

The Future of Journalism

A Report on the Aspen Institute Dialogue
on the Future of Journalism

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This report is written from the perspective of an informed observer at the Dialogue on the Future of Journalism.

Unless attributed to a particular person, none of the comments or ideas contained in this report should be taken as embodying the views or carrying the endorsement of any specific participant at the Roundtable.

Foreword

When the Dialogue on the Future of Journalism convened in August 2016, the original agenda focused on an industry deeply transformed by disruptive technologies and economic challenges. The profession, at the time, seemed to have turned a corner. Participants discussed a range of issues from “how newsrooms could lead the development and adoption of essential technologies” to understanding “the changing operations of journalism in the age of networks” to highlighting rising stars in new media.

The report on *The Future of Journalism*, written by Sharon Pian Chan, captures a wide range of perspectives from conference participants, which included media experts, academics, journalists and publishers. From the promises of virtual reality to the challenges of multi-platform distribution channels to the failures of staffing a diverse, representative newsroom, the conversations honed in on a call for action. Journalism was ready to re-emerge.

The issues and challenges raised during the summer conference were prophetic. The results from the 2016 U.S. presidential election not only exposed divisions in America, but it also shed light on a much deeper set of challenges for journalism. Today, the discourse calls into question issues of trust, objectivity and the role of journalism in a democracy. How readers produce, consume and engage with information needs to be reassessed. The stories of the under-represented or under-reported can no longer be overlooked. Though not alone in this problem, the profession and industry of journalism must confront its fading reliability among Americans.

As the report presents, the symptoms for journalism’s further decline have long been present. Yet, now, there is a new sense of urgency to re-establish journalism as a necessary component to a good society. This report is a synthesis of the Dialogue as well as events post-conference, which offers both cautionary tales and prescriptive action. While much remains unknown about the future of journalism, the report’s recommendations can serve as a necessary starting point.

Acknowledgments

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THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

Sharon Pian Chan

The Future of Journalism

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Introduction

For some Americans, journalism once served the public, providing citizens with the information they needed to self-govern in a democracy. But now, the journalism of America's past has been decimated by economic and technological challenges.

The digital revolution has caused tremendous dislocation. New business models and new platforms have destroyed the print-advertising revenue that supported the practice of journalism in the past. The total workforce of journalists working in legacy and digital newsrooms fell by 40 percent in the last decade, according to the American Society of News Editors' Newsroom Employment Census.

Meanwhile, the failure of news coverage and news staffing to represent the full diversity of thought, class, race, religion and identity has apparently made the product irrelevant to large swaths of the U.S. population.

This is the fundamental question: How do we sustain the journalism needed for democracy given the business model erosion and seismic shifts in the technology landscape?

The news organizations that publish journalism content have fallen subordinate to the distribution platforms of Facebook and Google.

And finally, there is the problem of boredom. Often, news publications are perceived as just a waste of people's time.

And yet, the need for news and information tools for a citizen to participate in a democracy remains vitally important.

This is the fundamental question: *How do we sustain the journalism needed for democracy given the business model erosion and seismic shifts in the technology landscape?*

The Aspen Institute Dialogue on the Future of Journalism explored several of these technological forces while re-examining journalism values in August 2016.

“We’ve all grown up with journalism as it relates to democracy: helping people with their daily lives, helping people achieve their dreams,” said Charlie Firestone, Executive Director of the Communications and Society Program at the Aspen Institute. “But, we’re now seeing a number of challenges to those traditional values and functions.”

“If the birth of the Internet was the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, it’s only 1480....”

-Jeff Jarvis

The goal of the Dialogue was to serve as a catalyst for action. Since that dialogue, a presidential election has exposed deep divisions in America. More pertinent, people questioned the balance of coverage in the media — e.g., whether broadcast news networks may have provided free coverage to political candidates. Additionally, the dissemination of fake news via Facebook and Twitter may have influenced a small percentage of voters while algorithmic filtering of feeds by social media platforms may have created a false sense of unanimity among the electorate on both sides.

As Jeff Jarvis, professor at the City University of New York Tow Center for Journalism said, “If the birth of the Internet was the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, it’s only 1480. Journalists need to rethink the core proposition to the customer.”

Journalism as Innovator

The Internet has eliminated barriers to competition and created a fertile field for media start-ups.

“You never had an opportunity where the Aspen Gazette could compete with *The New York Times*. *The New York Times* could get its newspaper in Aspen, but Aspen could never get its paper in the New York bodega,” said Bryn Mooser, a former Peace Corps volunteer and Vice President at AOL, who started a media company called Ryot. “[Now] everyone has the ability to compete with the big boys. Maybe even have an advantage without the big office building. There was a chance for a little guy to move quickly,” said Mooser. “These systems are changing really rapidly and quickly. If we can use them and exploit them there are great opportunities within that to tell stories.”

The Internet and other digital technologies have also forced the news industry to adapt and change, sometimes extremely successfully, sometimes not. Journalists are embracing innovation and experimenting with emerging new technologies from virtual reality to artificial intelligence.

Immersive Technologies. For example, a new video technology, 360-degree video, allows the viewer to pan the full field of vision around the camera — in front, to the side and behind. Ryot used this technology to produce a 360 video of the balloon drop during the Democratic National Convention.

Ryot has also moved aggressively into virtual reality. Virtual reality creates an experience that combines three-dimensional video, sound and 360-degree cameras to allow the viewer to move around within the video when wearing a headset. The company produced a virtual reality experience of the Nepal earthquake, for instance, where the viewer could walk around the ruins of Kathmandu.

Established media companies are also investing resources in these new technologies. *The New York Times* distributed Google Cardboard virtual reality (VR) headsets with its home-delivered print edition to publicize the creation of its first VR project on the global refugee crisis. *The Guardian US* created a VR experience called 6x9 where viewers could experience life inside a solitary confinement cell at a prison.

“We had been covering youth solitary confinement on Rikers (Island prison) in traditional ways,” said Joaquin Alvarado, Chief Executive Officer of Reveal/Center for Investigative Reporting. “But there was nothing like the emotional power of experiencing life inside a solitary cell.”

These tools also provide an opportunity to create greater engagement and trust with the audience. Consumer Reports, for example, partnered with virtual-reality company Oculus to create a VR experience. “For us it was about transparency,” said Marta L. Tellado, President and CEO of Consumer Reports. “Consumers want to see behind the curtain. Oculus allowed us to bring them into the lab and onto the test track so that they can see firsthand what goes into the work we do.”

The downside is that producing virtual reality video is still expensive. Stitching together film to create a seamless virtual environment is a resource-intensive process.

When evaluating whether these new immersive technologies are worth doing, *The Washington Post* asks, what does it do for the story? “There’s been a lot of attention to VR and 360, the latest cool thing. We can’t do the latest cool thing just because it’s cool,” said Marty Baron, editor. “What does it do for the story?”

To help news organizations reduce the costs and risk of these projects, the Knight Foundation commissioned a report on the best practices for virtual reality, which was written by Nonny de la Pena. That report can help determine how to evaluate the affordability of a project before starting it.

“The goal is to come up with a set of best practices around narrative, around the impact,” said Jennifer Preston, Vice President of Journalism at the Knight Foundation. “Who is viewing these experiences? They do evoke tremendous emotion. What are the guidelines that can be put in place?”

And then there’s the question of whether virtual reality is worthwhile when evaluated as a cost of customer acquisition.

“These tools require resources, and it does not work at the level of a metropolitan newspaper. Video doesn’t really work for most news organizations,” said Richard Gingras, Vice President of News at Google. “\$50 advertising CPM (cost per thousand) for a video doesn’t work unless that video draws 200,000 views. The production costs are too high, the shelf-life too low, and the audiences not large enough.”

The exploration around VR is an unaffordable luxury for a local, independent newspaper.

Storytelling. Beyond the video tools of virtual reality and 360-video, journalists have more storytelling tools than they know what to do with.

Twenty years ago, there were only a few elements to covering a story in print: the main narrative text story, a headline, a photo and a graphic, perhaps a sidebar. “Today there are many more tools for storytelling. I used to keep count. I stopped at 60,” said Tom Rosenstiel, Executive Director of the American Press Institute. “The challenge of being a great editor or a great journalist is being able to pick which tool to use, knowing that this story will mean something to people in this form. That’s a lot harder than saying it in a sidebar and a news story.”

There are basic digital tools such as annotating speeches and fact-checking in real time. *The Washington Post* does that for every Donald Trump speech. It invites readers to provide the analysis themselves. “Those things are hugely popular, and they don’t get talked about in the way 360 or VR does, but those tools are powerful,” Baron said.

The most cutting-edge tools, like virtual reality, may not be what serves the public at that moment. After all, the most powerful videos of 2016 did not include any of the virtual-reality or 360-degree video projects mentioned above.

“I wonder whether with these tools we’re still elevating the primacy of the journalist’s perspective,” said Sharon Pian Chan, Vice President of Innovation, Product and Development at *The Seattle Times*. “What were the most important videos of this year? They weren’t virtual reality or 360 video. They were videos shot with mobile phones of black men dying during routine police stops.”

“The most important role the journalist played was not producing a virtual reality experience,” Chan continued, “but reporting on the context of what was in the video. What happened between the police officer and a man before the camera was turned on? What happened in the justice system after the camera was turned off? How did the community react? Journalism is about getting as full a story as possible, not just what happened in the video.”

The New Forms of Journalism: Mobile, Podcasting, Reporting & Automation

Seventy percent of the globe now uses a mobile phone. By 2020, that will rise to 80 percent. By 2025, with the advent of the Internet of Things, there will be 50 billion devices — for a total of five billion connected humans on earth.¹

“The poorest people in the world will eventually have smartphones,” said Gabby Stern, Director of Media & External Relations at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “This allows others to reach and engage directly with those facing challenges, to get a better sense of what would help them lead healthy, productive lives.”

Later this year, fifth-generation wireless trials known as 5G will begin, eventually enabling the delivery of data at gigabit speeds to mobile devices.

Mobile as a public information broadcast network. The evolution of mobile technology represents the continuing opportunity to share public information in the 21st century, just as radio and television did in the previous century.

Frieda B. Hennock, the first female commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission, created public broadcasting in the 1950s. Her work laid the foundation for establishment of National Public Radio stations and children’s television on public television.

Mobile presents the same opportunities and public responsibility for dissemination of public knowledge, observed Joaquin Alvarado, CEO of Reveal/Center for Investigative Reporting. “The same questions asked of airwaves for television and radio apply to information distributed on mobile devices,” he continued. “Who owns the network? Who is building the network? How are the public interests served or not served? If you’re a young person in Mississippi can you even afford the unlimited data plan to get access to *The Washington Post*?”

Podcasting. Podcasting has emerged as a promising opportunity for national public radio on mobile phones. WNYC has 50 million subscribers to its podcasts. WYNC is entirely supported by underwriting.

The high advertising rates that podcasts are generating even has some in public radio wondering whether it’s a bubble. “I keep asking

myself whether we are in a podcast boom or a podcast bubble. It's probably a bubble because we have no data. The CPMs are so high but they may be artificially high," said J.J. Yore, General Manager of WAMU in Washington, D.C. "Podcasts are like the newspapers when we delivered the whole thing, but we didn't know whether someone read a story on (page) C3."

"The unique thing about podcasting is it follows you around all the time. I think of podcasting as hours upon hours that can be media-tized...."

-Julia Turner

Many believe podcasts represent a new commercial and content frontier for media companies. "The unique thing about podcasting is it follows you around all the time," said Julia Turner, Editor-in-Chief of *Slate*. "I think of podcasting as hours upon hours that can be media-tized.... It makes me think it's not a bubble."

The vast majority of podcast distribution and consumption is, however, controlled by Apple's iTunes marketplace. As one participant noted, until meaningful distribution channels open up, publishers are in a pretty weak negotiating position unless your company's name is Apple.

Reporting and Automation. Those 50 billion devices in 2025 will gather information on the five billion connected humans.

"The ancient job of journalism was to gather information. The gathering of information at the City Council — that will be done with technology," said Reed Hundt, former Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). For instance, the city council meeting would be captured by video, broadcast online and stored in a searchable archive by any citizen.

Intel has distributed 360 video technology to NBA and MLB that could replace the role of umpires in calling plays, Hundt continued. "Now you watch the umpires gather around the screen. That's an algorithm in 15 seconds. They're what journalism can't be thinking it should be doing: Playing an umpire role," Hundt said. "If there are only

7 plots . . . if a computer can beat the best player at Go, it can fit any story into the best plot.”

The Washington Post and the *Associated Press* are using automation technology to generate stories about corporate earnings and sports game results. Still, the Post recognizes that machine-generated stories cannot serve as a substitute for the work of a reporter.

...news has become a commodity. The story that “this happened” is a commodity. Analysis, experience and context are the premium service.

“We’re going to have a machine tell us what the scores of the Olympics are. But, I don’t know how you go to a city council meeting, and it tells you what happened. There’s no way a machine can tell you that,” said Marty Baron, Executive Editor at *The Washington Post*. “A good reporter will figure it out, not just what happened at the meeting but what happened before the meeting. I don’t know that there’s a machine that can do that,” he said.

Even Google still sees the need for journalists. “We at Google have invested a lot in supporting verification. We were a founding member of a group called the First Draft Coalition dedicated to developing best practices for journalists around verification and how to approach misinformation online,” said Olivia Ma, Head of Partnerships at Google News Lab. “I don’t see any time in the near-future where we’re not going to need journalists to step in and help sort fact from fiction.”

If machine-generated stories are not able to replace all the news writing done now, the trend toward automation requires a brand new consideration.

Many think news has become a commodity. The story that “this happened” is a commodity. Analysis, experience and context are the premium service.

“Externally focused journalism is helicoptering in and telling people what happened,” said Jeff Jarvis. “Internally focused journalism says, ‘What does this community need to meet its goals?’”

The Changing Operations of Journalism in the Age of Networks

Printed newspapers and broadcast news used to have a near monopoly on selling advertising to local audiences. Today, 85 cents of every dollar of ad spending is going to Facebook and Google.

To continue to bring traffic to its advertising platform, Facebook is actively courting media companies to publish content directly on Facebook's owned and operated platform, putting articles in Facebook Instant Articles and streaming video broadcasts through Facebook Live.

"A lot of publishers think about social as marketing. Now it's a distribution tool — it's where the audiences are consuming content," said Athan Stephanopoulos, President of the social content company, NowThis.

Consider the evolution of how people read the Internet. In the 1990s, it was direct. The sports fan would type in ESPN.com. In the 2000s, it was the Age of Google where you searched for the team you liked. The 2010s is about social referrals — attracting people from social media platforms like Facebook back to their websites. Facebook has been courting media companies to produce content directly on Facebook's network, with text stories publishing on Facebook Instant Articles and video streaming on Facebook Live.

NowThis doesn't even have a website. It produces platform appropriate content across the social web — issue based videos for Facebook, visually compelling stories for Instagram, breaking news for Twitter, animated GIFs for Tumblr, ephemeral videos for Snapchat and instant messaging stories for Chinese social platforms like Weibo. "You've got to produce content that is frictionless and conducive to the platform in which it is consumed," said Stephanopoulos. "We live in a scrolling economy where we only have a matter of seconds to capture the audience's attention."

The way media is consumed on social networks now shapes how the content is produced. Ryot Media was doing a traditional feature-length documentary about prison reform. While making the film, the director started posting two-minute videos on Facebook. After these short videos racked up eight million views, Ryot started wondering whether it would even be worth making the feature-length documentary.

Access to Audience Data. More than 40 percent of American adults get their news from Facebook, according to the Pew Research Center.² The 20 best-performing fake election stories on Facebook had a higher reach than the top 20 election stories from news outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, NBC News and others, according to BuzzFeed News analysis.³

“Speaking as a news consumer, I would like to find a way to signal to news platforms like Facebook and Apple, ‘Hey, these other website guys seem to be doing nothing but producing fake news,’” said Craig Newmark, Founder of craigslist.

But is it even possible to know the consumer when platforms like Facebook, Apple and Google have disintermediated the news organizations from the audience?

The lack of access to audience data creates major business risk for news organizations. News content creators feel they don’t know who their customer is, how their customers are consuming their news, and how to contact them. Podcasting companies do not have access to data about who is listening to their shows on Apple iTunes. Broadcast news sites do not have access about who is watching the Facebook Live broadcasts they are streaming on the social media platform. News sites have no idea who is reading their headlines aggregated by Google News.

“One of the things that concerns publishers of content on Facebook, Google and Apple is we don’t get enough data from those platforms and risk losing connections with our customers,” said Eve Burton, Senior Vice President and General Counsel for the Hearst Corporation. “When you start to create machines to chase traffic, you really don’t know who your readers or watchers are.”

“It’s more dangerous today if 80 percent of your traffic is coming from Facebook,” Burton said. “A turn of the wheel” by Facebook can bulldoze the global social newsstand.

The news organizations failed to secure access to data as each platform, search engine and marketplace came calling to distribute content. Google, Apple and Facebook do not provide personally identifiable information about users to third parties. News content drove the growth of those spaces. And before the news organizations knew it, the social media network, the search engine and the marketplace were calling the shots.

What responsibility do the platforms have to the content companies? “If it’s not mutually beneficial, it won’t work. If it’s just guilt, it won’t work,” said Jeff Jarvis. This continues to be a point of heated debate as Congress recently voted to repeal privacy rules passed by the Federal Communications Commission in October 2016, which required Internet service providers to explicitly gain consent before sharing or selling sensitive consumer data (e.g. financial or health information, or browsing history).⁴

The Changing Nature of Journalism

Some of the most powerful journalists in America are not even journalists — they are entertainers. For the second time in two years, HBO show host John Oliver single-handedly fired up the American public about the issues of net neutrality, overloading the Federal Communication Commissions’ Electronic Comment Filing System (ECFS) after each segment. While Oliver may not see himself as a journalist, many of his followers see him as one.

What does this mean about the value of journalism? As Oscar Wilde said, “If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they’ll kill you.”

The Internet has fragmented media into thousands of shards, all pointed at different audiences. One may appeal by pandering. Another just to have an argument to make. And, yet to another just for entertainment like John Oliver. This flowering of varied approaches has influenced the mainstream media’s undertaking of journalism.

These are the nine main principles that journalists agree on, as laid out in the book “The Elements of Journalism” by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosentiel:⁵

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.

Dealing with fake news. It can be argued that the coverage of the 2016 presidential election calls into question No. 1 and 3. The concept of “truth” and “verification” appeared irrelevant, even as fact checkers worked overtime to report campaign claims based on falsehoods.

“For a long time there was this mindset that facts are a drug. You shoot them in your bloodstream, and they have the right effect on you,” said Tom Rosenstiel. That “hypodermic theory of journalism,” Rosenstiel says, has been repudiated. We know from research the media can’t tell people what to think. Its only effect is that it can tell people what to think about.

“Is the precept of journalism not really functional anymore? Peter Drucker said culture eats strategy for breakfast. I would say culture eats journalism for breakfast.” -Reed Hundt

While the Dialogue convened prior to the election results, post-election reflection positions Reed Hundt’s statement as prescient. “Is the precept of journalism not really functional anymore?” he asked. “Peter Drucker said culture eats strategy for breakfast. I would say culture eats journalism for breakfast.”

Perhaps the problem is the “on the one hand and the other”-ism approach to covering politics. “When is it time for journalists to take a stand? You don’t know the moment you’re living in. I find myself thinking, ‘How would today’s journalists cover Krystallnacht?’” said Heather Chaplin, Chair of Journalism + Design at The New School. Would it be, “Well the Jews said this, but the Nazis said they’re dirty vermin.”

There are still people who don't believe any news they read because the news are either the liberal media or the corporate media, depending on whether they come from the right or the left.

"There is a huge gulf between how people perceive the world around them, largely driven by news coverage of anomalous events (bombings, catastrophes), and how people conflate those fears, often inaccurately, into perceptions about the communities they live in," said Richard Gingras, Vice President of Google News and Co-founder of The Trust Project with Sally Lehrman. The point is we need more readily-available data-driven metrics that show the accurate state of our communities (crimes rates, air quality indexes, housing costs, etc), he added.

The top fake news stories outperformed the top news stories from fact-based news organizations on Facebook in the final months of the election.

Points of View in Stories. Nikole Hannah-Jones, investigative reporter for *The New York Times*' Sunday magazine, has a clear stance on school segregation, which she's written about almost exclusively for the past four years.

"We live in this time of incredible richness and diversity of points of view when all kinds of people can commit acts of journalism...." -J.J. Yore

"Reporting the facts is that re-segregation exists and it's okay," Hannah-Jones said. "I felt that was bad journalism. I felt we needed to say segregation is bad. The reason we do journalism is to reduce harm. This is hurting children. That's been the problem with reporting all these years."

So she started to report on segregation with that angle. "Nobody can read what I write and not see my position on this issue," Hannah-Jones said. "What they can't argue with are the facts in my reporting."

"We live in this time of incredible richness and diversity of points of view when all kinds of people can commit acts of journalism; but, the part that's really what's uncomfortable is it leads to an environment

where everyone has their own set of facts,” said J.J. Yore of WAMU. “This incredible richness has led to a situation where we’re more polarized than ever. People believe things to be true that are completely in conflict.”

A Question of Trust. Pew Research Center surveys show that people don’t believe that even fact-based media get the facts right. When you ask people, “Do you think media gets facts right?” only 30 percent respond yes, according to Tom Rosenstiel. “The idea of trust is a panoply of many things — clarity, quality, fairness, even motive,” said Rosenstiel. “‘Did it load fast?’ along with, ‘Did they waste my time?’ The question is: How can journalism rebuild the sense of trust and relevance?”

**“The idea of trust is a panoply of many things —
clarity, quality, fairness, even motive.”**

-Tom Rosenstiel

“I get a whole lot less interested in the shiny new object when we don’t have the root foundation pieces thought out and properly in place,” said Richard Gingras. “Right now, until we figure out the foundations of journalism, we are just attaching tablets to the deck chairs of the Titanic.”

How does the news organization define its value proposition to the reader, viewer and listener? Even legitimate news sites are crowded with clickbait stories that contain little public value.

“We’re hitting it wrong at all levels. We’re not rethinking journalism at its core level. Worse, we do things that make it worse,” said Gingras. “I go to an *L.A. Times* article (or many other major news sites), and before I click on another article, what’s on that page? Outbrain or Taboola modules touting stories like ‘The ugliest spouses of Hollywood celebrities!’ But, I’m supposed to come to the conclusion that the *L.A. Times* is a brand that I can trust.”

Mentioned above, a confounding factor includes news organizations failings to tell the stories about the full diversity of voices, backgrounds, opinions and experiences.

Minority representation in legacy newspaper and digital newsrooms is 11 percent, according to the 2016 newsroom survey conducted by the American Society of News Editors. The total minority representation in the U.S. population is 37 percent.

“Why people don’t trust us is because we don’t look like them,” said Nikole Hannah-Jones, a reporter for *The New York Times* Sunday magazine. “Why is the media so surprised by a rise of Trump? We have not covered the working class. We don’t understand them. We’re going to solve it by hiring more people who look like them on the ground.”

Early reflections from the election suggest that working class whites did not feel heard, so they vented their frustration at the ballot box. Where was the reporting about their frustration in the decade leading up to this election as the pathways to the middle class disappeared? Their stories were neither validated nor verified by news media as manufacturing jobs disappeared, pensions were frozen and the Great Recession eliminated full-time employment.

One of the findings from The Trust Project was that people trusted reporting from people who they related to. “The strength of the affinity with the reporter: Women would trust women reporters more. People of color would trust people-of-color reporters,” Gingras said. “It wasn’t so much about the brand than it was about the reporter.”

The work of diversity extends beyond hiring and news coverage. To rebuild trust, news organizations need to engage communities of all backgrounds. The financial success of newspapers through the 20th century created an insular, ivory-tower mentality. The only opportunity the community had to engage was to write a letter to the editor. Whether it was print, television or radio, journalism was delivered as a monologue to the audience. News companies approached the Internet the same way, using it as another channel to distribute its monologue. But the Internet is an interactive medium, and users expect to do more than consume news — they expect to inform, shape and amplify the news.

“We have to reach for a relationship-based business,” Jeff Jarvis said. “To do that we have to know [our readers]. To do that we have to interact with them all over the damn Web.”

Still, most news organizations retain the walls of an elitist institution. Hitting publish, the very moment the audience has just begun to engage, is also the moment when the journalist punches out, and moves on to the next story.

ProPublica, a nonprofit investigative journalism organization, welcomes engagement. Where most investigative journalists zealously guard the secrecy of their projects in fear of getting scooped by a competitor, ProPublica's journalists set up crowdsourcing forms that inform its investigative reporting on specific topics such as Agent Orange. After a story is published, its journalists respond to questions about the accuracy and story premise by publishing follow-ups.

"We relentlessly show our work. We get people behind the curtain to let us know how we got what we got," said Robin Fields, Managing Editor of ProPublica. "When people challenge our work, we engage with them. I spent a lot of time at newspapers, and we just often refused to do that. You got your letter in the paper, maybe."

The Seattle Times Education Lab is a journalism initiative to create solutions-oriented community conversations about the biggest challenges to public education by doing the journalism in a solutions-oriented way. For the past three years, the team has been working to create a loop where the journalism sparks conversations among readers, and the conversation and work of readers then informs where the journalism goes. For instance, Education Lab spent a year exploring school discipline by reporting on innovative solutions, organizing an unconference, a town hall and a Facebook group to engage stakeholders. The engagement of parents and education leaders on social media and in person, in turn, seeded more stories that were then published.

"What you've seen is a steady reduction of a diversity of voices and the volume of them. From my standpoint, the real discussion here is how do we embrace these new voices? How do we encourage them, embrace them, feed them?" said Frank Blethen of *The Seattle Times*. "How do we nurture voices instead of stifling them?"

Reaching the community requires experimenting and building new partnerships. The Center for Investigative Reporting was working with youth media and trying to connect with parents.

"We would send pamphlets home and you might as well set them on fire," said Joaquin Alvarado. "So then we set up text [messaging]. The wireless carriers would only allow you to send them texts from entertainment brands. I got on the phone a senior MetroPCS executive and asked, 'Could you give us a pass?' And he said, 'Sounds good. Let's do it.'"

Economic Models of Modern Journalism

There is no clear answer to the future of how journalism will be funded. In today's world, advertisers are in control of where they go and what they pay. Again, 85 cents of every ad dollar goes to Facebook and Google.

The biggest crisis is in local news. There are plenty of people covering the White House. There are not enough journalists covering the suburban areas around fill-in-the-city.

“...this democracy is supported by diversity of local media.” -Frank Blethen

“Whether it's technology or we're talking about the audience, you feel like the stepchild at the third table at Thanksgiving. And all the adults speak at this national level, and they talk about all these national things, and they forget that this democracy is supported by diversity of local media,” said Frank Blethen, Publisher and CEO of *The Seattle Times*. “We all know it's a disaster out there. Five years from now, I don't know how we're going to make money.”

If you're going to survive as a media business, you're going to have to operate in at least eight out the following 11 revenue strategies, according to Tom Rosenstiel.

1. Shift heavily toward subscriptions.
2. Get into the technology leasing business. *The Washington Post* offers digital content managing services. *The Dallas Morning News* has acquired a host of businesses in Dallas that they lease to the *Morning News*.
3. Sell digital services. Why share revenue with digital ad agencies when the ad departments could offer that service and provide a digital advertising solution?
4. Develop new revenue segments: events, newsletters, podcasts, data services and printing are examples of segments that news companies have developed. Billy Penn, a Philadelphia digital news startup, makes 85 percent of its revenue from events.

5. Sell post-display advertising such as sponsored content. Banner ads are unappealing to consumers and will not support the future of journalism. Publishers can sell branded content and social lift.
6. Expand brand and market share. *The Washington Post* is selling an insert with its content.
7. Share resources to increase market power. The Local Media Consortium is an alliance of local news companies who negotiate advertising with Google. It's helpful, but it's not the answer.
8. Consolidate and try to exploit economics of scale. This is Gannett's strategy—to buy up newspapers and build an advertising network that looks like Verizon's coverage map. It can help cut costs, but it's fundamentally a traditional advertising pay.
9. Use aggregated models, such as Blendle's micropayments platform for single news articles.
10. Leverage nonprofit funding. ProPublica, Center for Investigative Reporting and *Texas Tribune* now each have annual budgets of \$10 million. This is a niche play that can bolster reporting on topics such as climate change or education, but it will not be the solution to covering Toledo, Ohio.
11. Utilize curation platforms such as Medium.

“The secret is a really shrewd operator that does everything well,” Rosenstiel says.

Build products that are relevant to people, says Jeff Jarvis. Then you will have reach. Then, convert people to something of higher value. To do that, news companies have to know their customer, even if most of the data is a black hole going to Google, Facebook and Apple.

The Future of Civil Discourse

This problem is bigger than the news industry. The issue is civil discourse.

“We don't know what the solution is to civil discourse being fact based,” said Joaquin Alvarado. “That's a profound problem. It's even

worse than climate change. The planet will be here. Humans will not. That's a few hundred years."

“We don’t know what the solution is to civil discourse being fact based.... That’s a profound problem. It’s even worse than climate change....”

-Joaquin Alvarado

“We need to get off the platitudes and start acting like ‘The Walking Dead’ here,” Alvarado said.

There is funding in the Gates Foundation, the Knight Foundation and other philanthropic sources, but they want to make investments that catalyze broad-based systemic change.

In the spirit of “The Walking Dead,” the Dialogue offers the following recommendations.

Recommendations

No. 1: Create national laboratories for journalism

Create a series of journalism laboratories across the nation that promotes collaboration, strengthens public-service reporting and expands distribution.

These laboratories would focus on creating collaboration among print, radio, online news, producing journalism and engage the community in the most urgent public issues that are critical to the future of a community.

These laboratories could focus on:

- Identifying spaces where communities lack locally produced journalism and establishing a laboratory to engage the community and journalists on under-covered, urgent public issues.
- Collaborations among nonprofit news organizations, legacy newspapers and technology companies.
- Sparking use and spread of emerging storytelling tools such as 360-degree video, virtual reality and mobile platforms.

- Building bridges between community and journalism organizations that break down the ivory tower that was erected around newsrooms and re-ignite the public's investment in journalism.
- Conducting in-depth investigative reporting that watchdogs public spending and elected officials. These laboratories would focus on obtaining and analyzing data sets to deepen journalism.
- Leveraging national distribution and technology networks to spiral out journalism produced locally.

No. 2: Hold an annual Future of Journalism convening

Hold a national Future of Journalism convening to expand the Aspen Institute Dialogue, continue work on recommendations and conceptualize new recommendations as new threats to public-service journalism emerge.

While there are many annual journalism conferences that serve specific niche audiences within journalism, there is no gathering spot to bring innovative thinkers, doers and researchers across disciplines and silos.

A Future of Journalism convening needs more than journalists in the room: it needs regulatory officials, community leaders, technologists, data scientists, social scientists, systems thinkers, philanthropists and impact investors.

It needs the full diversity of representation as outlined in the Recommendation No. 3.

This convening can tackle the long-term challenges: how we build business models that sustain public-service journalism and emerging challenges such as the infection of fake news and the balance of power between social networks and publishers.

No. 3: Invest in human capital

News organizations need to make major progress in strengthening their human capital.

Human capital represents the collective resources of the people who work within our organizations. They include knowledge, experience, talents, skills, abilities, intelligence, training, judgment and wisdom

held individually and collectively. These resources are an intangible source of wealth. Fully developed and managed, they are critical to delivering superior organizational performance.

There are a number of areas where continued progress is needed:

- **Diversity in race and ethnicity.** The population of the United States is undergoing a rapid transformation. News organizations need to reflect that. Diversity enriches the ability of organizations to detect and reflect the various perspectives in society today. Racial and ethnic diversity is also imperative to ensure news coverage that is accurate and fair.
- **Diversity in class and life experience.** The presidential election has highlighted the failure of news organizations to sense the depth of grievance in America's working class. That may well be because so few people in our newsrooms have a true working-class background. Moreover, there are other experiences that can be especially valuable and in short supply. For example, very few individuals working in newsrooms have served in the military, an experience that is always relevant; but, particularly so when U.S. armed forces are so actively engaged throughout the world. In the end, the goal is openness to a wide range of perspectives and to intellectual debate.
- **Expertise in technology.** Many American newsrooms are woefully ill-equipped to stay up to date with today's technology. Few developers and engineers choose to make a career at journalistic institutions. And very few newsrooms have the technological talent pool that can make them fully competitive in today's media environment. Some of this has to do with pay, and some of this has to do with the allure of industries viewed as more exciting and forward-looking. Both must be addressed.
- **Entrepreneurial spirit.** Journalism is becoming an entrepreneurial enterprise. Innovation is key to success. No longer can a newsroom work without regard to business imperatives. While journalists must adhere to longstanding ethics standards and a commitment to the truth, they also must play a central role in achieving commercial success. Either within existing

organizations or in launching new ones, journalists will have to be entrepreneurs. Newsrooms will need more personnel who possess that quality.

- **Command of data:** To thrive, modern journalism must understand at a deep level the constantly evolving ways that people consume and use information. That requires news organizations also being sophisticated data organizations. This is essential to providing news and information that has value to citizens in an era when they have so many choices. A grasp of data is a requirement in the 21st century for journalism to do its job of helping people to self-govern.

These are some of the areas the group pinpointed as needing significant progress. But there may be others which further conversations could identify.

The group also recommended supporting incubators, training programs, scholarships and fellowships that target these underrepresented populations. To train them is not enough. We must also build networks that connect them to journalism opportunities. These opportunities could be at legacy news organizations, digital newsrooms or in the entrepreneurial media space.

No. 4: Build an Internet of Civic Things

An “Internet of Civic Things” goes back to the core proposition of journalism: equip citizens with the information and tools needed to self-govern in a democratic republic.

This starts with universal free broadband access to public information.

The public, and the journalists who serve them, need a foundation of public government information that is technically and price free. Technically free access to government would include a live video feed of all public meetings, archived video that can be accessed at any time, real-time transcriptions of those meetings, and open access to electronic records that can be saved and searched.

“Price free” means that broadband access to public data is a universal right. Anyone in Cleveland, Miss., should have access to what is being debated at the Federal Communications Commission, whether or not that person can afford \$100 a month for a wireless data plan or cable broadband to their home.

News journalists could then build upon that universally free public information by providing analysis and context. Opinion journalists would build on that universally free public information and data by providing commentary. “Everybody in government, top to bottom, local to Supreme Court, they technically ought to make everything truly really public, not just pretend public,” said former FCC Chairman Reed Hundt. Not, “There’s a door and if you get in line early and knock you can get one of eight seats. It’s we put a camera here and we turn it on and you go on YouTube. You save it, you can search it. That’s technically public,” he added.

It is clear that the profession and industry of journalism is at an impasse. The challenges outlined in this report — from disruptive technologies to unprofitable business models to a lack of diversity in newsrooms — have plagued journalism for over a decade. Now, after events post-conference, it is clear that the challenges are much deeper. Now, journalism finds itself battling for relevancy as readers’ distrust grows. Questions about truth, objectivity, fake news, misinformation and the role of journalism in our democracy are plentiful. While this Dialogue could not have predicted the current state of journalism, the discussions captured in this report suggest that within the challenges raised are also the solutions.

Endnotes

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APPENDIX



The Future of Journalism

Aspen, Colorado
August 7-9, 2016

Dialogue Participants

Joaquin Alvarado

Chief Executive Officer of
the Center for Investigative
Reporting

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Executive Editor
The Washington Post

Frank Blethen

Publisher and Chief Executive
Officer
The Seattle Times

Eve Burton

Senior Vice President and
General Counsel
Hearst Corporation

Sharon Pian Chan

Vice President of Innovation,
Product and Development
The Seattle Times (rapporteur)

Heather Chaplin

Chair Journalism + Design
The New School

Michael Ferro

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Robin Fields

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Richard Gingras

Senior Director, News
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Nikole Hannah-Jones

Investigative Reporter
The New York Times Magazine

Reed Hundt

Chief Executive Officer
Coalition for Green Capital

Note: Titles and affiliations are as of the date of the conference.

Walter Isaacson

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The Aspen Institute

Jeff Jarvis

Professor and Director
Tow Knight Center for
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CUNY Graduate School for
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Olivia Ma

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Google News Lab

Bryn Mossier

Co-founder and
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RYOT News

Craig Newmark

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Vice Media

Tom Rosenstiel

Executive Director
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Athan Stephanopoulos

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About the Author

Sharon Pian Chan is deputy managing editor for audience development and journalism initiatives at *The Seattle Times*. In her current role she works on building a local audience to protect and pay for independent, public-service journalism.

She has previously worked as a reporter, editor and digital leader for *The Seattle Times*, covering beats ranging from city hall to Microsoft. She has wrangled guest columns for the opinion section, led the seattletimes.com home page team and launched major journalism initiatives in partnership with journalism nonprofits and philanthropic foundations.

Chan served as national president of the Asian American Journalists Association from 2009 to 2010.

Chan has a bachelor's degree from Pomona College. She is currently working on her MBA at MIT Sloan School of Management.

About the Communications and Society Program

www.aspeninstitute.org/c&S

The Communications and Society Program is an active venue for framing policies and developing recommendations in the information and communications fields. We provide a multidisciplinary space where veteran and emerging decision-makers can develop new approaches and suggestions for communications policy. The Program enables global leaders and experts to explore new concepts, exchange insights, develop meaningful networks, and find personal growth, all for the betterment of society.

The Program's projects range across many areas of information, communications, and media policy. Our activities focus on issues of open and innovative governance, public diplomacy, institutional innovation, broadband and spectrum management, as well as the future of content, issues of race and diversity, and the free flow of digital goods, services, and ideas across borders.

Most conferences employ the signature Aspen Institute seminar format: approximately 25 leaders from diverse disciplines and perspectives engaged in a moderated roundtable dialogue, with the goal of driving the agenda to specific conclusions and recommendations. The program distributes our conference reports and other materials to key policymakers, opinion leaders, and the public in the United States and around the world. We also use the Internet and social media to inform and ignite broader conversations that foster greater participation in the democratic process.

The Program's Executive Director is Charles M. Firestone. He has served in this capacity since 1989 and also as Executive Vice President of the Aspen Institute. Prior to joining the Aspen Institute, Mr. Firestone was a communications attorney and law professor who has argued cases before the United States Supreme Court. He is a former director of the UCLA Communications Law Program, first president of the Los Angeles Board of Telecommunications Commissioners, and an appellate attorney for the U.S. Federal Communications Commission.

