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LOSING THE NEWS: THE FUTURE OF THE NEWS THAT FEEDS DEMOCRACY

Alex S. Jones

Editor's Note

Alex S. Jones is a renowned news professional who is passionate about the quality of news. He has practiced all kinds of journalism at small newspapers and big metropolitan papers such as the *New York Times*. He has worked in radio and television, including its Web versions, and he has written books and articles. The excellence of his work has been recognized with a Pulitzer Prize. As the director of Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, he can view and assess news developments from exceptionally deep and broad perspectives.

Jones worries that the vigor of American democracy is declining because fact-based professional news reporting is shriveling. Citizens lack essential information that they need to make sound political judgments. The Web spews out flood tides of information in a variety of formats each day, but much of it is unidentifiable and unverifiable opinion. It fails to perform the essential functions of the free press, which is the "Fourth Branch" of American government at all levels. High-quality news alerts the public about crucial political events, putting them into meaningful contexts. The press informs government about public opinions and holds officials accountable by investigating and assessing their policies and behaviors. Without this type of news, democracy withers.

... I believe that journalism is important. That it matters. For over a century, Americans have had as a birthright a remarkably good—though far from perfect—core of reported news that is as essential to our freedom

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as the Constitution itself. But the times we live in trigger an unsettling cascade of questions about journalism and news. If taken seriously, these are difficult questions. Some are moral or ethical ones. Others are thorny for other reasons. What, indeed, is *happening* to the news at this time of tumultuous technological change? Does it matter that newspapers seem to be in free fall? Is objectivity the best model for American journalism in a new era that prizes the individual voice? Is media concentration a menace or a red herring? Is traditional journalism *really* essential to democracy? What exactly is honorable journalism? Such questions are at the center of this book, which is an effort to explain the curious story of news, a tale that has come down laced with mythology and misconceptions. The book's focus is the values of journalism at a time when those values are increasingly viewed as obsolete or unaffordable in a media world turned upside down by digital technology. My purpose is also to try to see over the horizon to where news might go from here, or at least to ponder our choices.

The book is not intended for people seeking fresh ammunition with which to bash the press from the left or from the right. News is like government itself—endlessly subject to criticism, and with few defenders. But also like government, news can be good and bad; it can do its job well or let us down. And usually, like government, it does some of both. This is not a book about media bias, but about the uncertain fate of serious news itself.

News—or something that looks like it—will exist in the future, of course. There will be, through the Web, a torrent of news and opinion. But high-quality news is expensive to produce, and in ever shorter supply. One hopes that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* will endure, but two great general interest news organizations are not enough. The best reporting before the Iraq War is widely viewed to have been not by the *Times* or the *Post*, but by what was then the Knight Ridder Washington bureau.

The profit squeeze has wreaked havoc on newsrooms and especially decimated the Washington-based press corps covering government on behalf of citizens back home. For instance, in 2006 Washington-based reporters for the *San Diego Union-Tribune* won a Pulitzer Prize for exposing the corruption of Congressman Randal “Duke” Cunningham—a story that would almost certainly not have come to light without their investigation. Now that bureau has been shuttered, along with a host of others. The future promises an abundance of what might be considered *commodity news*, which is to say plain vanilla news that is generated by a few news companies and sold cheap, like mass-produced fast food. Far less certain is whether *high-quality* news will be part of the daily life of any but the wealthy and the powerful—especially when it comes to local and state coverage. An analysis in 2009 of reporting strength in the nation's state legislatures by *Governing* magazine

detailed the wholesale abandonment of statehouse reporting by the nation's news organizations. Government at the state level often has the most impact on people's lives, and it is also where corruption flourishes without a watchdog press.

The word “crisis” is hackneyed in journalism and should be treated with great skepticism—a reporter's virtue. Nevertheless, to my mind there *is* a genuine crisis. It is not one of press bias, though that is how most people seem to view it. Rather, it is a crisis of diminishing quantity and quality, of morale and sense of mission, of values and leadership. And it is taking place in a maelstrom of technological and economic change. The Internet and digital technology have sent the news business into a frenzy of rethinking, an upheaval of historic proportions whose outcome is much in doubt. Things that are precious may well be lost or terribly damaged, and new things that are marvelous will certainly emerge. What is sure is that the old media world is being transformed—collapsing, in some respects—and the new media world will be different, for better and worse. The chips that had been in orderly piles in front of a few players are now scattered all over the floor, and everyone in the casino is scrambling to grab a handful. Tom Brokaw likens it to “the second big bang,” a stupendous media explosion in which some things are burning up and no one knows which of the swirling fragments will ultimately support life.

Optimists about the future of news are dazzled by the glories of the digital age and a democratization of news fueled by the Internet. They generally view those who express concern as self-interested sentimentalists clinging desperately to a disappearing media environment or as Luddites who are too old-fashioned to plunge into an exciting new world.

Pessimists see a frightening new order in which serious professional news reporting will be replaced by talk, advocacy, spin, trivia, and out-and-out propaganda. They see a world in which the news diet for most of the nation will be comparable to living on potato chips and beer, and a typical news story will be what fits on a cell phone screen. Despite the thrilling innovations in news taking place, they are alarmed by the dispiriting erosion of what has been the kind of news that made the press an institution of American democracy.

I like to think of myself as a realist, but not a cynic or a doomsayer. An inchoate free-floating anxiety about the news is abroad in our nation, and I certainly share that. Many people are worried, but aren't sure what they should be worried about. The issues are bewildering, the values involved are often contradictory, and the technological landscape seems to change by the hour. This book aspires to clarify what is happening to news and why, to look frankly at news values, and to lay out the important choices that will shape

the future. One thing is certain: the revolution in news now taking place will be critical to defining what kind of a nation we become in the years ahead.

The Iron Core

. . . Imagine a sphere of pitted iron, grey and imperfect like a large cannonball. Think of this dense, heavy ball as the total mass of each day's serious reported news, the iron core of information that is at the center of a functioning democracy. This iron core is big and unwieldy, reflecting each day's combined output of all the professional journalism done by news organizations—newspapers, radio and television news, news services such as the Associated Press and Reuters, and a few magazines. Some of its content is now created by new media, nonprofits, and even, occasionally, the supermarket tabloids, but the overwhelming majority still comes from the traditional news media.

This iron core does not include Paris Hilton's latest escapade or an account of the Yankees game or the U.S. Open. It has no comics or crossword puzzle. No ads. It has no stories of puppies or weekend getaways or recipes for cooking great chili. Nor does it include advice on buying real estate, investing in an IRA, movie reviews, or diet tips. There is nothing wrong with any of these things. Indeed, pleasant and diverting stories are far more appealing to most people than the contents of the core, which some find grim, boring, or riddled with bias.

It has no editorials and does not include the opinions of columnists or op-ed writers or political bloggers. These things are *derived* from the core. They are made possible because there *is* a core. Their point of departure is almost always information gleaned from the reporting that gives the core its weight, and they serve to spread awareness of the information that is in the core, to analyze it and interpret it and challenge it. Opinion writers pick and choose among what the core provides to find facts that will further an argument or advance a policy agenda. But they are outside the core, because they almost always offer commentary and personal observation, not original reporting.

Inside the core is news from abroad, from coverage of the war in Iraq to articles describing the effort to save national parks in Mozambique. There is news of politics, from the White House to the mayor's office. There is an account of a public hearing on a proposal to build new ball fields and an explanation of a regional zoning concept that might affect property values. There is policy news about Medicare reform and science news about global warming. There is news of business, both innovation and scandal, and even sporting news of such things as the abuse of steroids. An account of the battle within the local school board about dress codes is there, along with the debate in the state legislature over whether intelligent design should be taught as science. The iron sphere is given extra weight by investigative

reports ranging from revelations that prisoners at the county jail are being used to paint the sheriff's house to the disclosure that the government is tapping phones without warrants as part of the war on terror.

What goes into this cannonball is the daily aggregation of what is sometimes called "accountability news," because it is the form of news whose purpose is to hold government and those with power accountable. This is fact-based news, sometimes called the "news of verification" as opposed to the "news of assertion" that is mostly on display these days in prime time on cable news channels and in blogs.

Traditional journalists have long believed that this form of fact-based accountability news is the essential food supply of democracy and that without enough of this healthy nourishment, democracy will weaken, sicken, or even fail.

For more than a century, this core of reported news has been the starting place for a raucous national conversation about who we are as a people and a country. Just as the Earth is surrounded by a blanket of atmosphere, so too is this core enveloped by a thick layer of talk and opinion. The conversation—which seems more like an endless family squabble—takes place on editorial pages and in letters to the editor, in opinion columns and on Sunday morning talk shows, on *The O'Reilly Factor* and the radio programs of Rush Limbaugh and Don Imus, in blogs on the Internet and press releases, over dining-room tables, beside water coolers and in barrooms, in political cartoons and on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

And in jokes. In his first ten years as host of *The Tonight Show*, Jay Leno told over 18,000 political jokes, almost 4,000 of them about Bill Clinton. But for each of Leno's political jokes, the starting point was something from the core. The core also feeds the entertainment industry, which has its own powerful voice in the national conversation. The quasi-news programs on television, such as *Today* and *20/20*, look to the core for ideas and inspiration. Some pure entertainment programs, such as *The West Wing*, come directly from the core, and even the silliest of sitcoms and nastiest of hip-hop lyrics are often linked to it in some murky way. No matter where the conversation about public affairs takes place, it is almost always an outgrowth of that daily iron cannonball.

The biggest worry of those concerned about news is that this iron core is in jeopardy, largely because of the troubles plaguing the newspaper business. It is the nation's newspapers that provide the vast majority of iron core news. My own estimate is that 85 percent of professionally reported accountability news comes from newspapers, but I have heard guesses from credible sources that go as high as 95 percent. While people may *think* they get their news from television or the Web, when it comes to this kind of news, it is almost always newspapers that have done the actual reporting. Everything else is usually just a delivery system, and while resources for television news have plunged

and news on commercial radio has all but disappeared, the real impact on iron core news has been from the economic ravaging of newspapers.

Until now, the iron core of news has been somewhat sheltered by an economic model that was able to provide extra resources beyond what readers—and advertisers—would financially support. This kind of news is expensive to produce, especially investigative reporting. And there are indications that a lot of people aren't really interested. In the media economy of the future, cold metrics will largely determine what is spent on news. The size and quality of the iron core will be a direct reflection of what the audience for it will economically support. Demand will rule, and that may well mean that, as a nation, we will be losing a lot of news. There will be a bounty of talk—the news of assertion—but serious news, reported by professional journalists, is running scared.

Inside the core, there is a hierarchy of news, each type important in its own way. The first tier could be thought of as bearing witness. This is no small service to democracy, and is the meat and potatoes of accountability news in that it lets citizens know the fundamentals of what is happening in their world and in the corridors of power. Much of the headline news, both of the White House and around the world, is the act of journalists bearing witness to events. Firsthand coverage of disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are examples of this kind of bearing-witness journalism at its most challenging. Similarly, the reporter who tells you what happened at the mayor's press conference or at the school board meeting is bearing witness. Being a reliable surrogate for the public—the nation's eyes and ears—is most of what goes into the core, and it is also the most straightforward form of journalism. The burden for the reporter is to tell it straight and get as much of the truth as is possible.

But bearing witness is frequently not enough—indeed, not nearly enough for important issues. It opens the door to the second tier of core journalism, which can be thought of as “following up.” Good journalists rarely stop with bearing witness. That is the point of departure for the second step of finding out what more is to be known and answering the all-important question “why?”—seeking reasons that often are not apparent at the moment of bearing witness. This is the journalism that requires being able to stay with a story rather than simply visit it and then move on to the next thing. It means listening to the mayor's press conference and then finding out what was behind the decision or policy that was announced. It is staying with the war rather than parachuting in, doing a quick report, and leaving on the next plane. It is sometimes simply being able to confirm what seemed to be the truth at the moment of bearing witness, but may have been a selective representation. It requires time to follow up, and it demands—and in turn creates—expertise and sophistication about what is being reported.

Next up the hierarchy of core news is what might be called “explanatory journalism,” which takes even more time and expertise. This is the product of boring deeply into a subject, speaking to sources, unearthing data, gathering facts, and mastering complexity. It is the kind of reporting that compares the confusing options for older Americans as they try to choose between prescription plans and that examines—without prejudice—the evidence for and against the reality of global warming and presents the result in a form that is illuminatingly fair-minded. It could be thought of as following up on steroids, and if following up takes effort and dogged curiosity, explanatory journalism takes deeper knowledge and expertise, and even more time.

Finally, at the top of the reporting chain, is investigative reporting. This is the toughest kind of journalism because it not only takes time and great expertise, it must be done in the face of efforts to keep information secret. Inherent in the concept of investigative reporting is that it is news that someone with power does not want the public to know. Often, it starts with a reporter simply bearing witness. In perhaps the most celebrated example, in 1972 Bob Woodward was a low-level metro reporter at the *Washington Post*, on the job for only nine months, when five men broke into the Democratic National Headquarters in the Watergate complex and got caught wearing rubber surgical gloves and carrying fancy bugging equipment and \$2,300 in cash. Both Woodward and another metro reporter, Carl Bernstein, worked on the first-day page-one story, along with eight other *Post* reporters, and they didn't even get a byline. But they then attacked the story like wolverines, and the *Post* won a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for its coverage of the Watergate scandal. As Alicia Shepard points out in her article “The Myth of Watergate, Woodward and Bernstein,” the story released a deluge of reportorial energy as the nation's best news organizations competed for scoops. The *Los Angeles Times* was first to get one of the burglars on the record in a hard-hitting interview. In his book *Richard Nixon, Watergate and the Press*, Louis Liebovich said that within six months of the break-in the *Post* had produced 201 staff-written stories, but the *New York Times* had published 99 and the *Los Angeles Times* 45. Important investigative work was also done by the *Washington Star*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and CBS. The aggregate of their work was the fruit of thousands of man-hours by talented reporters, and it took every bit of that commitment by news organizations to finally force the truth to emerge. . . .

. . . [I]t was the prospect of doing serious news that drew most of the best reporters and editors to journalism. Reporting accountability news carried the most prestige. It was the most expensive to produce, took the most time, often got the biggest play, and required the greatest expertise. Much of the other content was provided by syndicates and services or reporters lower in

the pecking order. But serious news required employing an experienced news staff that expected raises and vacations, health insurance and pensions, and took themselves increasingly seriously as professionals.

It is this kind of news that is recognized in prizes and awards, which in turn validate the newspaper's inevitable claim to be fulfilling not just a commercial but a societal role. It was this kind of news that was thought important enough to be protected by the First Amendment—though what the amendment actually protected was free expression rather than high-quality news. Even so, in the 20th century, the public service of publishing iron core news was what gave newspaper owners a mantle of honor and respectability that went nicely with their growing profits.

. . . As the audience declines and advertisers experiment with new media, newspaper advertising and circulation revenues are under enormous pressure and are declining at many papers. To make things worse, the costs of labor and newsprint—a newspaper's two highest expenses—have spiraled up. Contractual agreements are making increased salaries unavoidable, and the cost of newsprint has increased dramatically in the past few years. Profit levels of over 20 percent had become commonplace at newspapers, and the squeeze between declining revenues and unavoidable cost increases has sent newspapers into a tailspin. In many cases, the newspaper companies have huge debt obligations from buying other papers in more optimistic times, only to see the revenues dwindle that are needed to pay interest and principal. The reaction at many newspapers has been to cut news staffs—including people who create the type of news that much of the audience considers boring and is expensive, requiring the best, most experienced reporters, who also command the highest salaries. Increasingly, this kind of news is viewed more as a luxury than an essential, and even a turnoff to readers who prefer to know what's up with Hollywood.

As a result, the iron core is in trouble.

A case can be made that the core will not only survive, but grow more weighty through new forms of news media, such as Web-based citizen journalism and journalistic bloggers. Traditional media are trying to find new ways to report news that will appeal to a younger, Web-savvy audience, and creating new publications and Web sites in response to reader tastes. Perhaps that is what will happen. But so far, we appear to be losing this important kind of news far faster than we are replacing it.

Even worse, the sense of social responsibility that has long existed at traditional news organizations is in retreat. This has been true for some time, but a gradual slackening in commitment to news as a social responsibility has become a headlong rout because of the panicky scramble to shore up profit margins. News and business have always been linked in the United States, and traditional news organizations have been commercial enterprises

that had profit as a priority. But there was also the parallel priority of social stewardship.

This stewardship was at best uneven, especially in times of financial crunch. It would, of course, be ridiculous to idealize journalism. There was no Golden Age in which the typical publisher was a self-sacrificing paragon, eager to demonstrate his rectitude by trading profits for high ideals. There were a few of those, but they were always the exceptions. Nor was there an Arcadia when news was not sometimes compromised by laziness, human error, greed, and bias. Journalism is a human endeavor, with all the attendant weaknesses.

But it would be just as wrong to suggest that nothing has shifted in the values of the news business, and that the overwhelming power of market thinking has not had a corrosive impact on those values. . . .

. . . Part of the news crisis is finding a solution that will pay the significant costs of generating the accountability news that is essential to our democracy and still allow an acceptable profit. This is a riddle that has yet to be solved, and so the iron cannonball of accountability news continues to grow lighter and shrink. But if within the traditional media a commitment to a social stewardship becomes mere window dressing and an empty boast, the loss will be terrible indeed. . . .