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WHAT IS QUALITY JOURNALISM AND HOW IT CAN BE SAVED

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1

INTRODUCTION

“So, what’s the subject of your research at Oxford?”

“Ehm... the future of quality journalism.”

“Oh. That’s... a big subject. What is quality journalism?”

“Do you want the short or the long answer?”

Above is a most typical bit of conversation between me and countless numbers of people who I met during my time as a Journalist Fellow at the Reuters Institute. I am still working on the short answer, but I think it will be something like this: “Quality journalism is something a democracy cannot do without.” The long answer is this paper.

I am not that worried about the survival of newspapers, but I am deeply concerned about the survival of journalism. I chose this admittedly vast subject because I was becoming increasingly frustrated about the debate on the future of journalism. To me, it seemed like everyone was fixated on finding a new business model that would save the old newspaper industry. At the same time news organizations were laying off people and squeezing budgets for specialist and investigative reporting. While I too would, of course, like to see someone come up with a panacea, I am not at all sure that it will happen. It seems that the business model is not the only thing that is broken, but it is the product as well. The difference is that the business model was broken from the outside. The product, namely quality content, is being eroded from the inside of news organizations.

The general understanding of the crisis of the traditional media, especially newspapers, goes like this: When the Internet started spreading among the masses, the advertisers fled from the printed press. Classified ads particularly were cheaper – or indeed free – to put up online where they could also easily target the right people. Pressures of declining advertising revenues, plummeting circulations and investing in online operations have led to massive lay-offs all over Europe and the USA.

All of the above has led to a vicious circle: cuts in the newsroom are likely to

cause weakening of the quality of journalism, which alienates the audience, which in turn puts further pressure on the maximising of revenues, which again leads to further staff cuts, and so on... This spiral points downward, and it is potentially dangerous for the survival of high quality journalism, and with it, functioning democracy.

In addition to these worrying trends there is also a core of evidence which states that the press might not have actually been doing its job well enough. At least part of the crisis seems to be self-inflicted. The apotheosis of this view is best portrayed in Nick Davies' book *Flat Earth News* (2009).

But this is not a gloom-and-doom predicting paper about the looming demise of serious news, nor does it give yet another detailed account of declining circulations and lay-offs. This paper reaches out to the people who want to save journalism and make it better.

I begin this study with an overview of how previous research has attempted to define and measure quality in journalism. I will extract a definition of high quality journalism from this literature and out of my own assessment of it. My study also draws from 11 interviews with academics as well as practising journalists and editors.

In addition to defining quality journalism, my aim is to tackle some of the topical issues surrounding journalism's role in democracy. These debates include the juxtaposition of professional and amateur media, the democratising effects of the Web, the perils of the traditional media and the ramifications of targeted contents and fragmented audiences on the Internet.

This study is not about newspapers as ink on paper, but it is about the functions that have been traditionally associated with them – informing the public and the watchdog role. Nevertheless, I have mainly focused on newspapers as a medium, both in print and online, for several reasons. First of all, so far the crisis has hit print media worst, and therefore there is already an extensive scholarship about the perils facing newspapers. Secondly, I decided not to include other media in my interviews or the literature I've read, because that would have blown my already big subject out of proportion. Public service

broadcasting, and especially its core purpose, is sometimes referred to, but its role in the information society is not fully analysed. Thirdly, my own career has been in newspapers, so I have been able to use my own experience and knowledge of what it is like to work in one.

When I tell people about my research subject, they very often ask me about ‘the business model’. It is, luckily, not my job to find a new business model for newspapers. This paper is not about that. I am sure that somewhere out there a multitude of astute business people are already being paid to think about business models. I can hardly fill in my tax return. Journalists, like me, are usually better equipped to think about journalism, and what it should be like if they got to decide. This study is my attempt to figure out what needs to be done in terms of saving quality content and making it better.

Actually, the crisis of traditional news organizations could turn out to be a good thing. It should force us to reinvent our journalism, to figure out our core purpose again. In order to achieve that, it is important to define what we mean when we talk about quality.

I am fully aware of choosing a vast subject and that in this limited time of an academic year I can merely scratch the surface of quality in journalism and explore only some of the possible ways it could be saved. However, I aim to give some basis for further discussion and, hopefully, action among my fellow journalists, editors and newspaper owners who share the same concern about the survival of high quality journalism.

2

WHAT IS QUALITY JOURNALISM?

Trying to define what quality journalism means is a bit like unwittingly taking part in the age-old debate about what is art and what is not. At first look, quality seems to be a very subjective thing, depending on one's own interests, knowledge and preferences, even politics. Some people in the UK would never trust the centre-left *Guardian*, and others would doubt what the conservative *Daily Telegraph* prints. Yet both of them are widely considered to be quality newspapers. Thinking of this, it is getting difficult to avoid another trap: the never-ending dispute about objectivity, public trust and the quest for truth in journalism.

There are no universal quality criteria carved in stone. Judgments of quality are often culture-specific, or related to one's socio-economic background, level of education and so on. Interestingly, not even the Pulitzer Prize – the world's best-known award for journalistic excellence – has a set of criteria for judging what makes a piece of journalism distinguished enough to win the Prize.

It is possible to look at quality from three main perspectives: It can be viewed through the public – how well does the media inform, educate and entertain its audience? What does the public think of the media's performance? There's no doubt that newspaper companies want to know what their readers want or need. Many newspapers conduct reader surveys to find this out. Of course, editors and journalists themselves have formed their own quality criteria and rules of conduct. Most publications have their own ethical code. To study quality, one could also measure the time and other resources, such as money, used to produce a certain piece of journalism. Many scholars have been interested in the relationship between newsroom investment and quality.

The two perspectives I mainly draw on – the journalistic and the academic perspective – represent views that aren't necessarily reflected in audiences who often prefer tabloids to broadsheets and *X-Factor* to *Newsnight*.

It can be argued, that condemning populist tabloid style as bad journalism is just plain elitist. Tabloid editors do often state that their popularity

guarantees that their journalism is what the public wants - and therefore it is good. We have also seen how upmarket broadsheets have adopted styles of presentation and story contents from tabloids (see Bob Franklin: *Newszak & News Media*, 1997). Trevor Kavanagh, *The Sun*'s former chief political correspondent, has said that it is not the proportion of a paper that is dedicated to serious news that matters, but the size of its readership.

 "In short, in terms of its impact upon political events, it could be argued that popular journalism can be even more significant than the so-called 'quality' or 'highbrow' journalism and needs therefore to be treated just as seriously."

(Anderson & Ward 2007, 5)

However, there still remains a significant audience whose appetite for news and high quality journalism is ever-growing. This digital age of ours can offer an abundance of news and commentary for all kinds of audiences. The problem is that hardly anyone is willing to pay for it.

I am not attempting to measure quality or prove its correlation with any business models. I am merely trying to define what quality means in a way that would be acceptable to most journalists, if not all. There are standards and also codes of conduct that are essential to quality journalism. These factors have a lot to do with the role of the free press in democratic societies, as described in more detail later in this chapter and also in chapter 3. If this kind of quality journalism disappears, we are all in serious trouble. A functioning democracy needs an informed public. In order to vote and participate in public life, the citizens need to know what is going on in society, and to a larger extent, in the world. Journalism is the most accessible and, hopefully, most trustworthy source to obtain this knowledge.

It may turn out that some of the quality criteria that were developed and adopted during the history of the printed press need reassessment in a digital era. Or, it may well be that they are still valid, perhaps even more important than ever before.

Of course, one must remember that not exactly the same ideals are shared all over the world. What I am talking about is a broad European/North American idea of high quality journalism that is essential to a democratic society as we know it.

There have been a number of attempts to define quality journalism. In this chapter I shall take a look at texts by Merrill, Picard, Bogart, Lacy & others, Meyer, Kovach & Rosenstiel, Rosenstiel & Mitchell, and Scheuer.

2.1. MERRILL'S SURVEY

Survey research of quality in journalism can be traced back to John C. Merrill's book *The Elite Press. Great Newspapers of the World* (1968), where Merrill gives the following indicators of quality press: it is a free, courageous, reliable, independent, news-views-oriented journal that is responsible to its readers.

Merrill comes to a definition of a leading quality newspaper out of his own surveys. These are his five rather large categories that constitute the quality newspaper:

- 1) Independence; financial stability; integrity; social concern; good writing and editing.
- 2) Strong opinion and interpretive emphasis; world consciousness; non-sensationalism in articles and makeup.
- 3) Emphasis on politics, international relations, economics, social welfare, cultural endeavours, education, and science.
- 4) Concern with getting, developing and keeping a large, intelligent, well-educated, articulate, and technically proficient staff.
- 5) Determination to serve and help expand a well-educated, intellectual readership at home and abroad; desire to appeal to, and influence, opinion leaders everywhere.

Is that all?, one might ask. After this somewhat idealistic definition Merrill goes on to describe profiles of 40 elite newspapers, including *Helsingin Sanomat* of Finland, *The Scotsman*, *The Yorkshire Post*, *The Guardian* and *The Times* of Britain. Now, *The Scotsman* and *The Yorkshire Post* are no longer considered to represent the highest quality in the British newspaper market.

Merrill thinks that all quality papers share an “obvious emphasis on idea-oriented news – stories that bear a significance beyond the straight facts (or bits of information) which they carry” (1968, 20).

A quality paper’s popularity is not built on voyeurism, sensationalism, or prurience. It offers its readers facts (in a meaningful context), ideas, interpretation; in short, it presents a continuing education. It gives its reader the feeling that he is getting a synthesized look at the most significant happenings and thinking of the day. (1968, 20)

2.2. HIGH ACTIVITY EQUALS HIGH QUALITY

In journalism literature it is common to roughly divide newspapers to classes such as ‘tabloid’ and ‘quality’, without really explaining what these categories actually mean. For instance, *The Times* in the UK is considered to be a quality paper even though its size is ‘compact’ (euphemism for tabloid). ‘Tabloid’ in this sense isn’t just a format, just like ‘quality’ doesn’t simply mean that the paper is printed in broadsheet. These are divisions of content, varying from sensational, gossipy and even untrue headlines to very elitist, highbrow style of writing. In reality, there is a lot of dark matter in between these two extremes.

I’ve often heard journalists and academics of the field define quality like this: You know quality in journalism when you see it. Or rather; you will certainly know when it’s not there. This is the notion that Robert G. Picard (2000) employs.

“Difficulties in defining quality are especially problematic because the issue of the quality of journalism is not merely a question of increasing the value of a product to consumers. Rather, quality is a central element in achieving the social, political, and cultural goals asserted for journalism in democratic societies.

(2000, 97)

He thinks that the only way to measure journalistic quality is by judging journalistic activity. The activities that can be measured are:

- 1) interviews,
- 2) telephone gathering of information, arranging interviews,
- 3) attending events about which stories are written,
- 4) attending staff meetings, discussions, and training,
- 5) reading to obtain background material and knowledge,
- 6) thinking, organising material, and waiting for information and materials and
- 7) travelling to and from locations of where information is gathered (Picard 1998, 2000).

Picard argues that since activity is the basis for quality, higher levels of journalistic activity raise quality. In other words: the more time dedicated to interviews and other information gathering, the better the result.

“Thus journalistic time use becomes a means of assessing quality because good time use increases activity and consequently quality. Poor time use on the other hand decreases activity and quality. (Picard 2000, 101)

Although resources, either time or money, are a crucial concern to those who have studied the state of journalism lately, Picard’s idea is still an attempt to quantify an inherently qualitative concept.

2.3. BOGART'S SURVEY

Leo Bogart (2004) has also asked if and how quality of journalism could be measured. He starts by arguing that the quality of any ‘product or service can be judged by its creator or producer’, and refers to his own 1977 survey of American newspaper editors, in which the 746 editors interviewed rated accuracy as the most important attribute of quality reporting.

In his study Bogart found these top three measures for quality in newspapers: 1) high ratio of staff-written articles as opposed to wire service copy, 2) high amount of editorial (non-advertising) content and 3) high ratio of interpretation and background of news. Many scholars have later used Bogart’s survey findings as a basis for their own research concerning quality, as they can be easily measured using content analysis.

Although Bogart in this more recent article does not give his own definition of journalistic quality, he seems to think that neither the judgment of the audience nor circulation has much to do with it. He points out that “*The Times*, because its seriousness and authority, provides its public with far better entrée into the complex and ugly realities that *The Sun* helps its readers to avoid” (2004, 43).

“Product quality is different from value – the individual consumer’s judgment of the benefit relative to the cost. Value is always a matter of subjective judgment. Almost any improvement in quality comes at a price, and for many products, small improvements come at what consumers may consider to be an excessive price (Bogart 2004, 40). ”

Bogart goes on to say that the assessment of editorial excellence is “as murky as critical judgment of poetry, chamber music or architecture”. The achievements of journalism, just like any form of art, are intangible. Journalism only has power if it is capable of arousing “passion and empathy”.

2.4. CIRCULATION & QUALITY

Working in the culture department of a daily newspaper I've often heard some of my bosses argue that art criticism is elitist and futile. In their opinion, a film review should reflect the popularity of the film in question. Too often, they say, our critic only gives one miserable star to the blockbuster that attracts the biggest audience. The big audience knows best, just as the market knows best, they might argue.

Many people think, according to the same kind of reasoning, that newspapers whose circulations drop cannot have produced a good enough paper. So does high circulation equal high quality? If circulation size was accepted as the sole indicator of excellence, *The Sun* would be by far the best newspaper in the UK. To its most devoted readers it might actually be so, but tabloid readers are often fully aware that the paper is not to be trusted when it comes to accurate information on current affairs. Reasons for reading sensationalist tabloids are different to the reasons for reading a serious broadsheet. Adrian Monck (2008) gives an example of *The Sun* fabricating a story about a Great White shark seen off the coast of Cornwall. Other media contradicted the ‘sighting’, but this didn’t cause any worries to The Sun or its readers. In fact, there was a moderate spike in the paper’s sales during the shark stories in the summer of 2007.

“ No significant research conclusively links drops in readership (or listening or viewing) to specific issues of credibility. In other words, shark stories carry no financial penalty. In fact, readers reward them. (2008, 19)

Moreover, gains or losses in the circulation of a nationwide newspaper cannot be compared to changes in circulation of a small local newspaper, simply because their markets are completely different. Many local newspapers have died out in the UK because they funded their journalism by selling classified adverts. These adverts have rapidly moved to the Internet. A newspaper’s death caused by this development has little or nothing to do with the paper’s journalistic standards.

In reality, as we have seen in the past few years, and especially during the global recession, declining advertising revenues and circulation rarely have much to do with the newspaper's content – except in cases where the paper has cut too many expenses in news gathering and staff. Alex S. Jones (2009) lists heartbreaking stories of such short-sighted measures in many American newspapers, although even he has to acknowledge that it is not easy to show a link between high quality and business success.

 The unhappy truth is that newspapers that sought to retain readers by investing in their newsrooms have not been able to show that this strategy pays off with a surge in circulation. The argument that quality will keep readers is not one that can easily be demonstrated. It appears that newspaper readership is a habit and one that is predictably generational.

 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.
(Jones 2009, 25)

Yet many scholars have argued that journalism of high quality and good business do go hand in hand. Most of these studies are American, so it is good to remember that the US lacks the UK's culture of big national tabloids. If *The Sun* can sell three million copies, why can't *The Guardian*? Finding a strong enough link between high quality and profitable business would certainly be like finding the Holy Grail. Every journalist, every editor, even most publishers would wish this dream would come true.

2.4.1. LACY & CO

 Ask any newspaper editor if money guarantees quality journalism, and the editor will likely deny it. Yet, ask that same editor if money can help him or her improve the quality of news reporting,

...

and the answer will be "of course." The relationship between financing newsrooms and content quality is complex: Money is not sufficient for content quality, but for a news organisation to produce high quality content consistently over time, sufficient financial support is crucial. (Lacy 2000, 25)

Stephen Lacy, a well-known scholar of media economics, has consistently argued that content quality is linked to circulation. Lacy and Fico conducted a study in 1984 of 114 randomly selected American daily newspapers. The study used eight content measures based on Bogart's survey of editors. These measures were:

- 1) a high ratio of staff-written copy to wire and syndicated copy,
- 2) total amount of non-advertising space,
- 3) high ratio of in-depth copy to hard news,
- 4) number of wire services carried,
- 5) high ratio of illustration to text,
- 6) length of average news story,
- 7) high ratio of non-advertising to advertising content in the news sections,
- 8) and the number of byline writers divided by the square inches of total staff copy (Lacy & Martin, 2004).

Lacy & Fico's study found that about 22 percent of the variation in circulation in the year 1985 was related to the studied newspapers' quality in 1984. Lacy and Fico found that circulation correlated with quality a third of the time, but once quality hits a certain level, the effect starts to fade. Cyr, Lacy and Guzman-Ortega have argued that circulation increases follow investment in newsrooms, although this is not a guaranteed result of investment (Newspaper Research Journal, Vol. 26, No. 4, Fall 2005). In another paper, Lacy & Martin (Newspaper Research Journal, Winter 2004) argue that this requires a long-term commitment.

“ It may take months or years for readers to reshape their reading habits to reflect changes in quality. This works both for improvements and declines in content quality. (Lacy & Martin 2004, 23)

They think that competition in the newspaper business not only forces the newspaper to spend money on improving content but also pushes reporters to do their work better.

On the website *Grade the News* Lacy writes: “Circulation is related to content. Circulation is not exclusively related to content, but most research supports some relationship. If newspaper managers don’t believe this, I suggest they fill their newspapers with wire-service copy and see what happens to circulation.”

2.5. INVESTING IN NEWSROOMS

Bogart, Lacy and many others have considered resources put into a newspaper’s content as a possible way to measure quality. On this approach, called the financial commitment theory, Rosenstiel and Mitchell (2004) have reported more recent findings. According to the theory, first introduced by Litman & Bridges in 1986, financial commitment can be used as a surrogate measure for content quality.

Rosenstiel & Mitchell wanted to find out “if it were possible to quantify with contemporary data whether good journalism was still good business”. According to Rosenstiel and Mitchell, it would be possible for researchers to provide the industry with economic models that show how much investing in a newsroom will help a newspaper to grow its revenues and circulation. This would require analysing several years of data from a newspaper.

Rosenstiel and Mitchell point out that many journalists might hesitate to measure the value of their newsroom since it is also possible that the results may damage their case. However, the study shows that investing more in the newsroom (newshole, staffing, etc.) appears to have a more powerful

association to growing revenues than investing in circulation and advertising departments.

2.6. MEYER'S INFLUENCE MODEL

Philip Meyer attempts to define quality as credibility in his famous book *The Vanishing Newspaper* (updated 2nd edition, 2010). He doesn't exactly give a definition of quality journalism, but thinks that some aspects of it, such as credibility, can be measured.

“ But if we can agree on enough interesting elements of quality that are measurable, and if there is statistical evidence that they are driven by some common underlying force not directly measured, we can make a good claim that the underlying force, even though it might be latent, is in fact quality. (2010, 68)

Meyer sets out to build a strong, empirically tested case for the link between quality journalism and profitability. As he points out, most studies that show a link between higher quality and higher circulation, are correlation studies. They show a causality, but not which is the primary cause and which the effect. Meyer thinks there is probably a “reinforcing loop, where quality produces business success which enables more quality” (2010, 78). Even Meyer's painstaking efforts do not produce a certainty that “quality journalism is the cause of business success rather than its byproduct” (2010, 5). However, his book does give news organizations a practical way of looking at their business from the point of view of good quality and public trust.

Meyer argues that journalistic quality does have its visible manifestations that can be measured. Also consequences can be measured by studying reader's reactions to reporting. Meyer looks specifically at credibility and influence in local communities, accuracy in reporting, readability and the importance of editing.

Meyer's main conclusion is what he calls the Influence model. This theory claims that high quality in journalistic content increases societal influence and credibility of news. Both drive growth of circulation and thus profitability.

If online entrepreneurs learn anything from newspaper history, it should be that trust has economic value, and that trust is gained through quality content. If the influence model works, the successful transitions will be by newspapers that use the savings in production and transportation to improve their content. (2010, 188)

2.7. JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS

In their book, *The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel list nine principles that are embedded in the practice of journalism. This theory of high quality journalism came out of a three year study conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism. These principles are at the core of quality journalism; they are something that all journalists can agree on, and, more importantly, something that the “citizens have a right to expect” from journalism. (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001, 12). This list of principles is now considered to be the industry standard in Western countries.

For journalism to ‘provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing’, it must fulfil the following tasks:

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 an independent 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 keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
9. Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

This list doesn't include words like objectivity, fairness or balance, because the authors came to the conclusion that these terms are much too vague and disputable for everyone to agree on. They feel that this list, even though it might seem obvious to many journalists, is necessary in order to clarify the core values of journalism. Journalists are often expected to apply this theory of journalism, yet it is rarely articulated. Kovach and Rosenstiel feel that the lack of deeply studied and clearly outspoken theory has weakened both journalism and democratic society.

Kovach and Rosenstiel argue that the survival of the independent press depends on the journalist's ability to communicate what the press is for and why – and whether the citizens care about it.

When *The Elements of Journalism* was first published in 2001, the author's greatest worry was the emergence of commercialism posing as journalism. They weren't yet fully aware of the terrifying challenges that the Internet poses to mainstream journalism, or the unfixable business model. This makes me see their conclusion about the survival of the free press in a different light. The citizens who do care are now challenging the press by producing content themselves and fact-checking news done poorly by time-pressured journalists working in mass media. The press has been doing a bad job, and it has been slovenly with repairing the damage. Journalists generally think that the citizens need us and that they know what journalists are for. But what if they don't? I will have further look at the challenge of citizen journalism and bloggers in the next chapter.

Bill Kovach has long been an advocate of what he calls 'journalism of verification'. In the era of Internet and warp-speed blogging, traditional media are under pressure to publish breaking news faster and faster. Some newspapers have adopted the habit of publishing news/rumours on their website before the information can be confirmed – 'because it's already out there' – even though they wouldn't do the same in their printed edition. This has seriously undermined their credibility, because reliability has been the hallmark of quality media.

“ Today we live in a media world in which competing interests are creating realities designed to encourage communities of consumers, communities of belief, and communities of allegiance. It is in this environment that a journalism of verification must find its place by using these new technologies to support communities of independent thought. (Kovach, 2005)

Kovach now thinks that the process of verification can be assisted by citizens. Journalists need to open the processes and tools of news gathering to the public.

“ As citizens become more proactive consumers, journalism must help equip them for that role and not continue to see them as a passive audience. (Kovach, 2005)

2.8. SELF-REGULATION

Another source for defining quality could be looking at journalists' own rules. Journalists all over the world tend to have a code of conduct or some kind of an ethical code, whether or not it is published in writing. It is stated very often that self-regulation does not work because not everyone subscribes to the rules defined by their peers. Knowing the rules does not prevent a journalist from breaking them. Rules or no rules, bad journalism thrives all around the world. The Project for Excellence in Journalism links to ethics codes of different journalistic companies and organizations on their website (www.journalism.org/resources/ethics_codes). These codes, be it the BBC, AP or *New York Times*, are very similar in content.

In Finland, where more than 90 percent of all journalists are members of the Union of Journalists, self-regulation does actually seem to work pretty well. This is because not only almost all journalists are members of the Union but also almost all publications and journalistic television and radio programmes are members of the Finnish equivalent of the UK's Press Council, the Finnish Council for Mass Media. Journalistic ethics are taught in universities and

other media schools, and there is a strong sense of professionalism among Finnish journalists.

The Finnish Guidelines for Journalists are listed by the Union and adopted by the Council for Mass Media. These guidelines begin as follows: “Freedom of speech is the foundation of a democratic society. Good journalistic practice is based on the public’s right to have access to facts and opinions.” The guideline then proceeds to set rules and principles about the journalist’s professional status; obtaining and publishing information; rights of both the interviewer and the interviewee; corrections and the right to reply, and the distinctions between the private and the public.

The Council receives complaints from the public. If a newspaper, for instance, gets a notice for bad journalistic practice, it has to print the Council’s decision (in full length) in the paper. Among Finnish journalists, a notice from the Council is widely thought as a public embarrassment, and discussing notices read from the Union paper, *The Journalist*, is a form of collegial gossip.

2.9. TOWARDS MY OWN DEFINITION: QUALITY AND DEMOCRACY GO HAND IN HAND

As academic research and the previous discussion show, quality journalism is difficult to define and impossible to measure precisely. In my opinion, however elusive and multiple these definitions may be, there is a common ground and strong agreement to be found.

Out of the principles, rules and definitions I’ve listed here, we can see a consistent picture forming. In this we must include, firstly, journalism’s role as the independent monitor of power and the servant of citizens. There is a strong consensus among both journalists and academics that journalism is essential to a functioning democracy. This notion is well represented in Kovach & Rosenstiel’s list of nine standards, even though the word ‘democracy’ is not mentioned in them. But they do talk about holding power to account and providing a public forum for discussion, two basic functions that journalism has been thought to perform.

Journalism does not need democracy in order to exist in some form or other. There is underground reporting in authoritarian countries, and many articles in pre-censored newspapers can still deliver news and disseminate information, even though the result can be seen as a limited and inferior form of journalism. Democracy, however, does need journalism. Citizens will not be informed without relentless reporting and critical analysis of government, councils, courts and all other public institutions. For this we need journalistic institutions that guarantee continuous scrutiny of power. As citizens, we need to know about the decisions that are taken in our name. We need journalists who have the stamina to sit through countless city council meetings, and we also need skilled investigative journalists, who look into things that are hidden – for things tend to be hidden for a reason.

It is said that a democracy is only as good as its press. Jeffrey Scheuer makes a strong case for high quality journalism as a core democratic value.

If journalism serves a core democratic function, without which democracy itself is all but inconceivable, then journalistic excellence must also factor into the quality of democracy. Journalistic excellence – and not just freedom of speech and the press – must be a basic democratic value. (Scheuer 2008, xi)

While Scheuer acknowledges that moral, political and intellectual differences may prevent us from agreeing on a single uncontested definition of high quality journalism, we should be able to see eye to eye on at least three basic components of journalistic excellence. These are “the moral imperative of truth, the intellectual imperative of context, and the institutional/political imperative of independence” (2008, 44–45). Truth is a tricky thing, but it is the most important feature of journalism. It differentiates journalism from fiction, PR, propaganda, gossip and political spin. Truth is a necessary precondition for quality journalism, but it is not enough to simply answer questions ‘who, when, what, and where’. We also need to explain ‘how’ and ‘why’: put the news in context.

“ For our purposes, the idea of “context” itself has several distinct contexts or applications. First, “connecting the dots” by answering questions such as “why” and “how” is central to journalism, and to journalistic excellence. Second, history is the temporal context for the news, a background for what happened yesterday, and for the entire journalistic enterprise. The two meld; today’s news is tomorrow’s history. Third, journalism itself, in addition to having history as a temporal context, has a moral context that gives it authority and responsibility, and that context is democracy. (Scheuer, 2008, 47–48)

Scheuer’s third form of excellence, independence, is modally connected to truth and context; it is crucial for achieving the two. Independence in journalism means freedom from outside influence or control.

In his book, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (2008), Michael Schudson lists six functions journalism is generally thought to serve in democratic societies, in different combinations and with different emphasis:

- I) information: the news media can provide fair and full information so citizens can make sound political choices;
- II) investigation: the news media can investigate concentrated sources of power, particularly governmental power;
- III) analysis: the news media can provide coherent frameworks of interpretation to help citizens comprehend a complex world;
- IV) social empathy: journalism can tell people about others in their society and their world so that they can come to appreciate the viewpoints and lives of other people, especially those less advantaged than themselves;
- V) public forum: journalism can provide a forum for dialogue among citizens and serve as a common carrier of the perspectives of varied groups in society;
- VI) mobilization: the news media can serve as advocates for particular political programs and perspectives and mobilize people to act in support of these programs. (2008, 12)

Definitions of journalism as servant of democracy are usually found in the outlined purposes of public service broadcasting. For instance, The BBC's first public purpose is "sustaining citizenship and civil society". The BBC Trust has divided this remit into five specific priorities, after public consultation:

- Provide independent journalism of the highest quality.
- Engage a wide audience in news, current affairs and other topical issues.
- Encourage conversation and debate about news, current affairs and topical issues.
- Build greater understanding of the parliamentary process and political institutions governing the UK.
- Enable audiences to access, understand and interact with different types of media.

Similar remits can be found in newspapers' written purposes as well. The Guardian and its owner, The Scott Trust, famously state that "the ethos of public service has been part of the DNA of the newspaper" ever since the early 19th century.

Usually, research does not define that quality journalism should be of any given subject matter. Sometimes the studies listed above talk about news journalism, and they may mention politics, but the somewhat dated terms 'hard' and 'soft' news do not feature. This, it seems, can be interpreted so that a journalist can produce high quality by adhering to certain quality criteria and ethical codes, practically regardless of what they are writing about. The criteria I've found do not exclude such things as entertainment and humour. Quality journalism can be a serious report on, say, legislation or misuse of power, but it can also be arts criticism, feature writing, sports – almost anything and everything, as long as it serves public interest and follows standards of verification and good writing. If I were to draw my own subjective set of quality criteria, I would certainly include this: "Don't be dull".

My own view is, that much like good literature, good journalism tries to

make sense of the chaotic world around us. It gives context and background to events. It interprets, analyses, and strives to give meaning to all the babbling that's going on. It looks beyond the obvious and behind the trickery, but also forward, to where we are being led by the ones who are in power.

3 JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY: THE CURRENT DEBATE

A free and independent press is essential to the health of a functioning democracy. It serves to inform the voting public on matters relevant to its well-being. Why they've stopped doing that is a mystery. Jon Stewart: America (2005, 131)

A lot has been said about the democratic functions of the press. We journalists tend to think that a democratic society simply cannot survive without us. In this digital age we face people who dare to think the opposite: they see the Internet as a democratizing force that makes everyone a journalist and a publisher, and some believe that this will make professional journalism and 'Big Media' obsolete.

During the over 300-year long history of the printed newspaper, the debate about democracy and freedom of speech has been at its core. The press, or the media, in turn, is at the core of the public sphere – where, according to Jürgen Habermas, private people come together as a public (McNair, 2000). In this chapter I aim to give an overview of some of the current pressing issues concerning the relationship between journalism and democracy. These debates include the juxtaposition of professional and amateur media, the democratising effects of the Web, the perils of the traditional media and the ramifications of targeted contents and fragmented audiences on the Internet.

I am asking where is the traditional press failing? What does the possible demise of newspapers mean to democracy? Where is the serious debate about politics moving to? How is it different from before? And most importantly: how will the society be informed?

3.1. BIG MEDIA VERSUS BLOGGERS – A FALSE DICHOTOMY

Blogging is about passion, which is something that mainstream journalism could do with more often. But, blogging is almost always a part-time activity,

and the blogger very rarely gets any money out of it. Even though some may still believe that bloggers can replace professional (employed) journalists, this idea has mostly been abandoned as a product of overly enthusiastic hype created by the emergence of the first blogs that gained visibility in the traditional media.

It is also worth stating that the emergence of blogs has meant the return of the partisan press. Conservative bloggers link to other conservatives, and liberals to other liberals. Many bloggers who portray themselves as press critics against bias in the media have an agenda of their own. It is often said that journalism is suffering from a crisis of trust, but bloggers certainly do have credibility problems of their own.

The inescapable truth is, however, that the Internet and the blogosphere provide alternative sources of news and views. Social media and the blogosphere open up the public sphere to a wider participation than ever before. The Internet is not only a new medium but a completely new ecosystem of information distribution. The Internet has made publishing open to everyone. There are no more costs of reproduction and distribution.

Clay Shirky points out in his book *Here Comes Everybody: How Change Happens When People Come Together* (2008), that journalistic privilege was based on scarcity of publishing. Not everyone could just write something and publish it themselves. Now that scarcity is gone.

Sometimes, though, the professional outlook can become a disadvantage, preventing the very people who have the most at stake – the professionals themselves – from understanding the major changes to the structure of their profession. In particular, when a profession has been created as a result of some scarcity, as with librarians or television programmers, the professionals are often the last ones to see it when that scarcity goes away. It's easier to understand that you face competition than obsolescence. (Shirky, 2008, 59)

Shirky wouldn't call bloggers journalists – because “mass professionalization is an oxymoron, since a professional class implies a specialized function, minimum tests for competence, and a minority of members”. The term Shirky uses is *mass amateurization*. Weblogs are not just alternative platforms for publishing; they are an alternative to publishing itself.

But who should enjoy journalistic privilege, for example the right to protect one's sources? There is no easy answer. Anyone can publish, and therefore anyone can be a ijournalist. Still, it is difficult to imagine that millions of bloggers could be protected by similar laws as professional journalists are. As Shirky says, that would lead to impossible situations – like the kind where people would refuse to testify about their friends' shady business because they've blogged about it.

“ Journalistic privilege has to be applied to a minority of people, in order to preserve the law's ability to uncover and prosecute wrongdoing while allowing a safety valve for investigative reporting. (Shirky, 2008, 71)

In his book, *Watching the Watchdog* (2006), Stephen D. Cooper names the blogosphere as the ‘Fifth estate’. Cooper identifies four genres of media criticism practiced in the blogosphere: accuracy, framing, agenda-setting/gatekeeping and journalistic practices.

“ Blog criticism of accuracy concerns factual evidence mentioned in reporting. Framing concerns the interpretations or meanings of facts and events. Agenda-setting/gatekeeping concerns the newsworthiness or importance of particular events and issues. Criticism of journalistic practices concerns the working methods of professional journalists and news outlets. (2006, 18)

Blogs and citizen journalism are a valuable addition to public conversation, and sometimes they pick up news that mainstream media miss. Still it is not

imaginable that they would replace professional media. As David Kline says, it is a “well known truth that it is often easier to criticize mainstream media for the way it covers the news than it is actually to cover all the news in the way it should be covered.” (2005, 13)

Daniel w. Drezner and Henry Farrell discuss the influence of blogging in American media in the book *Blog! How the newest media revolution is changing politics, business, and culture* (2005). While it is clear that Big Media no longer has a monopoly over what political news and opinion is delivered to the people, bloggers seem to still need Big Media to gain attention to their reporting.

All bloggers, even those at the top of the hierarchy, have limited resources at their disposal. For the moment, they are largely dependent upon traditional media for sources of information. Furthermore, bloggers have become victims of their own success: As more mainstream media outlets hire bloggers to provide content, they become more integrated into politics as usual. Inevitably, blogs will lose some of their novelty and immediacy as they start being co-opted by the very institutions they purport to critique, as when both major U.S. political parties decided to credential some bloggers as journalists for their 2004 nominating conventions. (2005, 95)

I conclude this brief review with a quote from the blogger Wonkette aka Ana Marie Cox: “A revolution requires that people leave their house”. This applies not only to the stereotypical bloggers sitting home in their pyjamas, but also to the ‘Big Media’ journalists who are more and more tied to their computers, churning out more and more stories in less time.

3.2. THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF THE INTERNET

The hopes and dreams invested in the possibilities of the Internet are numerous and highly optimistic. It is not only about democratising dissemination of news and views. According to many true believers, the Internet not only reinforces Western democracy but also spreads its gospel to authoritative countries all

around the world, thus curing dictatorships from evil. The Internet will make governing transparent and bring citizens and decision-makers together in the same big discussion.

While it is true that the World Wide Web has given opportunities of self-expression to many people living under oppressive regimes, the experiences of, for example, protestors in Iran using Twitter are hardly enough to fulfil the huge expectations. There is still too much hype and too little empirical knowledge about the Internet and its impact.

The Internet can potentially be a democratising medium in authoritarian countries, but in western democracies it seems to have different effects. When advertising fled from newspapers to the Web, it broke the business model that made newspapers so prosperous for a long time. As some Internet enthusiasts wait for the last newspaper to die, perhaps we should be asking whether democracy needs mass media. The Internet is not a broadcasting medium.

In many countries, such as Egypt, where censorship of newspapers is commonplace, the Internet is not (yet) being censored. Political dissidents, human rights activists and NGOs have been able to publish online such information that would have been censored in local newspapers. However, for example, the Chinese government has learned so much about restricting the Internet use of its citizens that it now teaches the same tricks to other authoritarian regimes, like the leaders of Ethiopia. In 2001, the Taliban regime banned the Internet altogether in Afghanistan. There are no bloggers in North Korea, as Internet access is reserved to political elites and foreigners only.

Daniel w. Drezner and Henry Farrell, in their essay on the Web of influence, discuss the power of the blogosphere:

The blogosphere also acts as barometer for whether a story would or should receive greater coverage by the mainstream media. The more blogs that discuss a particular issue, the more likely that the blogosphere will set the agenda for future news coverage. (2005, 91)

This counts also for the foreign news coverage of the press in democratic countries. Blogs emerging in countries where there are no or few other outlets for political expression have a possibility of affecting the news agenda of international media. But can blogs affect regimes in their own countries? This is yet to be seen. To be sure, bloggers can become an alternative source for information, news, and commentary in countries without a free press.

3.3. THE FAILINGS OF PROFESSIONAL MEDIA

There is nothing new in saying that there is a crisis of political journalism. Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch accused political journalism of tabloidisation, commercialisation and ‘dumbing down’ in their book *The Crisis of Public Communication* (1995). Brian McNair explains the crisis firstly with economic causation: contemporary journalism is seen as a commodity that is being sold in a media marketplace. Journalists and editors must compete for market share (ratings, circulation, advertising revenue), which makes them “prioritise the popular over the pertinent, the racy over the relevant, the weird over the worthy”. (Mc Nair 2001, 7)

Secondly, the crisis is caused by the negative impact of new technologies: the need for speed in gathering and presentation of news. All this has also contributed to the rise of political spin, and political media more vulnerable to manipulation. For all the reasons listed above, it can be seen that rather than supporting the democratic process, journalism may sometimes have an opposite effect on the public sphere. Bad political journalism can alienate people and create a cynical outlook on citizenship. On the other hand, “it can be argued that their commercial need for audiences, and for the raw material from which journalism can be fashioned, are creating new spaces for the accessing and meaningful representation of non-elite voices, as well as greater diversity in the styles and agendas employed by journalists” (McNair 2000, 172).

Michael Schudson argues in his book, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (2008), that it is the features that press critics generally attack that actually guarantee public discussion and promote democracy.

The focus of the news media on events, rather than trends and structures; the fixation of the press on conflict whenever and wherever it erupts; the cynicism of journalists with respect to politics and politicians; and the alienation of journalists from the communities they cover make the media hard for people to love but hard for democracies to do without. These are precisely the features that most regularly enable the press to maintain a capacity for subverting established power. (2008, 50)

Nick Davies provides a grim account on the production of journalism today in his book *Flat Earth News* (2009). He argues with powerful evidence that newsrooms have turned into factories where journalists, chained to their computers, churn out so many articles per day that they simply do not have time for basic fact-checking, let alone critical thinking and judgment. This leads to what Davies calls ‘churnalism’, and we can see its mark on “all local and regional media outlets in Britain”, both print and broadcast.

This is churnalism. This is journalists failing to perform the simple basic functions of their profession; quite unable to tell their readers the truth about what is happening on their patch. This is journalists who are no longer out gathering news but who are reduced instead to passive processors of whatever material comes their way, churning out stories, whether real event or PR artifice, important or trivial, true or false. (2009, 59)

If Nick Davies has a case in Britain, there is an even bigger pile of evidence in America, where the newspaper crisis is at its deepest. Since 2003, about one third of American newspaper journalists have lost their jobs. Some notable newspapers (*San Francisco Chronicle*, *LA Times*, *Baltimore Sun*) have cut their newsroom staff in half. Many American newspapers still make a profit, but they keep very high profit margins (around 20 percent) to keep Wall Street happy. This has led to vicious cuts in newsroom staff.

Alex S. Jones (2009) describes a managerial practice called ‘harvesting’. This means stripping the newsroom to a bare minimum, so that the paper is still

produced but as cheaply as possible. After a while the readers will go elsewhere, and so will the advertisers. But until then the dying newspaper would have made big profits for its owner.

3.4. FROM A BUNDLE TO DAILYME

Nicholas Negroponte predicted already back in 1996 that “being digital will change the economic model of news selections, make your interest play a bigger role, and, in fact, use pieces from the cutting-room floor that did not make the cut on popular demand.” (1996, 153)

Yet I can't remember anyone worrying about any of this at all when I began my journalism studies at the University of Tampere in the year 1999. All of what Negroponte says above is now very much a reality.

Personalised news is here now. Many newspapers (for example *The Daily Telegraph*, *Wall Street Journal*) offer a digital newspaper designed ‘just for you’. The reader can pick and choose the type of news she is interested in, and disregard the rest. The news aggregator website Google News sums up the idea this way: “No one can read all the news that's published every day, so why not set up your page to show you the stories that best represent your interests?”

Targeted contents and the fragmentation of audiences have been major trends even before the masses adopted the Internet, but the web has sped up this development by enabling everyone to search for content optimized for themselves, and only read about their own specific interests. Many have argued that online, one can easily interact only with people who already share the same views. This reinforces the way one thinks, and it doesn't subject to alternative opinions.

This can have a negative impact on civil society, argues Cass Sunstein (2007), as it can lead to extremism and polarisation, even terrorism.

“ Group polarisation is unquestionably occurring on the Internet. From the evidence thus far, it seems plain that the Internet is serving, for many, as a breeding ground for extremism, precisely because like-minded people are deliberating with greater ease and frequency with one another, and often without hearing contrary views. Repeated exposure to an extreme position, with the suggestion that many people hold that position, will predictably move those exposed, and likely predisposed, to believe in it.

(2007, 69)

The old-fashioned newspaper was, and still is, a bundle of information about all sorts of things: politics, economics, international affairs, local issues, sports, culture, arts, and so on. A newspaper could force the reader to see news that they didn't know they should be interested in – at least glimpse through the headlines.

In his book *Republic.com 2.0* Sunstein worries about the growing power of consumers to filter what they see combined with the reducing / decreasing importance of what he calls “general-interest intermediaries”, i.e. newspapers, magazines, and broadcasters.

Sunstein thinks that people should be exposed to content that they haven't chosen beforehand, “partly to ensure against fragmentation and extremism, which are predictable outcomes of any situation in which like-minded people speak only with themselves.” (2007, 6)

Secondly, citizens should have common experiences:

“ Without shared experiences, a heterogeneous society will have a much more difficult time in addressing social problems. People may even find it hard to understand one another. Common experiences, emphatically including the common experiences made possible by the media, provide a form of social glue.

(2007, 6)

This is not to say that the Internet and freedom of choice is a bad thing. On the contrary, Sunstein wants to distance himself from any nostalgia towards a world without the Internet. Catering for all kinds of niches is mostly a wonderful thing. But he argues that there can be no true assurance of freedom in a communications system committed to countless editions of the ‘Daily Me’, Negroponte’s vision of the future of news. This is because in a proper understanding of freedom there has to be “the ability to have preferences formed after exposure to a sufficient amount of information and also to an appropriately wide and diverse range of options.” (2007, 45)

The Internet’s version of Habermas’ public sphere is a networked one, and we have seen it at work on platforms like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. Nevertheless, group polarization happens easily on these networking sites. I post links to news that interest me to my Facebook page and my like-minded friends agree with my comments.

The one permanently important question is how will society be informed. The newspaper used to be a pretty good answer to this. In an age where mass audiences disappear into cosy little niches of cyberspace, we must keep asking how can the public sphere be forged in this new environment.

4

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

This chapter is based on the eleven interviews I conducted for this study. The issues addressed here are topics that emerged from the interviews. I chose to interview people who are experts either as academics who study media (**Bob Franklin, Natalie Fenton, Stephen Coleman, Robert Picard**) or practising journalists and editors (**Alan Rusbridger** and **Charlotte Higgins** of the Guardian, **Christopher McKane** of the Times). Among the interviewees were also people who have changed their careers in journalism to careers in universities (**Charlie Beckett, George Brock**) and media consultancy (**Juan Senor**). One editor-in-chief, **Tony Curzon Price**, runs an online operation called openDemocracy.net. For a full list of the interviewees and their affiliations, see the end of this paper.

The questions tackled in this chapter turned out to be the most prominent in my interviews.

- Firstly, we'll discuss some of the errors the traditional media seems to be making. These include cuts in the newsroom, underinvestment, 'dumbing down' of content, and poorly managed integration of digital and print operations.
- Second, we move on to different views on charging for journalistic content online.
- Thirdly, we'll take a look on some of the possible future scenarios for newspapers.
- The review ends with my interviewees' take on the quality criteria of journalism, as described in Chapter 2.

4.1. FROM CUTS TO UNDERINVESTMENT

For an appropriate beginning of the first part of this analysis, let us start with the words of Stephen Coleman, professor of political communication at Leeds University, an expert on e-democracy. He thinks that the press is failing in almost all of its duties:

It fails to report politics well, it trivializes politics, it fails to report international, global forces well – particularly business – and it fails to offer analysis at this quality level, this penetrating level of depth, that is intended to educate those who don't start out with a lot of prior information. It talks to insiders and it is very happy to do so. There is a lot of complacency about a lot of quality journalism. In terms of mission for journalism in a democratic society it makes me uneasy.

4.1.1. STAFF CUTS AND THE ECONOMIC MODEL

I asked Alan Rusbridger, editor of the Guardian, if he thinks that part of the general decline in newspapers' circulations is due to the press failing in its job.

Probably a bit, yeah. It is a good question to ask ourselves. Papers who were making very high profit margins didn't want to get used to lower profit margins, so they cut editorial costs to the extent where they couldn't do a proper job anymore. Then people stop buying the paper, and it creates a spiral. So that's a clear example of where people stop doing the thing they are supposed to. Maybe you are asking if we have in some way forgotten what our core purpose is anyway.

Rusbridger believes that the crisis of news organizations may give the profession a good reason to find its purpose again. Meanwhile, even the trust-owned Guardian has laid off some of its staff in order cut its cost base. According to Rusbridger, the paper had grown larger than it needed to be. The Guardian and its Sunday sister paper the Observer moved to new premises at King's Place, London, and joined their newsrooms in December 2008.

In the old building we had web operation on one floor, newspaper on another, and the Sunday paper operation elsewhere, and

each bit was growing big. We were growing a mirror culture department, mirror politics department and so on... You can get greater efficiency by working in a more integrated way. Also, we have to face it that the cost structure of the organizations who are taking us on in digital space are much lower. They haven't got the print bit to worry about. They are just doing the digital bit. And that's a much lower cost business than print.

Like Rusbridger, Professor Bob Franklin of Cardiff University takes on the issue of high profit margins. He says that local and regional papers in the UK had been running on 35–40 percent profit margins. Now many of these papers are in dire straits, if not dead and buried.

Turn them into workers co-ops and you immediately have 40 percent more money each year to invest, to hire more journalists... But it's all been bled off to the boardrooms and shareholders, and in that process journalism has got desperately impoverished.

Juan Senor, a consultant who has helped many newspapers increase their circulation, thinks cutting staff is a knee-jerk reaction that will only lead to “bleeding a death of a thousand cuts”. Cuts lead to weaker quality, which in turn damages the brand. He believes ‘dumbing down’ and celebrity news are not the way forward for newspapers.

Look at Apple. They have built a fantastic business based on quality and design. The question is, do you want to be one more of the same or to be in your own league?

4.1.2. DUMBING DOWN IS INCREASING ONLINE

In his seminal book, *Newszak and News Media* (1997), Bob Franklin argues that four major changes have resulted into what is often called the ‘dumbing

down' of quality news media:

- 1) Broadsheet papers contain less news, especially foreign news, parliamentary news and investigative stories.
- 2) Views have replaced news.
- 3) There is more tabloid-like stories in broadsheets.
- 4) Broadsheets have assumed many editorial features which previously were exclusive to tabloids (problem pages, dating). (1997, 7)

“ Journalism’s editorial priorities have changed. Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more ‘newsworthy’ than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined with new values; ‘infotainment’ is rampant. (1997, 4)

Franklin argues that, in the quest for higher circulations, stories of public interest have been replaced with “stories that interest the public”. Arguably, this development continues online, where newspapers compete in attracting clickstream to their websites. Natalie Fenton believes that the Internet has further increased the ‘dumbing down’ element in professional journalism.

“ I think what you’ve got is an enormous amount of comment and opinion on stuff, and that’s all fine, but the counter to that is you’ve had a dilution of that actual solid reporting and investigative journalism. That’s been a huge problem, the real flattening of the news and a real tendency – because this has to happen very fast and you have to fill an awful lot of space – just to take it from readymade sources.

Robert Picard told me that newspapers cannot continue on the path of entertainment and celebrity gossip. He thinks that the content structure has to be completely rethought in all newspapers. Picard compares news organizations to airline companies.

“ It’s the same thing that British Airways is having trouble with now. They can’t figure out if they want to be Ryanair or an airline known for high quality and good service. Newspapers have bounced between whether to be a quality paper or a free newspaper. To get mass audience they do stuff that attracts people who aren’t interested in serious news. Still, they are trying to get all customers, and that’s not working. To keep chasing the ones who don’t want to read the newspaper seems like a ridiculous thing to me, from a business point of view.

Yet quality broadsheets have been increasing the amount of tabloid-like content. There is a strong body of empirical evidence of this in journalism studies. Robert Picard says:

“ They’re still stuck in the mentality that they have to serve everybody. It’s the social engineering perspective from the 19th century: we’re here to educate the public, provide social control, to help them through their lives... There’s this real paternalism in that view of journalism. On the one hand they want that, and on the other level they want mass audiences. It’s hopeless. There is no evidence that it works for over a quarter of a century. That audience has TV, the Internet, the tabloids and free newspapers.

4.1.3. YESTERDAY’S NEWS TOMORROW

Most newspapers seem to still think that they are in the business of breaking news. They print the same headlines that were known to the avid news consumers on the day before. The stories very rarely have much more information compared to the stories that were published online on the previous evening. News is no

longer exclusive to newspapers, radio and television. The Internet brings news to everyone who wants it, and it brings it at an unforeseen speed. This should force newspapers to thoroughly renew their content.

“ It’s not exclusive any more, people read it 12 hours before or more. I’m tired of reading the same stories again in print. I open up the paper, and the news section has about 60 percent stories I’ve read before, because I’m a heavy news consumer. But there has to be something wrong with the formula. There has got to be something special in the paper. They have to rethink the whole product line. (Picard)

4.1.4. UNDERINVESTMENT IS THE BIGGEST THREAT

Goldsmith’s University’s study *New media, old news: journalism & democracy in the digital age* comes to the conclusion that the biggest threat to journalism is underinvestment. Natalie Fenton, editor of the fore-mentioned book, explains how certain simultaneous developments created what has been called the perfect storm of the news business.

“ You have the history of marketisation and deregulation, the shift towards new technological forms that have lead to a position where you have decoupling of advertising from newspapers, an economic model that’s falling apart and at the same time more investment in technology, more space to fill and the only way for the industry to square that circle is to sack journalists.

Huge redundancies of journalists and a significant move to far more insecure job contracts have resulted in the remaining journalists having to do far more in far less time. In their study, Fenton et al found out that some journalists had to file 15–16 stories a day.

“OK, they’re at the general news hell, so they’ve always had to do more than the specialists with more autonomy, but it was quite startling how little time they had to check on facts, to go back over things... I mean inevitably that leads to a particular type of journalism. The economics had a major impact because it led to more investment in technology and less investment in journalists.

By laying off so many journalists that it makes the rest perform worse, the newspaper managers may in fact be damaging their brand and hurting the very business they are trying to save by making these cuts. Natalie Fenton says:

“What they may be failing to realise – and some of them may come round to understanding it – is that what people want to buy quality journalism for is quality news coverage. Good, solid, trustworthy news service. If they stop doing that, then it actually is bad business sense. Because, if you have to define it in their terms, it’s their unique selling point that they are eroding. There was a noticeable difference between the Guardian and other newspapers, because they could afford a different style and type of work. They knew they could always fall back on the Scott Trust; even though it has to work as a business they still have a different remit – it is not just about business, it has to be about providing certain type of news as well. That is sort of fulfilling a public interest model.

“The Telegraph had over 20 journalists work on the expenses story, and it paid off for them in the end. But at the same time they were sacking their staff and putting people on fixed term contracts, so it’s a contradiction in terms.

4.1.5. NEWSROOM INTEGRATION – BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

Christopher McKane, managing editor of the Times, acknowledges that newsroom integration has been too slow and that for many years the online news production was considered a secondary operation, “an inferior product mainly put together by children or nerds”. What McKane says here is not the current situation in the Times but it depicts well a familiar scene in most newsrooms just a few years ago.

“When the website and the paper were completely separate, which was about a year ago, the stuff that went on the website was put up together very quickly by, to my mind, very inexperienced reporters. Speed was everything. They wrote little stories, got a bit of wire copy, and there was little quality control. Basically if you wrote something it went straight up there. They had a system they called another pair of eyes. Somebody else might glance at it. On the print side everything that ends up in the paper has to be looked at by 8 or 10 different people.”

At the same time when the Times and the Sunday Times were launching their exclusive new paysites, they were also cutting around 80 staff while looking to reduce editorial budgets by ten percent. The Times and the Sunday Times made losses of around £240,000 per day. The question is, can they produce high quality journalism both for print and for the new, very demanding website, with fewer staff?

4.1.6. CRISIS OF TRUST

The issue of public trust is central to journalism, and perhaps even more so in a complex, networked society where more ‘speakers’ are being heard than ever before. As Adrian Monck puts it, in his book *Can You Trust the Media*: “as our attention has moved online, so the quest for trust has moved there too” (2008, 65).

An Ipsos Mori survey from the year 2009 shows that 9 people in 10 who are

readers of the *Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* or *The Times*, trust their own newspaper to tell the truth. Two thirds of *Mail* and *Express* readers think the same, as do 55 % of *Mirror* readers. Only three in 10 of *News of the World* and *Sun* readers say that they trust their newspaper to tell the truth at least “somewhat”. These results are an interesting comparison to another Ipsos Mori survey that says only 19 percent of the people in the UK trust journalists to tell the truth.

Natalie Fenton points out that while people often say that they don't trust the media, they will still say that for the most trustworthy news they go to the BBC, for instance. The public may not trust the news, but they want to trust the news. It is an ambivalent relationship, and thus not easily explained with survey results.

“It's good in many ways that the audience is having a critical relationship with the news. Part of that is because we're coming into a post-enlightenment period where that whole idea of the truth is being undercut and reformulated in many ways. So people still have this, they want facts even they don't believe in the truth anymore.”

“What news organizations have got to do is take account of that by increasing the range of views and opinions that they include in their news. Rather than restricting them, which is happening now. Because of the speed they have to work and space they have to fill, they're drawing on a restricted source of news rather than an expanded one. And that will only further aggravate distrust. In a digital age where you can get hundreds, possibly thousands of responses to any individual news story – which will all counter the line that was taken – you have to draw on a much greater pool of sources to establish what you're saying has some ground in reality. Precisely the opposite is going on right now.”

Onora O'Neill, professor of philosophy at Cambridge University, talked about trust in her BBC Reith Lectures in 2002. “If we can’t trust what the press report, how can we tell whether to trust those on whom they report?” she asked.

“ What we need is reporting that we can assess and check: what we get often can’t be assessed or checked by non-experts. If the media mislead, or if readers cannot assess their reporting, the wells of public discourse and public life are poisoned. The new information technologies may be anti-authoritarian, but curiously they are often used in ways that are also anti-democratic. They undermine our capacities to judge others’ claims and to place our trust.

4.2. TO CHARGE OR NOT TO CHARGE? THE QUESTION OF PAY-WALLS

The debate about pay-walls has been dominating the discussion about the future of journalism for quite some time, and with the new pay-wall schemes of Rupert Murdoch’s empire, I suspect that it will remain in the focus for a while longer.

4.2.1. THE TIMES AS THE GUINEA PIG

The Times and the Sunday Times are currently acting as guinea pigs for the whole newspaper industry. On 15th of June 2010 the paper closed their old free website Times Online and launched their new websites thetimes.co.uk and thesundaytimes.co.uk on a free trial period. The organization started charging for the access to these websites from 2 July onwards. Users can buy a digital subscription to both websites for 24 hours (£1) or for one week (£2). The iPad application costs £9.99 a month.

The obvious problem is that the potential reader doesn’t know what is behind the pay-wall, and whether it is worth the money. The Times knows that they will lose a big proportion of their online readers, so I thought that someone

must have calculated exactly how many subscribers would be enough to make the website sustainable. I asked The Times' managing editor Christopher McKane how much audience the paper was prepared to lose because of the pay-wall. He didn't quite answer.

“ We don't always call it a pay-wall, we call it something like the view gate. It's a bit more accessible and so on. This is a big gamble, it really is. The commercial reality is that we have to make something from this. We don't think our content is valueless, so we're not going to give it away. It costs us an enormous amount to produce, and we've got to try and get something out of it. And I think the rates we're setting are very reasonable.

“ The Times has never made a profit since 1785. We are cross-subsidised from the Sun, the Sunday Times and to a lesser extent the News of the World. And we're being told now that we've got to get closer to breaking even. So we've got to put our house in order. We've spent a lot of money on the website, the new one is much better than the old one. Whether people will sign up we don't know.

Many have argued that charging for content online only works for specialist papers, such as the Financial Times, who have a niche product for an audience who needs it. General news is available for free from an abundance of places, and in the UK we have to remember that even if all quality papers went behind pay-walls, the BBC will not. So what does the Times offer online that is worth paying for? Their brand, thinks Christopher McKane:

“ I think one of our biggest sales points will be the comment, the analysis, during the day, and instant analysis. Everybody has news, but we have good news – and we have particularly strong foreign news because we have more correspondents abroad than any other newspaper. But the daily news is not what people are going to buy it for, I'm quite sure. And we have to hope that

“ the educated, intelligent, classic ideal Times reader who is really interested in engaging with our opinion makers and leader writers will pay for that, we hope.

The Times promises its online subscribers deeper coverage, direct access to its journalists (daily live Q&A), interactive graphics, exclusive photography and video. But what the Times will lose is the hyperlink, which is, one might argue, deeply important and intrinsic to the Internet. Others will not be able to link to the Times – and The Times will not want to direct its readers back outside the pay-wall, once it has lured them in.

“ This is going to be a problem, how do we link to everyone else. It's an unknown territory. The Wall Street Journal, our sister paper, is making a lot of money on its website, and it has a lot of subscribers. That is Murdoch's thinking; having made it work in America, maybe he can make it work here.

I signed up for the Times' free trial period, and after that, subscribed to the website in order to continue monitoring its development. The first weeks of the new pay-site look good, journalistically speaking. The website holds a lot of exclusive material, and while at least to my eye, the print version of the Times looks a bit grey and dreary, the website is actually full of interesting features and fresh ideas. The problem is, of course, how can people know whether they might enjoy the content if they cannot see what's inside the pay-wall. Time will tell if the Times is able to gain enough subscribers to sustain its journalism online.

4.2.2. THE GUARDIAN BELIEVES IN A MUTUAL FUTURE

Among the British newspapers, the Guardian is known for its firm belief in the Internet being free for all, but actually, its editor Alan Rusbridger is not absolutely married to the idea. He says that for now, guardian.co.uk will not charge for any content, but he doesn't exclude the possibility of charging for something in the future. The Guardian has recently launched a new service called Guardian Extra, a membership scheme that offers live events, discounts

and offers from various commercial partners and newsroom visits. Membership of Guardian Extra costs £25 a year, after a free trial period during the summer of 2010.

Rusbridger believes in the idea of ‘mutualisation’, that the future of journalism is much more interactive and open than it has ever been before. In mutualised journalism, the journalist recognises that many readers know more than she does and asks for their input. The Guardian has many convincing examples of big, influential stories that came out of co-operation between the newspaper and the audience – such as the death of Ian Tomlinson during the G20 demonstrations in London.

“ How much better are you than what’s out there for free? Uncomfortable question, and I think we know the answer. So, try and work out what it is that ties it all together and can still leverage the brands and attributes we have as journalists and to work out some glue that is going to stick all that together and make people come back to you. I still think we have the opportunity to do that but I don’t think it will be by creating lots of barriers between us and the people.

Alan Rusbridger and his team at the Guardian have come up with a list that encompasses the paper’s approach to working together with other contributors. Here are Rusbridger’s Ten Principles of Mutualisation:

1. It encourages participation.
2. It is not an inert, ‘us’ to ‘them’, form of publishing.
3. It encourages others to initiate debate, publish material or make suggestions. We can follow, as well as lead. We can involve others in the pre-publication processes.
4. It helps form communities of joint interest around subjects, issues or individuals.
5. It is open to the web and is part of it. It links to, and collaborates with, other material (including services) on the web.

6. It aggregates and/or curates the work of others.
7. It recognises that journalists are not the only voices of authority, expertise and interest.
8. It aspires to achieve, and reflect, diversity as well as promoting shared values.
9. It recognises that publishing can be the beginning of the journalistic process rather than the end.
10. It is transparent and open to challenge – including correction, clarification and addition.

The Guardian publishes everything online, and print readers will get the exact same content that was available free online already the night before. So why should one buy the paper?

“Out of habit or because the paper is different, maybe you like the experience of browsing and being surprised of what you read, or the tactile feel of paper and how it can display photos and graphics, the order of things... There are still 285,000 people a day who do it, it's still a business.”

“Maybe at some point we might hold something for the paper. But if you become obsessed with the idea that your newspaper is the only model, then you don't do the website with complete conviction. And I think you have to. If people want to read the Guardian online, or on tablets, then you have to support a model that allows them to do that. There's no point in me saying I'm going to keep it off that, and you just have to buy the paper.”

For Rusbridger, a pay-wall for all content is a strategy that lets newspapers “sleepwalk into oblivion”. It removes them from the way most of the Western world is now interacting with each other. While it may work from a business point of view, in editorial terms it is not a good move. Newspapers can no longer control distribution or create scarcity without isolating themselves from

the networked world, he argues. When it comes to business models, Rusbridger says that finding one is not his job. The Scott Trust allows him to concentrate on editorial lines. In the meantime, Rusbridger believes in experimenting with anything and everything.

 I think that's a better way to find a business model than say we'll throw up the big barriers now, and insist that people pay even if that impoverishes our journalism.


Rusbridger thinks that there has never been a better time to be a journalist, because the digital era offers all kinds of exciting new opportunities.

4.2.3. **SOME FOR FREE, SOME FOR A FEE**

Tony Curzon Price of openDemocracy, a former economist, predicts that newspapers will start charging for some of their content online. He says that he “can’t wait for the New York Times and Murdoch to go behind a pay-wall”, as it will just make openDemocracy more distinctive. Curzon Price is convinced that advertising will never pay for the costs of newspapers’ online operations.

 For the Guardian the pay-wall is actually commercially interesting. If it ends up with 100,000–200,000 subscribers, that's extremely valuable and will make commercial sense. Of course they should give up some of their audience for revenue. Their cost structure requires it. Most of the people doing this kind of work do it because they think it's important to have the influence, not to make money.


 I guess what will end up happening is to have a rather degraded free web experience with a non-degraded premium experience. The touch platforms are going to allow that to happen because of the integration of payment within them. A simple way of degrading is intrusive advertising. The FT is trying to have its cake and eat it because if you subscribe you still get these horrible flash advertisements.


Juan Senor, a consultant whose company, Innovation, has revamped several newspapers, thinks that the biggest blunder the newspaper industry ever made was to give it all out for free. He admits that the newspaper business model is broken, but argues that so is the open and free Internet model as well.

“ One has to extract value from the news that we give for free and begin to charge for some content. You can still do all the sharing and linking and participatory things, but you have to start closing some doors. Or, I don’t like to call it closing doors but opening ‘salon exclusives’. The entry to the British Museum is free but special exhibits cost 10 pounds. They will also make money when people go out through the shop.

4.2.4. CAN TABLETS SAVE NEWSPAPERS?

I asked all my interviewees what they thought about Apple’s iPad and other tablets as new platforms for newspapers. Almost everyone was equally hesitant. Tablets are seen as interesting ideas, but not as a panacea for the news industry. Their development is only in the beginning stages, and several new launches from different manufacturers are expected within a year or two. The price will eventually come down and they will be much more widespread than today. Tablets do provide an interesting opportunity for display ads because visually they work much better than computer screens.

George Brock thinks that tablets may help to fund news to an extent, but news organizations will have to adapt to a different form of doing journalism.

“ No consumer is just going back to a digital reproduction of journalism as it was 20 years ago. If newspapers think that it enables them to reconstruct their business model, they will be disappointed.

Robert Picard is apprehensive about the size, weight and usability of different tablets. For instance, Apple's iPad does not have the features of a laptop, a phone or a camera – so would one cram all of these in a bag along with an iPad?

“ For reading news it works. There's a comfort factor, you can turn pages. But competing newspapers want to adopt competing platforms... The current business arrangements are terrible. The hardware providers are putting themselves between the newspaper and the customer, and the customer is going to be their customer. In marketing strategy you need direct access to your customers, you need to know what they're reading et cetera. Also, a number of manufacturers want to dictate your price. If you give up your customer and your price then what are you in business for? We don't know yet how they will work for retail advertisers.

4.3. FUTURE OF NEWSPAPERS

The discussion on the future of journalism has been more about the survival of newspapers as a business than about the survival of the kind of serious journalism traditional ‘quality’ papers provide. Charlie Beckett thinks that the debate about the death of newspapers is a silly one – he predicts that newspapers will provide much more read-in-a-minute service journalism online and the more serious content will drift into magazines. Newspapers might reinvent themselves as magazines.

Most of my interviewees are not too bothered about the survival of the printed newspaper – as long as its functions are preserved on other platforms. The move towards the Internet, mobile and tablets is generally seen as inevitable. Around 70 percent of an average newspaper's budget goes into things to do with ‘dead wood’, i.e. printing and distribution. When these costs are cut, and operations moved into ones and zeros, a lot of money could be saved. Alas, the problem is not as simple as that. As long as display advertising works – and pays – markedly better in print, newspapers cannot simply ‘stop the presses’.

On the other hand, Christopher McKane points out that News International has recently spent some £600 million in new printing presses. McKane himself worked on this project.

“ It was an enormous investment. All I say to people who say this is crazy, I say look, Rupert Murdoch is one of the cleverest, a very astute businessman. If he thinks we can make those prints still pay for themselves in 20 years' time, anybody can. I would never have thought that we would print our biggest rival the Daily Telegraph, but we do now.

4.3.1. FROM PRODUCT TO SERVICE

Charlie Beckett, director of Polis at London School of Economics, thinks that news is not a product in the same way it used to be. It is now a service, and it needs added value. This value can be found in quality reporting that puts events in context and gives them meaning.

“ You can't put a price on news. Events happen, they are nobody's property. It's difficult to get journalists to understand that. Just because you went to the crash site or the press conference, it's not yours. The little bastards can find out. You add value: report it well, accurately, quickly, put it in context, add pictures and comments. They'll pay for the packaging.

Beckett believes in ‘networked journalism’, where traditional journalism opens itself up to the public. Just like in Alan Rusbridger's idea of mutualisation, networked journalism shares the production process with the citizen from start to finish: from news-gathering to production and publication.

Networks will provide a forum where we have both information and debate. This, as Beckett sees it, will be a new kind of a public sphere, whether we want it or not. He is not convinced that the old media institutions are going to

be able to cope with the new networked sphere. Actually, he thinks that the newspapers' ability to provide a public sphere was always "grossly exaggerated" anyway.

“Product of the nature of institutionalized journalism is that it saw itself in a power struggle with democratic institutions. I'm not saying that the network changes it into everyone holding hands together, I don't want that. I want a robust contestable discourse. I think networks allow better accountability through more openness. I think public sphere gets redefined as we become increasingly an information society – if we can have more information that's accessible. The function of journalism will be to interrogate those flows of information as opposed to the more personalized politics of clashing institutions. Journalists will help you get access to information and then act upon it.”

4.3.2. NOT FOR PROFIT BUT FOR INDEPENDENT REPORTING

At the moment, the most prominent academic paper published the United States on possible ways of funding journalism is Len Downie & Michael Schudson's report, *The Reconstruction of American Journalism*. It has received a lot of criticism, mainly because the US media finds it difficult to accept a need for government intervention, even in the form of tax breaks. Downie & Schudson propose a variety of ways "to help assure that the essential elements of independent, original, and credible news reporting are preserved". They suggest, for example, a bigger role for philanthropy and foundations, increased funding for public service broadcasters, creating a national fund for local news, and that universities become specialised news outlets.

Downie & Schudson promote a non-profit status for news organizations, as it would help "assure contributors and advertisers that they are primarily supporting news reporting rather than the maximisation of profits".

Bob Franklin suggests that the ownership structure of news media should be

changed thoroughly. For example, Cardiff University's School of Journalism was part of a bid to become an independently funded news consortium (IFNC). They also had a plan to buy the local newspaper, "if it goes bust". However, Franklin says that these plans are now put on hold, because the new Lib-Con government has rejected the ideas of IFNCs in favour of ultra local television and relaxing the ownership regulation for local and regional news media.

Franklin would like to see other players, such as trade unions, NGO's and community organisations, invest in not-for-profit journalism.

As soon as you make it non-profit it means you have a third more resource in your armoury. You don't have to make journalists unemployed, or send them off writing stories that may be popular – although it's not wrong to give people what they want, but it shouldn't be the driver. So it liberates you in many ways... Without journalistic functions, societies don't exist very well. You have got to make a way of delivering that in some way, so the communities can reclaim that activity for themselves.

Also Charlie Beckett sees that there is a greater role for foundations and other civil society organisations that can create various hybrids.

There needs to be an investment in the kind of institutions we want. Technological innovation does have an impact in media and society, but it's difficult to predict and control those effects. Lessons of the past tell us that we need to invest in policy terms and also resource terms.

What about co-operative newspapers? Could that be something to try?

That's never worked. Dream on, baby! There was one called News on Sunday, check it out. It was the biggest disaster ever.
(Beckett)

I did check it out. *News on Sunday*, a left-wing tabloid, only lived for a few months during the year 1987. It had a catchy slogan: “No tits but a lot of balls.” I am not thoroughly convinced, though, that this should remain the only known experiment of co-operative newspapers.

In the end, the question boils down to whether one believes that the market can support the free and independent quality press or not. Some, like Rupert Murdoch and his powerful corporation News International, often argue that only markets can provide a truly independent press. On the other hand we have public service broadcasting such as the BBC, whose scrutiny of the government is very consistent compared to most other media.

The more journalism has been a financial success, the less it has fulfilled what one might call the democratic requirements that one hopes journalism will do, and we always mutter about the public sphere, the fourth estate, the notions of critical accountability, responsibility of government, and spreading information so that citizens choices are wise and informed rather than based on nonsense and hearsay. It seems to me that (journalistic) quality is tied up with that. And that at times of resource scarcity corners get cut. (Franklin)

4.3.3. DONATIONS FROM READERS AND FOUNDATIONS

OpenDemocracy, established in 2001, is an online organization that depends on philanthropy and reader donations. Its editor-in-chief since 2006, Tony Curzon Price, says that it is in openDemocracy’s ethos to be free, but it needs donations to sustain the free model. The goal is to fund the publication entirely on reader donations.

In the beginning openDemocracy was basically a London-based magazine that just happened to be published on the web. According to Curzon Price, it was “staffed like a magazine, and had the ethos and the cost structure of a magazine”.

Since 2006 the aim has been to turn it into a “much ‘webbier’ organization, more flexible, much more lightweight”. Curzon Price says that the funding has been dramatically cut as some of the previous funders have moved on. OpenDemocracy is currently spending under £200,000 a year. Around 20 percent of this comes from small donations of under £200 or US\$200. On a typical day openDemocracy publishes around 20 edited pieces.

A few loyal supporters, like the Potter Foundation, have stayed with us and they understand what we’re doing. The goal is to transfer to reader donations. Now, there are 1,000–2,000 people who are giving. I think it should be possible to get it up to 5,000–10,000. Our authors typically write for nothing.

4.3.4. UNBUNDLING THE BUNDLE

New technology not only adds to the ongoing fragmentation of audiences but it leads to the fragmentation of newspapers – unbundling the bundle that used to be the newspaper. By ‘bundle’ I mean that the newspaper holds a collection of different kinds of content: from foreign news to sports and arts, from lifestyle and fashion to the weather. The editors could take revenue from display ads placed by car salesmen and real estate agents and use it to cover different aspects of civic life. The old business model made the bundle happen, but the Internet destroyed the logic of the bundle. Why should one flick through all these sections to get to the comics when one can just go directly to the comics?

If you started doing something 70 years ago because it made sense at the time, might not make sense today, or it can be better done by some other organization. Newspapers are not yet at the point where they think that maybe we need to change the product. You’ve got to decide whether or not we need to do all those functions. I’m constantly amazed of the amount of time and effort that goes into lifestyle and listings. (Picard)

State of the News Media 2010, an annual report on American journalism, recognizes the unbundling of news as one of the major trends of online journalism. On the Internet, consumers are not coming to newspapers for their broad coverage of various issues.

“Online, it is becoming increasingly clear, consumers are not seeking out news organizations for their full news agenda. They are hunting the news by topic and by event and grazing across multiple outlets. This is changing both the finances and the culture of newsrooms. When revenue is more closely tied to each story, what is the rationale for covering civic news that is consequential but has only limited interest? The data also are beginning to show a shift away from interest in local news toward more national and international topics as people have more access to such information, which may have other effects on local dynamics. (State of News Media 2010, Major Trends)

George Brock, of City University, says that news organisations need to stop thinking in a print habit. The most important thing now is to find a way of sustaining journalism in a different context. He thinks that odds are against a pay-wall for all content, but to have some content free and some behind a pay-wall might work for some papers.

“I think there will be more people willing to pay than we generally think. I think experiments will show that people are prepared to pay for some things, just not for the slightly devalued particular sort of packages they've come to associate with newspapers. That was a very successful economic formula for a very long time but that particular formula doesn't work anymore, partly because the digital technology disaggregates the bundle, splits up the content. There is information on the web for which people are prepared to buy, but it's not the bundle.

Perhaps surprisingly, Google's CEO Eric Schmidt does see a future for the bundle:

As for the very idea of paid subscriptions: How can they have a future in the Google-driven world of atomized spot information? "It is probable that unbundling has a limit," Eric Schmidt said. Something basic in human nature craves surprise and new sources of stimulation. Few people are "so monomaniacal," as he put it, that they will be interested only in a strict, predefined list of subjects. Therefore people will still want to buy subscriptions to sources of information and entertainment – "bundles," the head of the world's most powerful unbundler said – and advertisers will still want to reach them. (James Fallows: How to Save the News, Atlantic Monthly, June 2010)

4.3.5. MUCH TALK ABOUT GOOGLE

Stephen Coleman believes that at least a short-term business model can be found by working together with web organizations like Facebook and Google. However, Coleman fears that in the long-term these companies will swallow up news organizations and reshape them, whereas "we as a society want them to exist in something like their current form". The local press, especially, needs improvement and public money.

I think once you cross that line, when you accept that the only way you can have a public policy that stimulates quality journalism is getting people to pay for it through taxation. I don't think there is another way. Then you can start thinking of ways how to do it.

Google might actually come up with a plan. Quality journalism and reliable information is crucial to Google, because without it there isn't much relevant and valuable content to link to.

James Fallows writes in *Atlantic Monthly* (6/10) about Google's efforts to help the news business find its path in the online world. At Google, print is widely ignored. Google's people believe that online news can be made sustainable when display ads online become more valuable and advertisers learn how to use the more targeted advertising potential of the Internet. Eventually people will spend more time on news websites, and this will bring in more display ads. For now, the 'per eyeball' revenue from display ads online is much lower than in print, but it should increase when the transition period is over and things settle. This idea is more or less what the newspaper industry has come to know as the 'Rusbridger cross'.

Google has another thing in common with Alan Rusbridger and the Guardian: continuous experimenting. Google's concept of 'permanent beta' is closely related to the Guardian's principle of constantly trying new things out online.

The other implicitly connecting theme is that an accumulation of small steps can together make a surprisingly large difference. The forces weighing down the news industry are titanic. In contrast, some of the proposed solutions may seem disappointingly small-bore. But many people at Google repeated a maxim from Clay Shirky, of New York University, in an essay last year about the future of the news: "Nothing will work, but everything might." (Fallows 2010)

Google has practical experiments going on with hundreds of news organizations, such as the Associated Press, the (American) Public Broadcasting System, The New York Times, and local TV stations and papers. One of these ideas is called Living stories, "essentially a way to rig Google's search results to favor serious, sustained reporting". All articles about an important topic, like the war in Afghanistan, can be grouped on one page with links to all of the paper's coverage on the issue. The Google Living stories source code is now available free online for any organization to use.

Another project is the Fast Flip, "an attempt to approximate the inviting aspects of leafing through a magazine". It loads the contents of a magazine as highly

detailed photos of pages as a whole, so that the reader can leaf through them, imitating the experience of turning paper pages. A third Google experiment that may well prove to be useful for newspapers is building a YouTube Direct video channel on the website. Rather than attracting revenue, the purpose of this idea is to create engagement among the audience.

The three pillars of the new online business model, as I heard them invariably described, are distribution, engagement, and monetization. That is: getting news to more people, and more people to news-oriented sites; making the presentation of news more interesting, varied, and involving; and converting these larger and more strongly committed audiences into revenue, through both subscription fees and ads. Conveniently, each calls on areas of Google's expertise. "Not knowing as much about the news business as the newspapers do, it is unlikely that we can solve the problems better than they can," Nikesh Arora told me. "But we are willing to support any formal and informal effort that newspapers or journalists more generally want to make to come up with new sources of money." (Fallows 2010)

4.3.6. KEEPING CITIZENS INFORMED

I asked my interviewees whether or not they are worried about how to keep citizens informed online, and whether people are better or worse informed online. We also talked about the role of the press in a democracy and the trends of fragmentation and specialized or targeted content, as described in Chapter 3. Everyone I interviewed completely agreed with the notion that journalism is central to democracy, but the question about fragmentation on the Internet divided opinions.

I think that is partly true but I also think people get multiple sources and viewpoints on the web, I think people are more likely to see what the Daily Mail says about the election, not just the Guardian. It's not just an echo chamber of looking for people who share your views. (Rusbridger)

If it were the only story it would be greatly detrimental to democracy. The loss of the single public, universal information... But the story of the Internet is not quite as depressing as that. There is a lot of empirical evidence. People do stumble across a lot of information, often through other people, and links. The early adopters were more isolated online, but now the reverse is undoubtedly the case. If you go online a lot, you know more people etc. It doesn't happen because of the bundle of news but it does happen through what sociologists call weak links. Through those weak links you stumble on things. The information route is far more complicated than we usually think. It's very bumpy. You'll be just as disturbed and shocked out of your prejudices online as you were offline, it just goes in a different manner. (Coleman)

Tony Curzon Price of Open Democracy knows that his website naturally appeals to a group of people who are not disengaged. He says:

It's not difficult to go on YouTube and find the channels that probably do appeal to the disengaged. They will probably spend their time there rather than on a public broadcaster channel that feeds them some paternalistic view of what they should be seeing. The long tail is energising some groups of politically engaged people and it's offering the disengaged people the opportunity never to be involved in political processes. There we go.

Fragmentation of audiences may produce huge knowledge gaps between people who are interested in news and know how to use the Internet to find the best sources available, and people who don't have the will, the know-how or the time. But, we have to ask what did we know about those knowledge gaps before the Internet?

“ There was the comforting idea of the newspaper, and that people are not just flicking over scanning the headlines for any notion of sex and then going to the sports pages. We know so much more about people’s information browsing habits now that we’re measuring them. Probably a lot of quality newspapers have been shocked to know how little their serious pieces are being read. A serious piece on (The Guardian’s) Comment is Free is read by 3,000 people, what kind of an audience is that? It’s leisure, lifestyle and sports that people actually read about. It’s a sad realisation, which brings us back to the point where we started from. What’s the role of the intelligentsia? Intelligentsia has been able to live in a comforting bubble of its own importance. Google analytics has done terrible things! (Curzon Price)

4.3.7. DO NEWSPAPERS NEED SAVING?

An important question related to the above discussion is whether traditional media organizations should be saved if and when they are on the brink of extinction. Do newspapers need bailing out because they do an irreplaceable job in informing citizens on matters they didn’t know they needed to know? Institutions like newspapers can allow journalists to investigate. They protect their employees in dangerous situations and in courtrooms. Freelancers rarely have this protection, and bloggers or citizen journalists don’t have it at all.

“ I don’t think that measures of support should be aimed at propping up broken business models that are clearly past their shelf life. They should do it (subsidise) in a platform-agnostic way so that the best experiments on most suitable platforms are most likely to succeed. (Brock)

Like George Brock, Robert Picard and Tony Curzon Price think that old organizations should not be saved. Picard points out that we don’t need the press, but the functions of the press. So the question is whether new forms of providing these functions will surface before the old ones keel over? There is

no evidence of this happening yet. So the key question still remains: who is going to protect journalists if we lose the old institutions?

The newspaper was an economic unit, a unit of production. We know that the models of production are changing and being massively transformed by technology, so there's no point in preserving the newspaper. I think that there are journalistic cultures, journalistic ethics et cetera that are very important and one wouldn't want them to go. Important thing to think about is how that culture and ethic gets transferred from newspapers to the new ecology. I'm not particularly worried about where that money's going to come from because I think that need is generally widely recognized. (Curzon Price)

Many are placing their hopes on the old institutions finding a way to adapt so that they can continue providing journalism and its democratic functions in a new, commercially sustainable way. But some, like Stephen Coleman of Leeds University, think that public funding is the only way to save quality journalism.

The Guardian was first to take the Internet seriously, but it can't survive economically. You then have to come up with quite different policies, not market driven, because the market cannot solve the problem. For maintaining spaces online and offline where one can do quality journalism, I think the bottom line is that you have to have public funding. But that's unpopular. No political party is going to argue for it. The public might argue for it, if they actually recognize what they're in danger of losing. (Coleman)

4.3.8. NICHE PRODUCTS FOR ELITE AUDIENCES

Many of my interviewees think that the newspaper of the future is a niche product for small elites. In 10–15 years' time there will still be newspapers, and “luxury niche might be a way of describing what they will become”, says

George Brock. They will have older, smaller audiences, and they will cost more per copy. They will no longer be a mass medium.

I think newspapers are going to get more specialized. The generalized is not working. It'll go for an even more niche audience, maybe 20–25 percent of the population. It's not happening over night but over 10–15 years we'll see the change. There's no way of doing something for everyone. You can't afford to waste so many pages. If stock tables take up to seven pages, and there's one paid ad – kill them. Kill them if they're not paying for it. Reduce the size of the paper, make it more focused. And frankly, the person who needs stock tables will go to the financial publications. (Picard)

Many have argued that charging for content online only works for specialist publications such as the *Financial Times*. However, also general newspapers could develop a niche for themselves by doing something infinitely better than anyone else. It would be silly to try and charge for celebrity gossip, because there is an abundance of it available for free. The niches that people are willing to pay for are likely to be found at the high-brow end of newspaper content. Natalie Fenton thinks that a lot of (British) quality journalism is already elitist, and it does speak to a certain well-educated class of people:

The BBC doesn't have that elitism because it tries very hard not to. So I keep coming back to public service broadcasting, because if you could translate something like that into print you would have a quality journalism that could do both things. It's a mistake to say that quality journalism is elite journalism, you can have quality journalism that speaks to a mass audience and brings in a wide range of people, but it has to be re-imagined from what it is now. Not just about getting the same old crusty elite experts giving the standard elite views all the time, that's more of the same. Opening that up and say: we do accept there are more views and we do want to get people involved and

interested. Actually saying that we are going to preserve a certain proportion of this paper for news that is for the public good and public interest I think is critical because that is getting squeezed all the time.

Evaluative point of view, not elitist – the distinction between what people need and what people want. They may need a lot of background to understand the current situation. And they won't necessarily seek that out because they don't have time and the inclination but if it's there in a newspaper it will filter through. Even if you're watching a news program on TV, you get the range. Screen and mouse, easy come easy go. Newspapers will eventually move to charging for some online content, which will shut off those specialist sections for a vast range of people, and that's hugely problematic.

4.3.9. CIVIC COMMONS ONLINE

Stephen Coleman has, together with Jay Blumler, suggested a 'civic commons' of the cyberspace. He explains:

I would like to see a space online in which citizens can do certain things like talk to one another and talk to their representatives, but representatives not only can do but they have to do that, it's part of their functional accountability. It's part of the requirement to answer people's questions, to engage in debate. Actually most of those requirements are already there but in a fragmented and incoherent fashion. We think that this needs to be institutionalized, we think that just as the BBC in many respects has institutionalized the best of what radio and TV can do, we think that there is now a scope to institutionalize the best that the Internet can do. It's not to replace all the other things but to supplement them.

Some critics have argued that the online civic commons would be an attempt to create a homogenized public sphere in a radically multi-voiced modern system. Coleman accepts the critique.

I think they're right, but Jay and I came up with this very old-fashioned institutionalized model of a single public. And I still believe that you have to have a single public, notion of a public, how would you know what you're talking about... however, it is multi-vocal, networked, diffused. The notion of the CC as we developed it has got to reflect much more this idea of not only what the public has to say but also who the public is, who's in or out. It's more complicated than we originally thought. The principle, the strategic argument for the CC is still the same, however you do it, whatever is right for the 21st century, you cannot have this absolute fragmentation, where nobody gets to enter the public space, in relation to democracy that's just got to be wrong. That would be like having a parliament in every street corner.

Coleman calls for establishing an agency that would be funded by the government but independent and accountable to the public – much like the BBC. Coleman and Blumler have not developed technical solutions as to how this project would work in practice. They are only arguing for the principle.

4.4. QUALITY CRITERIA

In my list of questions for the interviews, I included this following set of quality criteria, drawn from the previously reviewed studies (see chapter 2).

- a) accuracy
- b) independence
- c) credibility
- d) high ratio of staff-written articles as opposed to wire service copy
- e) high amount of editorial (non-advertising) content
- f) high ratio of interpretation and background of news

The first three are more or less in common for all research on quality that I've read. The last three are Leo Bogart's three top measures of quality in journalism. I chose them because they have been included in several studies (such as Lacy et al) after Bogart. I asked the interviewees to tell me which ones they think are most important to the quality of journalism in a new media ecosystem. Are the quality criteria developed during the history of printed newspapers still valid in the era of Internet?

My interviewees are surprisingly unanimous about these criteria. Most of them would raise context to the top – or, high ratio of interpretation and background of news, as Bogart formulated it. The amount of editorial content compared to advertising doesn't seem to be a valid point anymore. Everyone leaves it towards the bottom of the list.

Beckett would add transparency and Juan Senor wants to include exclusivity or original reporting. Alan Rusbridger and Bob Franklin are both apprehensive about comparing staff-written articles to wire service copy and other content produced outside the newsroom. Rusbridger doesn't want to think that only staff journalists can do quality journalism. In Franklin's view, a freesheet filled wire copy is a better quality newspaper than a red-top tabloid.

Bob Franklin pointed out that good writing is not among the list, which made me realise how little concern there is for the standard of language in the research I've read about quality. I can only assume that this is because it is taken as a given.

4.4.1. CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

George Brock puts it like this: "There should be a difference between journalism and information." Until very recently, all news media did a lot of selection. They distilled the news from masses of information. In the world of the Internet and digital news operations, in which space is no longer limited, selection doesn't work in quite the same way anymore. The traditional media are rapidly losing their role as gatekeepers when new sources for news emerge on the Internet. During political elections, for instance, parties and candidates can now have direct access to the voting public via their own websites and social

media communities. Nevertheless, we still live in a world where there is more news than ever to be consumed within the same 24 hours as ever. There is still room for selection, editing and interpretation.

“ Defence of quality journalism is much better conducted if journalists are upfront about the fact that yes, they are relaying news to people but, that intrinsic to that, is what I like to call sense-making. They make judgments about what is important for people to know. Selection is what journalists do, so to defend journalism, we might as well be open about it. (Brock)

What professional journalists ought to be doing is giving context to news. This means analysis, interpretation, criticism – creating understanding and knowledge. Any medium can adhere to fairness, accuracy, balance and so on, but that does not guarantee high quality journalism.

“ Newspapers are packed with information but very little knowledge and understanding. Journalists know how to say things well et cetera, but unless they have special skills, they don't know anything. There are medical or science sites talking straight to the public. Journalists will have to become much more specialized. They've got to be experts on South East Asia, the banking industry et cetera in order to ask the right questions and do the comprehensive stories and background so that what they're conveying is knowledge.

“ In the US there is a good study of all the stories of the sub prime. The media was lauding it. The only person raising this issue was a blogger in Ohio, who was a mortgage specialist. Those are the questionable areas, and there are not enough people looking at the background. There was not a single critical article about Bernie Madoff. Nobody was asking the right questions. (Picard)

Charlie Beckett sees new possibilities for context in the digital era.

Hypertextuality has “potential for an extended context”. Online, it may not be enough to just offer a two-dimensional description of an issue. An article can contain links to other points of view, or to other sources, and previous stories on the issue in addition to video and audio streams.

“ It’s a stream rather than an object. It can be constantly updated and provisional. The way people write online is different, and I suspect some people find it disturbing. On news channels there is the phrase ‘this is what we know so far’ or ‘never wrong for long’. The idea is to tell a bit of a story and then correct and add. What I was told when I joined the BBC, was to get all the facts and report them. It’s a stream now. Inevitably that will affect your authority. (Beckett)

5

CONCLUSIONS: 7 WAYS TO SAVE QUALITY JOURNALISM

5.1. THE CRISIS OF TRADITIONAL MEDIA IS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY

TO GO BACK TO THE CORE PURPOSE OF JOURNALISM. News organizations need to reinvent themselves, and they need to start by defining the purpose of their journalism. Are they going to commit to high quality journalism and public service or not? Are they serving the public or shareholders? Is serving democracy a defining value for the organization? Or will they treat the journalism they produce as a mere commodity?

In the new century, one of the most profound questions for democratic society is whether an independent press survives. The answer will depend on whether journalists have the clarity and conviction to articulate what an independent press means, and whether, as citizens, the rest of us care.

Kovach & Rosenstiel: *The Elements of Journalism* (2001, 14)

The need to articulate the values of an independent press to the general public is even more pressing now than almost a decade ago, when Kovach & Rosenstiel's seminal book was published. Professional high quality journalism is now under threat both from the outside (the Internet, the broken business model) and the inside (staff cuts, impoverished newsrooms).

A democracy can do without newspapers, but it cannot exist without quality journalism. The problem at the moment is, as Clay Shirky puts it, that "the old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place". We need to make sure that during the revolution of journalism we don't lose its most important standards and values.

"We are seeing for the first time the rise of a market-based journalism increasingly divorced from the idea of civic responsibility", Kovach & Rosenstiel wrote in 2001. In 2010, there is hope yet that the perils of traditional media will force

news organizations understand what really matters. I sincerely think that journalism needs to renew its core purpose as a public service, because if it fails to do so, it may well become obsolete. Furthermore, we need to communicate this purpose to the public.

Without a democratic mission journalism will be reduced to a mere commodity – like much of it is right now.

5.2.

CONTENT MUST COME BEFORE BUSINESS MODELS. The discussion concerning the future of journalism has been revolving around the broken business model and the desperate search for a new one. I'm afraid it may well be that there isn't a profitable model for the same old product anymore.

“Round and round this goes, with the people committed to saving newspapers demanding to know ‘If the old model is broken, what will work in its place?’ To which the answer is: Nothing. Nothing will work. There is no general model for newspapers to replace the one the internet just broke. With the old economics destroyed, organizational forms perfected for industrial production have to be replaced with structures optimized for digital data.”
(Clay Shirky: Newspapers and thinking the unthinkable, 2009)

Content must come before business models, for business reasons too. If you claim to offer high quality, then you need to invest in it. If you are thinking of charging for content, then you have to have the kind of content that people are willing to pay for. The Internet does not have reader loyalty like newspapers used to have. If you are not providing the high quality that you promised, you are in danger of eroding your brand, which in turn will damage your business. Print subscribers will forgive lapses in quality for a while before they abandon you – especially in local markets – but online readers will just click on to the next website, not thinking twice about it.

The Sun does celebrity gossip better than the *Daily Telegraph*. Why go after the readers who are not interested in serious news, and alienate your core

audience? Readers decide to buy or subscribe to a newspaper for its editorial content. If they think they're buying a smart quality paper, they are going to be disappointed if they get gossip and lazy journalism instead.

We make a newspaper for the readers, and we sell the space in the paper for advertisers who want to reach our readers. We want to keep both, the readers and the advertisers, happy. If we alienate the readers, there is no business. Therefore content and its quality should be of highest importance to the management of news media.

- 5.3.** **UNBUNDLE THE BUNDLE.** There is a significant change in how content is arranged (by search engines) when we move from print to online. The bundle that is known as the general newspaper doesn't work online. It doesn't work for advertisers, hence it doesn't generate enough revenue to sustain online news organizations. It doesn't work for readers either, because the bundle is not the way they search for information on the Web.

A point of view to consider is that newspapers were never in the business of selling journalism, but in the business of selling classified ads. That business is now gone. The old newspaper business was highly profitable for a long time. The newspaper as we know it is a mixture of all sorts of things that don't necessarily have to appear in the same product. It is rather arbitrary when you think about it: why should a newspaper have everything from news to sports to comics to horoscopes to weather? Simply because advertisements made this bundle possible. Newspapers should rethink how they portray their content both online and in print. Is it time to cut something out? Do we need to produce the stock table or the weather anymore, or are people looking for these things elsewhere? What are they looking for on our website?

There is no way back to the remarkably high profit margins that newspaper owners got used to. Maybe accepting smaller profits, or indeed no profits at all, is the way forward, as many people in the US – the epicentre of the crisis of traditional media – now believe. Changing the structures of ownership may well work for some organizations.

Find something that your medium can do really well, and it may still pay for the news coverage of local politics and other important things that will not pay for themselves. Quality coverage was always subsidised anyway. *The Times* is subsidised by *The Sun*. The Baghdad bureau is subsidised by other kinds of news that attract advertising. Newspapers who want to continue to have broad coverage of news will have to find a completely new way to cross-subsidise. They may try partnerships with other organizations (see *Guardian Extra* and *Times Plus*) or develop other products to sell in addition to news. A good Web archive may generate some revenue.

“ And, before anyone makes the obvious point that we are trust-owned and loss-making, let me make the equally obvious point that all the Scott Trust does is to enable the *Guardian* to compete on the same more or less level playing field as a host of other loss-making papers, whether their own cross-subsidies come from large international media businesses, Russian oligarch billions or unrelated companies within the same ownership or group. (Alan Rusbridger: Does journalism exist?)”

Consider what it is that your medium does the best and concentrate on that. Is it something the audience might be willing to pay for? If your paper is well known for its outstanding arts writing, then do that even better. You may be able to charge for that and leave the rest of your online content free. Perhaps you can find a new way of bundling and cross-subsidising by finding your own quality niche.

5.4. MAKE YOUR JOURNALISM INDISPENSABLE AND RELEVANT AGAIN.

Here’s a tricky question: What do professional media do that others cannot? It no longer has a monopoly on news events, press releases or even scoops. Anyone can publish anything online at any given time. Access to an abundance of information is now easily available for everyone, and mostly free of charge. How can news media compete with news aggregators, bloggers, citizen journalists and social media?

The new journalist is no longer deciding what the public should know. She is helping audiences make order out of it. This does not mean simply adding interpretation or analysis to news reporting. The first task of the new journalist/sense maker, rather, is to verify what information is reliable and then order it so people can grasp it efficiently. (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001, 24)

George Brock put it this way in my interview: “There should be a difference between journalism and information”. If you can offer your readers something they cannot just simply ‘google’ for, then you have something to sell. This requires that your journalism is something more than just an answer to ‘who, what, where and when’. The more important questions to answer are ‘why’ and ‘how’ and ‘what next’. We can call this context, background, interpretation or analysis. It should be surprising, interesting, and smart. By no means should it ever be dull.

This is already the direction that some newspapers are taking as they are becoming more magazine-like. *The Independent* has named its pullout second part ‘Viewspaper’ – in the paper’s editor-in-chief Simon Kelner’s definition, “a daily magazine supplement which includes Britain’s most wide-ranging opinion, award-winning commentary, more space for your letters, the finest writing on cultural matters, a daily essay and in-depth features on the environment, media, science, technology and history”. *The Observer* now has a thick second section called ‘Review’, a name that has connotations of the *London or New York Review of Books*. The French newspaper *Libération* now publishes long-form, in-depth articles with emphasis on background and analysis of news every day.

Many quality newsmagazines – *The Economist*, *The Spectator*, *The Atlantic Monthly* – are doing well despite the recession. Perhaps the style of magazines is the way forward for newspapers. Many of them already publish glossy magazine supplements on weekends. Some newspapers may actually reinvent themselves as magazines, providing more long-form, in-depth stories instead of lots of news in brief.

“It’s very late, so why pretend to call it a newspaper, why not a review?” asks

Charlie Beckett. “Newspapers haven’t been in the breaking news business for about ten years.”

I am not saying that a blogger, for instance, is incapable of providing context for news as well as a professional journalist. However, professional media should be relentless and continuous in its news coverage and analysis whereas citizen journalists normally have a day job elsewhere and only write about things they happen to be enthusiastic about. They can provide great analysis, but it will be occasional rather than comprehensive. There is also another thing that news organizations can do that individual bloggers seldom have: financial and legal protection against libel charges and political pressure.

Citizens and media professionals can work together, and indeed they should. Journalism is more and more a conversation rather than a lecture. Old media needs to give up the patronising attitude and open up their journalism to citizens; invite them in. Nevertheless, in all the excitement caused by ‘mutualisation’ and sharing, it’s probably good to remember that the number of people who actually want to contribute to journalism is tiny compared to those who just want to sit back and read what the writer has come up with. I suspect that we will soon see a backlash against the use of user-generated-content in professional media amongst the most knowledgeable readership. They will choose the medium which has the most interesting original content to offer.

- 5.5. JOURNALISTS MUST SPECIALISE.** Who are the people who can produce the kind of journalism that will make your medium stand out? They will probably know how to use tools of audiovisual multimedia, and they will have a set of skills that allows them to be truly – to use a fashionable phrase – platform-agnostic in their work. But this is not the most important requirement of the new journalist. She will have to be an expert, someone who knows something really well. She’ll be able to use the wisdom of the crowds and the power of networks better than most people, because the crowds will respect her expertise. She will create a following, perhaps even a community around her stories.

The people I have talked to at *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and the BBC, all have told me that specialists will be needed more than ever. The Times and the BBC say their journalists are mostly specialists, and they have just a few general reporters.

To people who want to become journalists I say study a science, maths, accountancy, a language – know something really well. In a world of complex information, one of the problems of journalism is that we're just not literate enough. It's been like that for a long time, but we just got away with it! I think there's a fantastic opportunity, it's a demand of the market that journalists become much more specialized and knowledgeable about stuff.
(Charlie Beckett)

Since 2001, roughly a third of American journalists have lost their jobs. Staff cuts come particularly in specialty beats like science and the arts, suburban government and statehouse coverage (State of the News Media 2010, Key Findings). To me it seems that this is exactly the wrong way to go. I would choose the opposite direction and see how many people in the newsroom are just churning out recycled stories from other mediums. I would let them go – or free them from their desks to find out if they could create some original content.

I asked the Guardian's chief arts writer Charlotte Higgins how worried she is about the future of her profession. She puts her trust in the value of specialist knowledge:

Expertise is a real property that can't easily be replicated. I have this value that is that I know a hell of a lot about this tiny not very significant subject. So I cling on to the hope that expertise will always be a valued commodity and people will be pay money to have a bit of it.

5.6.

INVEST IN QUALITY – IT IS THE KEY. It is difficult to prove that quality keeps readers, let alone that it brings in revenue. However, I predict a longer life for the respected news organization whose brand is valued and trusted than for the paper that takes the route of tabloidisation. Gossip, celebrity news, and links to cute animal videos are everywhere, but smart and interesting journalism is harder to find. If you don't have quality what do you have? Just more of the same as everyone else has.

I believe that the market alone cannot guarantee high quality journalism. Newspapers' huge profitability of recent decades was an anomaly. Circumstances have changed, and so should newspapers. For quality papers, lowering the standards of reporting will only alienate the core audience who are used to expecting high quality.

Political scientist Robert M. Entman has a useful categorisation of the media: 1) traditional journalism, 2) tabloid journalism, 3) advocacy journalism, and 4) entertainment. These categories have different levels of commitment to five key journalistic standards.

The first four are accuracy, balance, holding government accountable, and separation of news from editorial and advertising. The fifth standard is the degree to which there is a determination to maximise profit. (Jones 2009, 43)

Indeed, the financial success of the news organization is essential to the journalistic mission. But traditional news organizations have operated with the belief that seeking to maximize profit would be both bad and wrong – bad, in the long term, for business, as news was thought to be a key drawing card for their audience, and wrong, in a moral sense, because the traditional news organizations had a social role as well as a commercial one. (Jones 2009, 45)

News organizations have to renew their journalism radically, rearrange newsrooms and perhaps change ownership structures – but without losing the most important principles of traditional media.

There are numerous complex reasons as to why the business of journalism is in trouble. One of them, surely, is that what we are providing is no longer enough to satisfy our most devoted – and hence most critical – audience. High quality journalism must provide much more than breaking news. Quality papers will have to abandon copy-pasting and start making their own news.

- 5.7. STOP BEING AFRAID OF THE WEB.** Journalism will be digital, and a huge part of it already is. This doesn't mean the 'death of print' – as long as touch pads and other devices cannot compete with the comfortable reading experience that one gets from newspapers, magazines and books, there will be journalism as ink on paper.

As for the future of printed newspapers, I believe that they will still be around for quite some time. They will no longer be about breaking news, and they will have a smaller audience and circulation. But they can still have influence. They can hold power to account, and they should focus on just that. They should invest in investigative journalism, try and get stories and scoops that no one else has. When the investigation pays off, the story will be quoted everywhere on the web. Newspapers can still maintain their agenda-setting role if they hold on to their watchdog role.

I am no mathematician, but even I can see that there are some interesting calculations to be made concerning the costs of print. Typically, the costs of paper, printing and distribution constitute around 70 percent of the costs of a newspaper operation. At the moment, print usually provides most of the revenue as well, so cutting print is not an option for most. But if the print advertising market doesn't pick up after the recession, some news organizations might benefit from printing only from Thursdays to Sundays, or just on weekends – or even going completely digital. How about not shaving off editorial costs, like staffing and content production, but cutting down on 'dead wood' instead?

Journalists need to stop thinking that the Internet is destroying journalism. The effect is quite the opposite: never before have so many people been able to access news in such speed and volume. The appetite for news is ever-growing.

“If you think about journalism, not business models, you can become rather excited about the future. If you only think about business models you can scare yourself into total paralysis.”
(Alan Rusbridger: Does journalism exist?)

There is no straightforward correlation between the growth of Internet penetration and declining newspaper circulation. For example, the Nordic countries all have very high levels of Internet penetration but also some of the highest readership numbers in the world. However, readership in these countries is descending as well, albeit slowly compared to the US and the UK.

Everyone knows that journalism is in crisis. But, journalism was always in crisis. There was always a golden age of journalism, and it was always in the past – around the time when the person pining for it came into the profession. Whatever we may feel about the predicament that the broken business model has put us in, we have to acknowledge one thing: there has never been such an abundance of journalism, both good and bad. It’s everywhere and in every format, and mostly it’s free and easy to find. New technological tools have made publishing easier and cheaper and journalism more accessible to more people everywhere. Surely this is a good thing for democracy.

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LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Charlie Beckett, director of Polis, a journalism and society think-tank at the London School of Economics' Media and Communications Department. Author of the book Supermedia – Saving Journalism So It Can Save The World.

George Brock, Professor and Head of Journalism at City University, London. Former editor at the Times.

Stephen Coleman, Professor of Political Communication and Director of Research at the University of Leeds. Expert in e-democracy and digital citizenship.

Tony Curzon Price, editor-in-chief of openDemocracy.net.

Natalie Fenton, Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths University, London. Editor of the book New Media, Old News: Journalism and Democracy in the Digital Age.

Bob Franklin, Professor of Journalism Studies at Cardiff University. Author of the book Newszak and News Media.

Charlotte Higgins, chief arts writer of the Guardian.

Christopher McKane, managing editor of the Times.

Robert Picard, Professor of Media Economics at Jönköping International Business School.

Alan Rusbridger, editor of the Guardian.

Juan Senor, Partner at Innovation Media Consulting Group based in London. Media consultant who helps news operations to re-invent their products.

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