**Reading (week 1):**

**I. THE BIRTH OF JOURNALISM**

As the Middle Ages ended, news came in the form of song and story, in news ballads sung by wandering minstrels.

What we might consider modern journalism began to emerge, in the early seventeenth century, literally out of conversation, especially in public places. In England, the first newspapers grew out of coffeehouses — numerous enough for some to be known for specializing in certain kinds of information. They became so popular that scholars complained that “nothing but news and the affairs of Christendom is discussed.”

Later, in America, journalism grew out of pubs, or publick houses. Here, the bar owners, called publicans, hosted spirited conversations about information from travelers who often recorded what they had seen and heard in logbooks kept at the end of the bar. The first newspapers evolved out of these coffeehouses when enterprising printers began to collect the shipping news, tales from abroad and more gossip, and political arguments from the coffeehouses and to print them on paper.

With the evolution of the first newspapers, English politicians began to talk about a new phenomenon, which they called public opinion. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, journalists/printers had begun to formulate a theory of free speech and free press. In 1720, two London newspapermen, writing under the pen name “Cato,” introduced the idea that truth should be a defense against libel. At the time, English common law had ruled the reverse: not only that any criticism of government was a crime but that “the greater the truth, the greater the libel,” since truth did more harm.

Cato’s argument had a profound influence in the American colonies, where discontent against the English Crown was growing. A rising young printer named Benjamin Franklin was among those who republished Cato’s writings. When a fellow printer named John Peter Zenger went on trial in 1735 for criticizing the royal governor of New York, Cato’s ideas became the basis for his defense. People had “a right … both of exposing and opposing arbitrary power … by speaking and writing the truth,” argued Zenger’s lawyer, who was paid by Franklin, among others. The jury acquitted Zenger, shocking the colonial legal community, and the meaning of a free press in America began to take formal shape.

The concept became rooted in the thinking of the Founders, finding its way into the Virginia Declaration of Rights (written partly by James Madison), the Massachusetts constitution (written by John Adams), and most of the new colonial statements of rights. “No government ought to be without censors & where the press is free, no one ever will,” Thomas Jefferson would tell George Washington. Neither Franklin nor Madison thought such language was necessary in the federal Constitution, but two delegates, George Mason of Virginia and Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, walked out of the convention, and with men like Thomas Paine and Samuel Adams, they agitated the public to demand a written bill of rights as a condition of approving the Constitution. A free press thus became the people’s first claim on their government.

Over the next two hundred years the notion of the press as a bulwark of liberty became embedded in American legal doctrine. “In the First Amendment,” the Supreme Court ruled in upholding the *New York Times*’ right in 1971 to publish the secret government documents called the Pentagon Papers, “the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors.” The idea that was affirmed over and over by the courts, First Amendment scholar Lee Bollinger, then president of the University of Michigan, told us at one of our gatherings for this book, is a simple one: Out of a diversity of voices the people are more likely to know the truth and thus be able to self-govern.

Even when journalism was in the hands of the yellow-press mavens at the eve of the twentieth century, or the tabloid sheets of the 1920s, building community and promoting democracy remained a core value. At their worst moments, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst appealed to both the sensational tastes and the patriotic impulses of their audiences. Pulitzer used his front page to lure his readers in, but he used his editorial pages to teach them how to be American citizens. On election nights he and Hearst would vie to outdo each other, one renting Madison Square Garden for a free party, the other illuminating campaign results on the side of his newspaper’s skyscraper.

Whether one looks back over three hundred years, or even three thousand years, it is impossible to separate news from community and, over time, even more specifically from democratic community.

**II. JOURNALISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

On the eve of the digital revolution, on a rainy Saturday in June 1997, twenty-five journalists gathered at the Harvard Faculty Club. Around the long table sat editors of several of the nation’s top newspapers, as well as some of the most influential names in television and radio, several of the top journalism educators, and some of the country’s most prominent authors. We were among those gathered. The digital age was only beginning, but the journalists gathered that day already thought something was seriously wrong with their profession. They barely recognized what they considered journalism in much of their colleagues’ work. Instead of serving a larger public interest, they feared, their profession was damaging it.

The public, in turn, had already started to distrust journalists, even hate them. And it would only get worse. In 1999, less than half of Americans (45 percent) believed the press protected democracy, nearly ten points lower than in 1985.8 By 2011, as many people would feel the press hurt democracy as helped it, 42 percent. And just 15 percent would think the press was independent, less than half the number (37 percent) in 1985.9

The problem is not just public perception. By the late 1990s, many journalists were beginning to share the public’s growing skepticism about the press. “In the newsroom we no longer talk about journalism,” said Maxwell King, the editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer, that day in Cambridge. Another editor agreed: “We are consumed with business pressure and the bottom line.” The concern wasn’t that the values of news had deteriorated. It was that news companies had begun to operate in a way that suggested they no longer believed in those values.

News was becoming entertainment, and entertainment news. Journalists’ bonuses were increasingly tied to profit margins, not to the quality of their work. As the discussion drew to a close, Columbia University professor James Carey offered what many recalled as a summation: “The problem is that you see journalism disappearing inside the larger world of communications. What you yearn to do is recover journalism from that larger world.”

Digital technology had not yet eroded the advertising revenue model that financed journalism, or diminished journalists’ ability to verify the news before the public saw it. Newspaper revenue, for instance, would continue to grow for seven more years, peaking in 2005. What worried some of the leaders of America’s journalistic and educational institutions was commercialization—the sense that the leaders of their companies had become more concerned with growing profits to please investors and had lost confidence that investing in better, more innovative journalism could help them engage new audiences.

Already, largely because of the corporate structure of the news industry, newsroom leaders were worried about an important existential question. If journalism—the system by which citizens get news—was being subsumed by commercialization, what would replace it? Advertising? Entertainment? E-commerce? Propaganda? Ideological news? Fragmentation? And what would the consequence be? The idea of user-generated content, news in which everyone participated, was not yet a topic of serious discussion beyond a few digital pioneers.

Most of the people in that room had seen the industry undergo enormous changes throughout their careers. For a century prior to the Internet, disruptive technologies and new formats emerged roughly every fifteen to twenty years. Radio had come in the 1920s, followed by television in the 1950s (delayed by World War II), cable television, and then the deregulation of electronic media in the 1980s that helped give way to the new era of partisanship on radio and TV. With each new technology, new forms of entertainment emerged to compete for people’s attention. The incumbent media would change, shove over, lose some hold on the audience, and then adapt as a smaller entity.

At its best, journalism survived because it provided something unique to a culture: independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information that citizens require in order to make sense of the world around them. A journalism that provides something other than that subverts democratic culture.

The public’s growing discontent with journalism that began in the 1980s is not a rejection of journalism’s values. It is a result of journalists’ failure to live up to those values. Look closely at the data on trust, for instance, and you will see that even today the public has not given up its expectation that the news will be independent and reliable, or that news be produced by people who are operating in the public interest. Data from the Pew Research Center shows that a clear majority — 64 percent — of the public prefers getting news from sources that have no political point of view — and those numbers have barely budged over the course of two decades. The number is even more pronounced (74 percent) when people are asked about online news content. The public largely still expects the news to be produced by skilled professionals; what disappoints them is that the news has not lived up to those promises.

On one level, the credibility crisis is ironic. Many news companies had tried to adapt to a changing marketplace by delivering what they thought the public wanted, trying to make the news more like entertainment. Television news in particular had leaned toward celebrity scandal and true crime to lure viewers back — and had done so unsuccessfully. The number one topic on nightly news in the 1990s was crime, during a decade when crime was dropping. While stories such as the O. J. Simpson trial and the murder of a child named Jon-Benet Ramsey would buoy ratings briefly, audiences began to sense they were being exploited. The credibility research found the public decried media sensationalism—a fact some in the news business dismissed as public hypocrisy.

Distracted by the myopia of trying to keep audiences interested in old platforms and managing costs to protect profits, news companies missed something essential: People were not abandoning news. They simply were abandoning traditional formats in favor of new ones that were more convenient. First, twenty-four-hour cable news was an easier way to check out headlines than waiting for the evening newscast at 6:30, even if the later evening newscast might be a better product. Soon enough, the Web would prove to be profoundly more convenient, deeper, and eventually, more portable.

Journalists were culpable in their own way for the growing discontent and migration of the public. They staked too much faith in traditional definitions of quality news and failed to study the changing news audience. They saw the Internet as a threat to what they knew and failed to recognize it as an opportunity to reach new audiences in new ways with new forms of content. The gathering in Cambridge in 1997 was a signal that, even before the digital disruption, many journalists sensed their industry had lost focus on the public and in a journalism that served its needs.

In short, the collective failure of the news industry to adapt to the digital revolution was rooted in a crisis of confidence about news that had been sounding alarms a decade earlier.

In the years since then, one group of oligarchies has been replaced by another. Media companies that produced news and subsidized its creation largely by selling advertising have been replaced by an even smaller group of technology firms that control access to the Internet by making devices, producing operating systems, selling apps, organizing content, and selling products online. Brands such as Newsweek and U.S. News & World Report are gone. Google and Facebook have a share of the public’s attention that those old media empires could never have imagined.

In both scenarios, the same question pertains: As citizens, do we have access to independent, accurate information that makes it possible for us to govern ourselves?

The group of journalists in Cambridge that day in 1997 decided on a plan: engage journalists and the public in a careful examination of what journalism was supposed to be. As a group, we set out to answer two questions: If newspeople thought journalism was somehow different from other forms of communication, how was it different? And if they thought journalism needed to change but that some core principles couldn’t be sacrificed, what were those principles?

Over the next two years, the group, calling itself the Committee of Concerned Journalists, organized the most comprehensive and systematic examination ever conducted by journalists of news-gathering and its responsibilities. We held twenty-one public forums, which were attended by three thousand people and involved testimony from more than three hundred journalists. We partnered with a team of university researchers who conducted more than one hundred three-and-a-half-hour interviews with journalists about their values. We produced two surveys of journalists about their principles. We held a summit of First Amendment and journalism scholars. With the Project for Excellence in Journalism, we produced nearly a dozen content studies of news reporting. We studied the history of the journalists who came before us, and we conducted training in newsrooms nationwide.

What you read here is not an argument about what journalism should be. Rather, it is a distillation of how those engaged in creating journalism interpret what citizens think journalism is for and how, in turn, journalists should deliver it. It is predicated on the belief that the history and values by which journalism evolved should inform the journalism of our new century. There is no reason for the new journalism to be a repudiation of the best of the old, for journalism has always been a living thing. Every generation, building on what came before, has created it anew.

As such, we offer here a set of principles for anyone who might produce news in the twenty-first century, whether they be a professional in a newsroom, a citizen eyewitness posting pictures on a photo-sharing platform, or someone trying to distill the reports and conversation from social media and turn them into news. It also offers a guide to what values consumers should look for in the news they encounter.

This is an important change, but in many ways a less fundamental one than some imagine. We have always argued here that the question has never been who is or isn’t a journalist. It is whether the work produced lives up to the character of what we would call journalism. That is still true.

Even before the epochal changes brought by the digital age, the roots of what has occurred were firmly planted. While most journalists could not easily articulate a theory of journalism (or even agree if they were engaged in a profession with shared principles), most people in society expected journalists to operate according to professional theory.

To add to the confusion, our educational system expects students to graduate high school and college with literacy in concepts of algebra, geometry, foreign language, and literature. Yet there is little serious demand or coherent effort to teach young citizens to comprehend what we think should be considered, as we said in the preface, the literature of civic life — the news.

This lack of clarity, for both citizens and newspeople, has weakened our journalism. If one accepts the tenet that democracy and journalism rise and fall together, it also likely has contributed to the polarization of American politics and the failure of the country to address the economic crisis that has beset the United States and the world since 2008. A lack of clarity about what journalism should be, and how to intelligently consume the news, has left both journalists and citizens less equipped to cope with the effects of the digital transformation, which demand more clarity of purpose from those who produce the news and greater awareness from those who consume it.

Unless we can grasp and reclaim the theory and practice of a free press, we risk allowing our first constitutional right to disappear. The quality of the journalism we consume now is far more a matter of what the public free press is distinct from free speech. The acts of reporting and commenting on the day’s events relate to each other, but they are not synonymous. The quality of our democratic life depends, in short, on the public having the facts and being able to make sense of them. And that, even in a networked age, requires journalists. Whether we have them increasingly will depend on whether citizens can recognize the difference between propaganda and news—and whether they care.

For all the changes, there remain clear principles we require of our journalism, principles that citizens have a right to expect. The principles have ebbed and flowed over time, but they have survived because they provide things that citizens need from the news in order to adjust to the demands of life in an increasingly complex world. These are the principles, in other words, that have helped both journalists and the people even as journalism has changed with technology and new social demands. They are the elements of journalism: The first among them is that the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.

To fulfill this task:

1. Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.

2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.

3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.

4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.

5. It must serve as a monitor of power.

6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.

7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.

8. It must present the news in a way that is comprehensive and proportional.

9. Its practitioners have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience.

10. Citizens have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news as well — even more so as they become producers and editors themselves.

*The Elements of Journalism,* Bill Kovoch & Tom Rosenstiel, Crown Publishing Group, 2014.