even when their ideals are compromised. This syndrome of dependence on officials is made worse by the failing business model of the commercial press. And so there are now many challengers to the dominance and gatekeeping authority of the legacy press. Among the most interesting of these challengers is the rise of a critical, investigative press dedicated to holding government officials accountable to the public.

The Rise of the New Investigative Journalism

The economic crisis in journalism, combined with the loss of popular confidence in mainstream news, is producing waves of innovation and experimentation. The array of mostly online news organizations, blogs, and hybrid organizations is impressively large and growing. An investigation by Pew Research identified 172 nonprofit digital outlets launched between 1987 and 2012, with most of them still in operation today. These range from prominent national investigative organizations such as ProPublica, discussed in the case study below, to Portland Afoot, a site aimed to report on how to beat the car culture in Portlandia.⁴⁴ Depending on how one defines a news outlet—which is becoming more challenging in this era of hybrid media—the list of for-profit operations is likely even larger, including the *Daily Beast*, *Huffington Post*, *Vox*, *Vice*, and many others. Like their nonprofit cousins, these relatively recent additions to the news world vary in terms of the range of topics covered, the degree to which they feature original reporting or reprocess news from other sources, the balance between evidence and opinion, whether they are staffed by paid professionals or amateur content creators, and the sizes of the audiences they pull in. A number of these organizations claim to be dedicated to investigative journalism that holds officials accountable to public standards of integrity, transparency, and other democratic values. Many of these operations contrast themselves to legacy news organizations that they regard as too dependent on the officials they cover. This emerging class of investigative news organizations merits attention as potential challengers to the legacy press. Indeed, many of the stories they have produced are among the major news events of our time, rocking governments and drawing large audiences.

CASE STUDY

HACKTIVIST JOURNALISM: THE NEW INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The exchange between Bill Keller and Glenn Greenwald opening this chapter suggests a changing paradigm that is emerging to challenge the troubled legacy press. Many reporters who represent conventional news organizations—as embodied by Keller in this exchange—continue to practice the modern-era code of impartial or objective journalism that leads to close reliance on official sources. For many journalists, this professional paradigm serves as a defense against charges of bias, even though such charges continue to be made anyway as a means of

keeping the press on notice that it is being constantly policed from all sides. Critics such as Greenwald argue that maintaining this thin veil of objectivity comes with the high price of being spun and failing to hold officials accountable to the public when their spin crosses the line into deception and lying. In this disruptive period for legacy journalism, many news organizations have folded, and numbers of good journalists have left legacy news organizations as they cut staff—often joining new digital start-ups. In addition, many young reporters are skeptical about working in low-paying and insecure jobs for organizations that seem unable to find a news format that meets with much public enthusiasm. As a result, a new era of more critical investigative journalism has developed.

The rise of these organizations is aided by the ease of public access to online sites and the low cost of producing them compared to that of conventional news organizations. One of the first sites was ProPublica, which began publishing in 2008 and defined itself this way: “ProPublica is an independent, nonprofit newsroom that produces investigative journalism in the public interest. Our work focuses exclusively on truly important stories, stories with a ‘moral force.’ We do this by producing journalism that shines a light on exploitation of the weak by the strong, and on the failures of those with power to vindicate the trust placed in them.”⁴⁵ Its reporting has won a number of major journalism prizes, several of which were the first time they were given to an online journalism organization. With funding from foundations and philanthropic donors, ProPublica’s innovative model involves sharing stories freely under Creative Commons licenses with other news organizations. This free syndication model has resulted in over 120 “publishing partners” since its founding.

Another recent investigative organization is *The Intercept*, which launched in 2014 with funding from eBay billionaire Pierre Omidyar. With a founding editorial team of Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras, and Jeremy Scahill, the online site declared its mission as “producing fearless, adversarial journalism. We believe journalism should bring transparency and accountability to powerful governmental and corporate institutions, and our journalists have the editorial freedom and legal support to pursue this mission.”⁴⁶ *The Intercept* site has a page inviting readers to “become a source,” along with a link “How to Leak to The Intercept.” Indeed, the availability of large troves of electronic data about any manner of subjects makes many ordinary people potential news sources simply by downloading files at the office or hacking into systems remotely and leaking the information to journalists. This is of course a high-stakes game, but the playing field that once greatly advantaged public officials and secrecy against public accountability is being leveled somewhat by such organizations. Many of the top stories in *The Intercept* during its early era came from the NSA archives leaked by Edward Snowden.

This emerging trend is interesting in many ways, and could signal a second muckraking era of the sort that became popular after the turn of the twentieth century before the birth of the professional, objective press in the 1920s. Political communication scholar Adrienne Russell has called this new trend the rise of “hactivist” journalism, in which conventional news formats are “hacked” or repurposed for the ends of activists who gather and share information they feel publics should receive without being clouded by official spin and contrived journalistic neutrality.⁴⁷ Some of these hactivist reporters are also activists for various causes such as the environment, economic justice, and personal privacy, among others. At the same time, they actively seek solid information that they publish using various digital technologies that they may develop or hack together to aid their reporting. Another sense in which these journalists display a hactivist spirit is that they may hack into databases or receive information as leaks from others who do. The overriding rationale is that information about what governments are doing should be free and available to the public.

As a result of these more aggressive forms of gathering and publicizing information, the tensions run high between government officials who guard their secrecy and the whistleblowers and hackers who would expose their behind-the-scenes activities. In many ways this journalism has become a hallmark of larger struggles to keep the Internet free as a public space by tilting the balance toward citizen interests and away from surveillance and data mining. As discussed in the last chapter, many hackers and leakers have been prosecuted, and journalists have faced increasing government pressure in recent years. Figures like Chelsea Manning, Jeffrey Sterling, and Edward Snowden discussed in chapter 4 are heroes to some and traitors to others. They have raised questions about the balance between government secrecy and surveillance versus protecting fundamental human rights and democratic principles.⁴⁸

In addition to operating outside conventional news organizations, these new journalists often have very different methods of gaining and publicizing information. Indeed, some have been successful as solo citizen journalists without belonging to a larger organization at all. Adrienne Russell compares the personal profiles of four prominent examples.⁴⁹ Activist Tim Pool was involved in the Occupy Wall Street protests and wanted the public to witness the action from the inside rather than from the distant remove and official spin applied by the mainstream press. He developed technology to live-stream many Occupy activities, from marches to police raids, using personal equipment and the streaming platform Ustream. His audience soon numbered in the millions, and his reports were picked up by a number of conventional news agencies whose reporters could not get as close to the action with the same degree of authenticity. Pool was subsequently hired

by other organizations such as VICE News to cover protests in a number of other countries. Another activist journalist is environmentalist Bill McKibben, who published a number of influential books on the environmental crisis. He decided that the impact of information alone was not enough without providing his audience with opportunities to act on it. He created an activist organization (350.org) to help his reading public take action on the information he provided them. Glenn Greenwald, already introduced in this chapter, has become a critic of conventional journalism, initially as an influential blogger, and subsequently as a risk-taking reporter who helped publicize the Edward Snowden NSA leaks. Juliana Rotich is one of the founders of Ushahidi, a crowdsourcing platform that has enabled direct citizen reporting and aggregation of human rights violations, elections, natural disasters, and other events that conventional journalists either cannot reach or often get wrong because they may not understand them (or because they think that their home audiences will not grasp foreign situations that are not translated into more familiar story lines).

As these examples indicate, there is no single form that this new investigative reporting takes. In fact, operating outside legacy news organization and using technologies to help organize their activities frees these journalists to create formats best suited to different stories and events. The result is a fluid information system that contains many different hybrid news organizations. Instead of being bound by routines, and competing for scoops and tidbits of information from officials, the new investigative reporting has generated some of the biggest stories of our time and reached large audiences by hacking improvised networks together. As Andrew Chadwick and Simon Collister observe, these divergent models were inspired by the initial WikiLeaks release in 2010 of US government cables and other artifacts pertaining to the Iraq War.⁵⁰ In a novel twist, WikiLeaks formed an international partnership with leading news organizations in different countries. Editors and reporters in those organizations sifted through the documents, performed the editorial and writing work, and published the stories to their large international audiences. After years of disruption by financial blockades and prosecutions from a host of world governments, WikiLeaks relaunched in 2015, offering new security protections to its informants and publishing dozens of stories about ways in which governments around the world are spying on their own citizens, other nations, and business corporations.⁵¹ All of this occurred while publisher Julian Assange was holed up in the Ecuadorian embassy in London facing sexual assault charges in Sweden and espionage charges in the United States.

The global publishing partnership model pioneered by WikiLeaks was also adopted after Edward Snowden released his trove of documents to Laura Poitras and Glenn Greenwald. They coordinated the selection and release of stories

across different news organizations in the United States (*Washington Post*), the UK (*Guardian*), Germany (*Der Spiegel*), France (*Le Monde*), Brazil (*O Globo*), and a number of other countries.

All these changes suggest an interesting set of trends that may redefine journalism as we have known it:

- High-quality information produced and distributed by citizens and activists
- Hybrid and flexible networks created with a mix of digital platforms and conventional news organizations
- Global distribution of news about issues such as climate, economics, wars, human rights
- News environments in which citizens can both contribute and consume information, and take action

This journalism promises to challenge official authority and deception as conventional journalism only rarely does. Governments and officials do not appreciate these efforts and often attempt to suppress them by punishing the individuals involved. However, the hacktivist culture that has adopted the slogan “Information wants to be free” may well prevail, ushering in a new era of public interest reporting.

Democracy with or without Citizens?

Recall from chapter 1 that political communication scholar Robert Entman has argued that the mass-mediated democracy of the legacy press is in danger of becoming a *democracy without citizens*. This is in part because most news coverage uses formats that place the audience more as passive consumers than active citizens.⁵² For both politicians and journalists, the public has become more of a market to be tested, persuaded, and sold than an equal partner in communication and government. The reality of much opinion and participation is anchored in electronic images that move people psychologically in private worlds that may be detached from society and face-to-face politics.⁵³

The irony in this is that the technology exists to communicate more information—farther, faster, from more sources, and to more people than ever before. At the same time, the political and business pressures operating behind the legacy press create just the opposite results. Perhaps the electronic age would not be so worrisome if politicians and the press used the potential of today’s electronic technology to communicate critical ideas to people and help them take action. The question is how to move politicians and journalism away from the paths of least political and economic

resistance in their communication strategies. The promise of the new investigative journalism is to bring citizens directly into the news by making government more transparent and often providing ways in which people can act and react to the information they receive.

The informal partnerships that have emerged between investigative organizations and conventional media may signal a path for change in the legacy press. In addition, the appearance of high-quality news sites covering topics such as climate change or prison reform may signal another direction for a press that better informs and engages citizens. As journalists are laid off from news corporations and conventional jobs dry up, idealistic journalist-activists may find niches in the digital realm and join the hacker culture, exploring how digital technologies may attract more active audience involvement. Recent years have seen the rise of blogs, discussion forums, instant polls, YouTube channels, social networking sites, and invitations for citizens to report stories they have documented on cell phones and digital cameras. What do you think? What kind of news best fits the needs of a *democracy with citizens*?