The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Cultural Power

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Abstract   Recent technological change and the economic upheaval it has produced are coded by social meanings. Cultural codes not only trigger technological and economic changes, but also provide pathways to control them, allowing the democratic practices of independent journalism to be sustained in new forms. Even as they successfully defend their professional ethics, however, journalists experience them as vulnerable to subversion in the face of technological and economic change. Indeed, independent journalists and the social groups who support them often feel as if they are losing the struggle for autonomy. Just as current anxieties have been triggered by computerization and digital news, so were earlier crises of journalism linked to technological shifts that demanded new forms of economic organization. Digital production has created extraordinary organizational upheaval and economic strain. At the same time, critical confrontations with digital production have triggered innovative organizational forms that allow new technologies to sustain, rather than undermine, the democratic culture and institution of news production. If news producers are making efforts to adapt professional journalism to the digital age while maintaining journalistic civil values, there are parallel adaptations from the digital side: digital journalism becoming more like professional journalism.

Keywords   Civil sphere · Journalism · Cultural sociology · Crisis of journalism · Citizen journalism · Professional journalism

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For most members of the civil sphere, and even for members of its institutional elites, the news is the only source of firsthand experience they will ever have about their fellow citizens, about their motives for acting the way they do, the kinds of relationships they form, and the nature of the institutions they create. Journalistic judgments thus possess an outsized power to affect the shape-shifting currents of contemporary social life, from people's movements to legal investigations, foreign policy, public opinion, and affairs of state. The reputation of news media—their ability to represent the public to itself—depends on the belief by their audiences that they are truly reporting on the social world, not constructing it, that they are describing news factually rather than representing esthetically or morally.[1]

Conceptualizing news media in this manner provides a dramatically different perspective on the contemporary "crisis in journalism." Most social commentators, and journalists themselves, understand this crisis in economic and technological terms—as the challenge to the economic viability of newspapers triggered by the digital revolution in publishing and news distribution. Many leading journalistic institutions in the West have experienced great economic upheaval, cutting staff, and undergoing deep, often radical reorganization—in efforts to meet the digital challenge. Rather than seeing technological and economic changes as the primary causes of current anxieties, however, I wish to draw attention to the role played by the cultural commitments of journalism itself. Linking these professional ethics to the democratic aspirations of the broader societies in which journalists ply their craft, I will suggest that the new technologies can be shaped to sustain value commitments, not only undermine them.

Recent technological change and the economic upheaval it has produced are coded by social meanings. It is this cultural framework that has transformed material innovation into social crisis—for the profession, the market, and for society at large. Cultural codes not only trigger sharp anxiety about technological and economic changes; they also provide pathways to control them, so that the

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[1] Whether journalistic news platforms are more or less differentiated from political parties and their ideologies, or for that matter from religious, ethnic, economic, or racial groups, is an empirical question that has been intensely debated over the course of three decades of historical and comparative sociology (Schudson 1978; Alexander 1981; Chalaby 1996; Hallin and Mancini 2004, 2012; Jones 2013; Mancini 2013). What has not been subject to debate, however, is the factual self-presentation of journalists, whatever the nature of their more implicit connections. Putative neutrality allows news media to present themselves as third-party alternatives to partisan struggles between openly ideological parties and their depictions of social reality. For example, a recent lead editorial in the New York Times (2013), headlined "The Facts About Benghazi," suggested "an exhaustive investigation by The Times goes a long way toward resolving any nagging doubts about what precipitated the attack on the United States mission in Benghazi, Libya, last year that killed Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans." As grounds for confidence that its journalists had discovered "the facts," this Times' editorial referenced evidence, proof, publicity, and interviews, implicitly linking these fact-finding methods to the integrity of paper and reporters: "The report, by David Kirkpatrick, The Times's Cairo bureau chief, and his team turned up no evidence that Al Qaeda or another international terrorist group had any role in the assault, as Republicans have insisted without proof for more than a year. [Republican Representative Mike] Rogers, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee who has called Benghazi a 'preplanned, organized terrorist event,' said his panel's findings [were] based on an examination of 4,000 classified cables. If Mr. Rogers has evidence of a direct Al Qaeda role, he should make it public. Otherwise, The Times's investigation, including extensive interviews with Libyans in Benghazi who had direct knowledge of the attack, stands as the authoritative narrative."

democratic practices of independent journalism, rather than being undermined, can be sustained in new forms.

1 The Fragility of Autonomy

Democratic societies depend on the interpretive independence of mass media. Situated between hierarchical powers and citizen-audiences, journalism can speak truth to power. Supplying cultural codes and narrative frameworks that make contingent events meaningful, news reports create a mediated distance that allows readers to engage society more critically. The ability to sustain mediation depends on professional independence. To some significant degree, journalists regulate themselves, via professional organizations that have autonomy vis-à-vis state and market. Organizing their own work conditions and their own criteria for creating and projecting news, journalists evoke such professional ethics as transparency, independence, responsibility, balance, and accuracy.

These professional ethics significantly overlap with the broader discourse of democracy, the set of beliefs that sustain an independent civil sphere (Alexander 2006). Journalism is a critical element of the institutional-cum-cultural world of elections, parliaments, laws, social movements and publicity that creates the conditions for democracy. Just as the independence of the civil public sphere is continuously threatened by incursions of markets, states, ethnic, and religious organization, so is the autonomy of journalism itself. Journalistic boundaries are often fraught and always permeable. The interpretive independence of journalism is never assured. An ongoing accomplishment, partial and incomplete, the profession and its social supporters must engage in continuous struggle for it to be sustained.

Authoritarian leaders go to great lengths to prevent the interpretive independence of journalists (Arango 2014; Buckley and Mullany 2014; Forsythe and Buckley 2014; Mullany 2014; Shear 2014). What is less widely understood is that such independence is also highly fraught inside democratic societies themselves (Schudson 1978; Alexander 1981). Efforts to sustain professional autonomy in the democratic societies of the West and East have often been markedly successful. Yet, such efforts also cause journalists to experience their institutional independence as fragile and threatened. Even as they successfully defend their professional ethics, journalists experience them as vulnerable to subversion in the face of technological and economic change. Independent journalists and the social groups who support them often feel as if they are losing the struggle for autonomy.

Because social change is endemic in modern societies, it is hardly surprising that the history of journalism has been marked by continuous eruptions of crisis. Just as current anxieties have been triggered by computerization and digital news, so were earlier crises of journalism linked to technological shifts that demanded new forms of economic organization (Breese, this volume). Radio and television were feared as objective threats that would undermine print journalism's capacity for independence and critical evaluation. Neither actually did so. Neither did the transition from network to cable news in the USA, nor the transformation of the public service TV model in Europe that created overwhelming anxiety about privatization in the 1980s (Luengo and Sanz 2012).

Examining the upheavals created by television and cable reveals how the deep meaning structures of journalism constructed new technology and economic organization as dire threats to journalistic integrity, anxieties that actually helped maintain the independence of journalism in new organizational forms. Case studies of contemporary newspapers in crisis—from the New Orleans *Times Picayune* (Luengo, this volume) and other metropolitan American dailies to papers in Sweden, Norway, Germany, France, and Britain—illuminate how the same combustible combination of enduring cultural structures and rapidly shifting technological and economic change is at work today, and how new platforms of journalistic work are being forged and engaged. Critical jeremiads against the profane, putatively anti-democratic effects of technology and economy should be seen less as accurate depictions than as spirited rallying cries to protect the sacred, and still robust, ethics of independent journalism.

While European newspapers do not always share American journalism's ethic of liberal neutrality, journalists on both sides of the Atlantic emphatically embrace a professional identity of interpretive and institutional independence (n. 1, above.) The digital-cum-economic challenge to these values has triggered crises in both European and American journalism, creating extraordinary organizational upheaval and economic strain. Tens of thousands of individual careers have been disrupted, and the profession's most venerable institutions are being severely tested (Minder and Carvajal 2014; Ramirez 2014). At the same time, critical engagement with digital production has triggered innovative organizational forms that allow new technologies to sustain, rather than undermine, the democratic culture and institution of news production.

The economic crisis of newspapers needs to be understood, not as Schumpeterian creative destruction, but as the culturally informed *re*construction of new organizational forms. What are the institutional arrangements that, under the conditions of digital reproduction, can allow the cultural commitments of democratic journalism to be sustained? If networked news productions are making efforts to adapt professional journalism to the digital age, while maintaining journalistic civil values, are there parallel adaptations from the digital side? Is the anti-professional ideology of "citizen journalism" also being reconsidered, shifting the balance between news blogs and professional news writing in the new world of journalism emerging today?

I begin by reconsidering the theoretical underpinnings of scholarly writings about digital technology and journalism. Against reductionism, I argue for journalism's independent cultural power. This theoretical corrective allows empirical studies to be framed differently, the causes and consequences of the contemporary crisis to be approached with more clarity, and the ongoing, if often submerged processes of institutional repair to receive the attention they deserve.

2 The Problem of Reduction

In a recent essay in the *Times Literary Review*, Lemann (2013) wrote the "situation in journalism is changing so rapidly that it is difficult to get a sure sense of what is going on," adding, "while there is an endless series of panel discussions and blog posts where there are plenty of confident assumptions," there is "not much reliable

data." In the last 10 years, an enormous amount of scholarship has been devoted to the crisis in journalism, a profusion of empirical studies about its causes, current condition, near term consequences, and long-term effects. The problem isn't a dearth of data but its reliability. Empirical investigators have produced drastically divergent findings. It is the striking incommensurability among this plethora of studies that prevents observers from being able to get any sure sense about the crisis of journalism today.

The problem with current scholarship is theoretical. Empirical analysis rests upon theoretical presuppositions about how societies work, about what motivates social action, what institutions are most important, how they interact, and why (Alexander 1982). Not methodological but theoretical logic determines the possibilities for getting empirical social science right. In studying the crisis of journalism, theoretical guidance has often been misleading, and sometimes downright wrong.

The crisis of journalism can be reconsidered only if we get the theory right. Efforts to empirically assess the nature, causes, and effects of the crisis have been perniciously affected by technological and economic determinism. This reductionism needs to be challenged and corrected for understanding of the current crisis to move ahead.

It is obvious, for example, that the Internet has been centrally involved in creating the problems of contemporary journalism. What is not obvious at all, however, is that the social effects of this invention can be treated in a purely technological way. Like every major practical scientific discovery of the modern era (Alexander 2003), the Internet has exerted its force not only as technology but as narrative, a culture structure inspiring faith as an "agent of change" (Negroponte 1995a; cf. Sanz 2014). From the moment of its emergence, the Internet was wrapped up inside a radically utopian social narrative, promising to "flatten organizations, globalize society, decentralize control, and help harmonize people." As one of its most influential early proponents, MIT professor Nicholas Negroponte (1995b: 182), predicted two decades ago: "It is creating a totally new, global social fabric…drawing people into greater world harmony … It is here. It is now" (Negroponte 1995a: 183, 230, 231; cf. Van Dijck 2005; Benkler 2006; Jarvis 2009, 2011). Internet was introduced as a material technique that would make us cooperative and free. Its effect on the mass media would be wonderful and immense, liberating us from the stifling effect of an anti-democratic, professional elite. "From now on," promises Shirky (2008: 64), a Professor of New Media at NYU, "news can break into public consciousness without the traditional press weighing in."[2] Exclaiming "nothing like this has ever been remotely possible before," Dan Gillmor, nationally syndicated columnist from the *San Jose Mercury News* and blogger for *Silicon.Valley.com*, explains:

> Big media … treated the news as a lecture. We told you what the news was …
> It was a world that bred complacency and arrogance on our part. Tomorrow's
> news reporting and production will be more of a conversation. The lines will
> blur between producers and consumers … The communication network itself

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[2] *The Economist* has hailed Shirky, a Professor of New Media at NYU, as "one of the preeminent public intellectuals of the internet" (Ottawa 2011).

will be a medium for everyone's voice, not just the few who can afford to buy multimillion-dollar printing presses, launch satellites, or win the government's permission to squat on the public's airwaves. (Gillmor 2004: xii–xiii)

As salvationary techno-culture, Internet's economic effects on journalism were far-reaching. "Technology has given us a communication toolkit that allows anyone to become a journalist at little cost," according to Gillmor (2004: xii). "What happens when the costs of reproduction and distribution go away? What happens when there is nothing about publishing anymore because users can do it for themselves?" asks Shirky (2008: 60–61): "Our social tools remove older obstacles to public expression, and thus remove the bottlenecks that characterized mass media. The result is the mass amateurization of efforts previously reserved for media professionals" (ibid). Attaching a fee to liberation seemed conservative and profane. Even as public opinion compelled newspapers to make their products available online, the utopian expectations framing Internet culture prevented online access from being contingent on fees.[3] Efforts to erect firewalls were broadly stigmatized. "Paywalls," Shirky (2010) predicted, "don't expand revenue from the existing audience, they contract the audience to that subset willing to pay." When paywalls were initially introduced, they were quickly shut down (Perez-Pena 2007). Meanwhile, the breathless spirit of freedom that energized Internet expansion allowed blogs to aggregate the fruits of journalism—"news"—without paying for the labor that created it.[4] "As career journalists and managers," writes newspaper mogul and new technology advocate John Paton, "we have entered a new era where what we know and what we traditionally do has finally found its value in the marketplace, and that value is about zero" (in Mutter 2011).

The social effects of the cultural mantra "information must be free"[5]—not the materiality of Internet strictly considered—forged the economic vice within which journalism finds itself squeezed today. Newspapers were culturally compelled to forgo compensation for the labor power that created their complex product. Only then did it become "objectively" impossible for the business form marketing journalism to compensate for declining advertising. At the same time, fierce market competition emerged from new business forms—news-aggregating blogs—that could commoditize journalism without paying production costs. No wonder

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[3] "Newspapers from the start were caught in a frustrating dilemma. Overwhelmingly, the culture of the Web is that content is free. If newspapers put the content of the newspaper online for free, they would encourage subscribers to drop their subscriptions and undermine the circulation of their print version. If they charged for content, the prospective audience would avoid them and go instead to other sites where content was free" (Jones 2009: 186).

[4] "Search engines and Web portrayals such as Google and Yahoo and AOL are all major providers of news, but very little of it's originated by them. They are 'free riders,' who get the benefit of offering their audience a range of reported news that has been generated by newspapers and other traditional media … Google, in other words, makes money from the news article while the newspaper does the work. The 'free rider' syndrome is also at the heart of the portion of the burgeoning blogosphere devoted to news and public affairs, because all of their commentary is based on the traditional media's reporting" (Jones 2009:187).

[5] This iconic phrase, which has assumed an almost folkloric status, is attributed to a presentation that Stuart Brand made at the first Hackers Conference in 1984. Brand was the creator of the *Whole Earth Catalogue*.

newspaper expenses began to far exceed revenues. The vice forged by techno-culture began to tighten its grip. The bottom lines of newspapers caved in.

If Internet technology were simply material, and the current crisis purely economic, then the direction of the unfolding crisis would be a one-way street and its social consequences impossible to deter. Journalism would become Exhibit A of capitalist "creative destruction," the process Joseph Schumpeter believed "incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one" (Schumpeter 1975 [1942]: 83, original italics), which he predicted would eventually corrode the cultural foundations of modern life. In the face of more efficient technology, such economic logic holds, more profitable forms of business organization must replace newspapers. The economic foundations of journalism will be destroyed so that information can be distributed in a more efficient way.

It is such reductionist logic that compelled *The New Republic* (2009) to headline "The End of the Press" and Philip Meyer (2009) to speak of the "vanishing newspaper;" that allowed Alex Jones (2009: 51) to claim "the nation's traditional news organizations are being transformed into tabloid news organizations" and Marcel Broersma (2013: 29) to announce journalism "has entered a state of progressive degeneration," one that "will not be curable;" and that led McChesney and Pickard (2011) to ask "will the last reporter please turn off the lights."

3 Journalism as Sacred Profession

Because the theoretical presuppositions of these arguments are misleading, their empirical predictions have not come to pass. Instead of being pushed over, journalism has pushed back. It is a profession, not only a market-responsive business. Organized by a deeply entrenched cultural code, the profession erected a virtual "wall" (Revers 2013: 7) between news reporting and profit making, a cultural division perceived as protecting the sacred from the profane. Business managers devote themselves to trying every which way to financialize the products of journalism, but crafts persons, not owners and managers, create the news. The culture that regulates investigating, writing, and editing news is so revered it long ago acquired a quasi-religious status. In 1920, complaining that "the news of the day as it reaches the newspaper office is an incredible medley of fact, propaganda, rumor, suspicion, clues, hopes, and fears," Lippman (1920: 47) declared "the task of selecting and ordering that news" to be "one of the truly sacred and priestly offices in a democracy." For Lipmann, the newspaper was "the bible of democracy, the book out of which a people determines its conduct" (ibid). A few years earlier, Walter Williams, University of Missouri's first journalism Dean, published what he called the *Journalists' Creed*, inscribing, "clear thinking, clear statement, accuracy, and fairness" at the ethical core of the profession (in Farrar 1998). Contemporary practitioners sometimes refer to Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's *Elements of Journalism* as the "bible" and Kovacs as journalism's "high priest" (Ryfe 2012: 51). They assert that "journalism's first obligation is to the truth" because "its first loyalty is to citizens," not the powers that be. If journalists are to "serve as an

independent monitor of power," then they "must maintain an independence from those they cover" and "exercise their personal conscience." If these moral obligations are met, this professional bible assures its readers, journalism can "provide a forum" not only for "public criticisms" but also for "compromise" (Kovacs and Rosenstiel 2007 [2001]: 5–6).

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels (1962 [1848]: 36) proclaimed that, with the coming of capitalism, "all that is holy is profaned," that there can be no "religious fervor," that there survives neither "honor" nor "reverent awe" for any professional occupation. This was their reductionism speaking.[6] In the century and half since those predictions were made, journalism actually continued to inspire reverence, its professional ethics seeming sacred and holy, and its moral obligations honored not only in the breech but in daily acts. The contemporary scholar Matthias Revers (2013) has documented how "symbols, myths, and narratives of triumph and failure" are "ingrained" in the occupation of journalism. The profession's culture is organized not only around mundane practices but sagas of courageous heroes (Revers 2013: 6) who sacrifice, and sometimes even die, to uphold the values of autonomy, fairness, and critique, struggling against corrupt villains from the worlds of politics, money, ethnicity, religion, and state, who are motivated by greed and wanton disregard, acting in ways to undermine journalistic ideals.

Theoretical reductionism depicts the products of journalism as merely informational. If journalism is only about information, then it is indeed simply a technology, one bound to be superseded by the super-efficient, high speed, user-friendly information-processing capacities of the Internet Age.[7] In a biting critique, Dean Starkman links Internet rhetoric to a future of "network-driven system of journalism in which news organizations will play a decreasingly important role."

> News won't be collected and delivered in the traditional sense. It will be assembled, shared, and to an increasing degree, even gathered by a sophisticated readership, one that is so active that the word "readership" will no longer apply. This is an interconnected world in which boundaries between storyteller and audience dissolve [into] the transformative power of networks [and] faith in the wisdom of crowds and citizen journalism, in volunteerism over professionalism [and] in "iterative" journalism – reporting on the fly, fixing mistakes along the way – versus traditional methods of story organization, fact-checking, and copyediting. (Starkman 2011)

Such reduction of news to information lends support to the fatalistic picture of journalism's displacement. Via a mechanical series of ineluctable facts, the

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[6] Shirky's predictions that Internet will destroy journalism are based upon the same reductionist logic, equating professional form with a specific type of economic production: "The definition of journalist, seemingly a robust and stable profession, turns out to be tied to particular forms of production" (Shirky 2008: 70).

[7] "We are undoubtedly in an information age … The information superhighway is about the global movement of weightless bits at the speed of light. As one industry after another looks at itself in the mirror and asks about its future in a digital world, that future is driven almost 100 % by the ability of that company's product or services to be rendered in digital form … Media will become digitally driven by the combined forces of convenience, economic imperative, and deregulation. And it will happen fast" (Negroponte 1995a, b: 11–13).

all-powerful forces of capitalism's creative destruction will have sway. But if journalism is craft and profession, its product must be much more than the mechanical recording and transmission of information. Michael Schudson documents how journalism, once not so very different than stenography, gradually became a source of "fundamental translation and interpretation," projecting the "meaning of events" to "a public ill-equipped to sort [this] out for itself" (Schudson 1982: 99). Anthony Smith (1978: 168) describes news reporting as "the art of structuring reality, rather than recording it." Donald Matheson shows how, between 1890 and 1930, journalism became transformed from "raw information" into a nuanced, thickly construed, and esoteric kind of discourse, a "textual apparatus of interviewing, summarizing, quoting and editing that would allow it to be able to claim to represent reality" (Matheson 2000: 563) in a manner that was more objective, and thus authoritative, than other claims.

4 Journalism as Civil Institution

Kovacs and Rosenstiel describe the elements of journalism as "principles that have helped … people in self-governing systems to adjust to the demands of an ever more complex world," helping people "to be free and self-governing" (2007 [2001]: 5). Journalism is not only about professional ethics but civic morals (Durkheim 1950). The neutrality, the perspective, the distance, the reflexivity, the narrating of the social as understood in this time and this place—all this points beyond the details of craft and the ethics of profession to the broad moral organization of democratic life. Even as the sacred codes of professional journalism reach downward into the practical production of daily, hourly, and minute-by-minute news, they reach upward into the more ethereal world of civic morals. When journalists make meaning out of events, transforming randomness into pattern, they do so in terms of the broader discourse of civil society (Alexander 2006: 75–85). Fairness to both sides is not just a narrowly professional obligation but a fundamental principle of citizenship, one that requires divided interests to play by the rules, to imagine themselves in place of the other even as they fight for interests of their own. Exercising individual conscience, being independent of one's sources, conducting interviews that allows sources to speak, providing neutral information that makes compromise possible—these professional mandates not only create news but contribute to the moral discourse that makes civil solidarity possible. As James Sleeper has put it, "journalism is a civil art."[8] The belief that more impersonal truth is possible allows demos to criticize cosmos and moral universalism to seem not just a cheap trick, a camouflage for self-aggrandizement, but a morality whose ideals have the power to reign.[9]

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[8] Yale University seminar, January 28, 2014.

[9] Bourdieu's field theory of society ignores the relative independence of cultural power, insisting that group struggles inside and between fields are utilitarian efforts to increase symbolic capital, efforts that are themselves expressions of meta-conflicts among classes and their class-fractions (Alexander 1995). If journalism does have significant autonomy as an independent field (Benson and Neveu 2005), it is because of the cultural force of professional ties; the meaning that self-regulation has for journalists motivates intense efforts to defend their distinctive sacred creed. That their professional morality

Evoking the sacrality that binds journalism to democracy, James Carey once described "public" as the "god term of journalism"—"its totem and talisman, and an object of ritual homage" (1987: 5, in Ryfe). Conceptualizing journalism in public sphere terms, however, can create theoretical blinders that prevent the current crisis from being properly understood.[10] Drawing upon an idealized view of the Greek polis, Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas tie democracy to publicness, to openness and transparency, and to making assertions that everybody can hear and see. In other words, the exchange of information seems key. Hardly surprising, then, that public sphere theorists have heralded the Net as a great democratic invention, deepening transparency, and widening the circle of participation (Cohen and Arato 1992; Bohman 2004; cf. Shirky 2011). Their enthusiasm is shared by social theorists like Castells (1996; cf., Jarvis 2011), who view society as nodes of communication writ large.

> The development of interactive, horizontal networks of communication has induced the rise of a new form of communication, mass self-communication, over the Internet and wireless communication networks … It is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many [sic]. We are indeed in a new communication realm, and ultimately in a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive. True, the medium, even a medium as revolutionary as this one, does not determine the content and effect of its messages. But it makes possible the unlimited diversity and the largely autonomous origin of most of the communication flows that construct, and reconstruct every second the global and local production of meaning in the public mind (Castells 2007: 238, 248)

While divergent in various ways, public sphere and network theory are both species of reductionism. They view communication technology as sui generis, and new forms of social understanding as emanating directly therefrom. From the perspective of a more cultural sociology, by contrast, the public sphere is less normative highpoint than performative stage, one that offers bigoted demagoguery a chance to succeed just as much as the more civil forces of democratic life. Blogs can narrow networks, not only widen them, allowing likeminded people to huddle together in the virtual public sphere, creating nodes of communication that empower particularism in dangerous ways. Synthesizing recent research about "how people

Footnote 9 continued

complements that of the civil sphere guarantees warrants that the "performances" of journalist struggling to sustain autonomy can resonate with significant segments of the citizen-audience.

[10] "Publicness is an emblem of epochal change. It is profoundly disruptive. Publicness threatens institutions whose power is invested in the control of information and audiences … Publicness is a sign of our empowerment at their expense. Dictators and politicians, media moguls and marketers try to tell us what to think and say. But now, in a truly public society, they must listen to what we say…with respect for us as individuals and for the power we can now wield as groups—as publics" (Jarvis 2011). The section headings in Jarvis' chapter on "The Benefits of Publicness" are: "Publicness Builds Relationships," "Publicness Disarms Strangers," "Publicness Enables Collaboration," "Publicness Unleashes the Wisdom (and Generosity) of the Crowd," "Publicness Defuses the Myth of Perfection," "Publicness Neutralizes Stigmas," "Publicness Grants Immortality … or at Least Credit," and "Publicness Organizes Us" (Jarvis 2011: 43–59).

exercise their newfound freedom online," Ryfe (2012: 7) finds that people "tend to congregate in 'small worlds'."

> A small world is a network structure characterized by dense clusters of individuals linked together via bridges or connectors. Within these dense clusters, individual go on with their virtual lives much as they do in their real ones: they interact with people who are familiar, or with whom they share a common interest. Indeed, one way of thinking about the Internet is that it amplifies people's social tendency to interact with others like them, and brings this tendency to scale. (Ibid.)[11]

The professional ethics and civic morals of journalism can counter such narrowing, but public and network theorists are indifferent to the culture that sustains it. The fate of journalism has been of little concern to theorists of the public and the information age.[12]

Journalism is much more than the publicizing and networking of information. It is about *interpreting* information in a broader, often more universalizing manner, "wrest[ing] meaning from the torrent of events rather acting as mere transmission belts" (Grant in Barnhurt and Mutz 1997: 47), providing the "context of social problems, interpretations, and themes" (Barnhurt and Mutz 1997: 28). Neither journalism nor democracy is about letting more people say what they want, more rapidly, in increasingly public ways. Yes, journalism does provide information, but it is knowledge filtered through stringent, often acerbic standards of moral judgment—"reporting that is aggressive and reliable enough to instill fear of public embarrassment, loss of employment, economic sanctions, or even criminal prosecution in those with political and economic power" (Downey and Schudson 2009). News not only observes but judges, stigmatizing violations of civil morality and dramatizing heroic struggles against injustice. Journalism is not simply about the public but also about the civil sphere (Jacobs 1996a, b).

Such an enlarged understanding of journalism and its environment helps us understand why, despite a decade of economic hardship and mushrooming moral panic, journalism has not finally been pushed aside. In fact, "in many countries, after a phase of depression, pessimism has receded," the Director of the Oxford's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, David Levy, recently told *Le Monde*. "Moving away from the idea of internet killing journalism to a more balanced perception," according to Levy, has allowed "actors to focus on what they can do to improve the situation" (Levy 2013).

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[11] In his empirical study of *The Guardian* online, Ahmad (2010: 151) observed "the levels of bilious and abusive comments under any given article," suggesting that the "bitterly negative" tone often seems to undermined journalism civil code and solidaristic aspirations.

[12] In fact, journalism has been of little interest to social theory generally (Hardt 2001). Max Weber once intended to study journalism, but managed to compose only a fragmented proposal.

5 Pushback: Journalism Defends Independence

This pushback has come from inside and outside the profession. Vis-à-vis demands
to transform themselves into bloggers, journalists have put up a furious resistance,
adamantly refusing to subordinate their sacred professional ethics and idealistic
civic morals to what they see as the profane logic of market and technology. When
they have remained employees, journalists have not allowed news reporting to be
transformed into information collection. When they have been fired, journalists have
continued to ploy their craft in professionally inflected news blogs—at last report, as
many as 10 % of those who have lost regular newspaper jobs (Schudson 2010).[13]
Pushback against economic and technological "desecration" (Luengo, this volume)
has also emerged from the broader civil sphere within which journalism nests. The
last decade has witnessed a chorus of *cris de coeur* from public intellectuals,
academics, columnists, religious authorities, public figures, and even politicians.

Examining digital transformation at the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* and the
public responses it triggered, Maria Luengo found that enduring moral, journalistic,
and civil codes informed both sides of the struggle. In May 2012, Newhouse
Publications, the *Picayune*'s corporate owners, revealed their intention to reduce
print production of the newspaper to 3 days a week while steeply upgrading news
reporting and posts on its 24/7 website. What followed this announcement was an
explosion of protest and heated self-defense, one side evoking civil discourse to
"trigger reactions within the journalistic sphere and the public," the other to "justify
economic and technological changes made by newspaper management." These
equal and opposite reactions drew on the same underlying cultural commitments.
Examining reports that documented the organizational changes and public
statements by those initiating and opposing them, Luengo found "facts"—neutral
information—hard to come by. "Articles reported changes as facts," she observes,
"but they were actually coded facts." Suggesting that "the facts were 'thinner' than
reported," she describes how reporters "thickened them with a selective factual
reporting that reveals civil and anti-civil codes."

Amidst the outburst of indignant local, national, and even international reporting,
Luengo finds, there were "mobilizations across urban social networks in New
Orleans, public demonstrations on behalf of the newspaper, and a statement signed
by the newly formed '*Times-Picayune* Citizens Group' of influential citizens." The
old daily newspaper was represented nostalgically, as having been the acme of a
crusading, corruption-fighting, public-serving, ultra-professional democratic med-
ium. One church pastor from a poor neighborhood "urged his congregation to pray
for the *Times-Picayune* and the reporters who were losing their jobs." Calling the
newspaper a "tonic," the religious leader lamented that "many in his flock would be
shut out by the changes." Even the city's Mayor, himself a frequent *Times-Picayune*
target, felt compelled to testify that "the dedication of journalists and their

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[13] "This very crisis, by letting go thousands of reporters and editors, has provided a workforce of talented
and experienced journalists [and] some of them have been able to quickly produce quality news reporting
with small staffs, low costs, and alliances with other online organizations, with traditional newspapers and
broadcasters, and with philanthropists who believe that the withering of news institutions threatens the
vitality of local communities and national well-being" (Schudson 2010: 17).

professionalism have made our civil business and education institutions stronger, more transparent and honest." For their part, the new, more digitally oriented managers at the *Times-Picayune* framed the changes as necessary to preserve professional ethics and civic morals. In the new digital "space for information," one editor argued, the old cycle of reporters posting their daily content each evening simply could no longer be sustained.

> We wanted reporters to be out in the communities where the news is happening and not sitting at their desk hiding behind piles of documents. We want them talking to people and we have given them the [digital] tools and infrastructure to be able to report their stories wherever they are. They do not have to come back to the newsroom to plug into a network and edit the story. [They] gotta get up, start tweeting, check aggregates, be on the social media, check posts, check comments … This doesn't diminish journalism, it [just] makes the job a lot tougher … The rigors of new journalism filter out the lightweight would-be journalists [but] nothing about 24 h news cycles is bad for journalism.

Luengo concludes that, paradoxically, the exploding "fear of civil annihilation" on one side, and the pressure on managers and editors to defend the civil character of the digitalizing changes, on the other, have "encouraged social forces to explore new ways of defending ethical journalism for the people of new Orleans."

> News organizations do not seem to be declining, nor is local journalism dying … Years ago, relatively few news media organizations [were] operating in the city. Now there is a proliferation of news media outlines: *The Times-Picayune*, *The Advocate*, the nonprofit The Lens, and a wide range of online and offline media outlets. After the critical coding of the *Times-Picayune*'s print reduction, lay-offs, and expansion of the website, some reporters were re-hired …. Other journalists joined *The Advocate*, a new home-delivered daily newspaper that had partnered with the [local] WWL-TV station to reinvigorate investigation. Meanwhile, *Times-Pic* editors made fervent public declarations about maintaining professional standards with serious investigative reporting. A series of investigative stories on campaign finance entitled "Louisiana Purchased" was launched, and distribution of a tabloid version of the paper, *TPStreet*, started on [what had been] digital-only days.

6 Cultural Power and Hybridity

The discourse that has triggered the crisis of journalism is sharply binary, filled with ominous claims and counterclaims about purity and danger, the sacred and profane. Yet, the actual practices taking shape on ground-zero of journalism have proved increasingly hybrid (Revers 2014, 2015). Of course, many scholars continue to make breathless observations about blogs and twitter ushering in an "ambient" (Hermida 2010a, b) new world of "immersion" (Ahmad 2010), one that will tear down the walls between news and information, writing and marketing, and

journalist and audience, and create a seamless new world of empowered citizens reporting to and about themselves. When massive political repression (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012; Zeyunep and Wilson 2012; Hermida et al. 2012; Alexander 2012) and extreme natural disaster (Ostertag 2013) make journalism impossible, social media can provide an alternative. Such exceptional situations aside, however, web technology has rarely been deployed in a manner that severs the link between reporting information and professional journalistic norms.

As Boczkowski (2004: 102–103) first suggested in his foundational study of the *New York Times*, new technology has "repurposed" the print process into "online newsrooms"; digital media has displayed familiar forms of "print storytelling"; and "online journalists" have exhibited an "occupational identity that resembled the one of their print counterparts, as defined partly by a traditional gate-keeping function and a disregard for user-authored content" (103). Singer's more methodologically controlled study of J-bloggers confirmed these findings. While affirming, "political j-bloggers use links extensively" in such a highly interactive and "participatory format," she insists these are "mostly to other mainstream media sites," in which "although expressions of opinion are common, most journalists are seeking to remain gatekeepers" (2005: 173). Singer concludes that journalists "are 'normalizing' the blog as a component, and in some ways an enhancement, of traditional journalistic norms and practices" (ibid). Investigations of more contemporary web technology have discovered a similar normalizing process to be at work. Lasorsa et al. (2012: 19) demonstrate that J-Tweeters strongly resist the partisanship of blog culture. Although non-elite journalists sometimes do "act more like other non-journalist Twitter users—by posting their opinions on Twitter"—only one in seven J-Tweeters actually engages in "major opining" (Lasorsa et al. 2012: 228–30). In an ethnography of political reporters in Albany, New York, Revers (2014) observes "journalism has embraced twitter" as a welcome "augmentation of news production space," but warns that "the idea of replacement of one by the other is absurd." Revers finds that concerns about professionalism are a "constant subject of discussion" among even the youngest, most twittering reporters, and that the latter justify their tweeting of ongoing events by expanding, not inverting, such traditional norms as speed, accuracy, responsiveness, and transparency.

Studies of small, less institutionalized community "news" websites see normalizing hybridity as well. While Nikki Usher (2011: 266) believes the new technology can allow "what counts as a public concern…to be defined by citizens themselves"—rather than relying "on traditional news organizations for the dissemination of content"—she finds that, on the ground, "reality is not that simple."

> The Web 2.0 world, in fact, has only accelerated the extent to which a commercial and professional impulse from news outlets permeates citizen content. News organizations can take advantage of the ease and speed that citizens have in sharing their content in a way that is timely and relevant. (ibid)

Reporting on a study of 100 start-up news websites on the West coast of the U.S., Ryfe (2013) writes that, while entrepreneurs were "initially inclined to do

something different with their sites," they are pushed by sources, readers, and even advertisers to employ the new technology in a manner that conforms more closely to journalistic models of news.

> Imagine for a moment that you are a news entrepreneur … You have never worked in a newsroom or covered a daily news beat. You do have some technical skills. Maybe you worked for a technology startup in the past. After several months of work setting up your site, you are ready to launch [but] you need access to information. You need to figure out how are you going to make money. And you need credibility. You quickly find that these problems are interrelated. For instance, one of the first things you do is attend a city council meeting. Before the meeting, you want to ask a few questions of the city councilmen. When you approach, one of them naturally asks, who are you? Who do you work for? You explain that you have just started a new community news site. This response elicits the question: you aren't one of those bloggers, are you? The next day, in an attempt to attract advertising to your site, you visit a neighborhood bookstore and ask to talk to the owner … She asks if you work for the small neighborhood newspaper that has existed in the community for years. You shake your head no. She narrows her eyes just a bit and asks: Then who do you work for? Are you a blogger? … Gaining access to information and advertising is directly tied to credibility. Sources will be less willing to talk with you if you are not a journalist, and business owners will be less likely to place and advertisement on your site. Even audiences will be less likely to visit … The accusation of being a blogger rather than a journalist was not merely a blow to the ego of these entrepreneurs. Potentially, it could harm their business. (ibid)

Ryfe's conclusion about new Internet-based websites—that their "alignment with core elements of journalism's culture is obvious" (cf. Ryfe 2012)—confirms the broader argument I am making here.

If one gets past the "technotopian" discourse, it becomes possible to understand how Internet and journalism can be changed from agonistic binaries into friends. Theoretical reduction has created false hopes and false fears. Neither technology nor economics exercises its social effects in isolation. They are mediated by the professional ethics of journalism and the civic morals that anchor them.

Like every major technological invention over the last two centuries, the social and economic upheavals triggered by Internet are real and often destructive. But predictions of Internet's transformational consequences for social life, for better and for worse, have been greatly exaggerated. Culture is the dark matter of the social universe, invisible but exercising extraordinary power. The meanings of journalism are fervently formed and fiercely delineated, and the cultural power of the profession resists technological and economic determinism. Cultural power generates individual and collective agency, the resourcefulness that allows journalists and supportive communities and institutions, not only to resist desecration, but also to engage in civil repair. Certainly, the preservation of any professional craft is never guaranteed. The more central a profession to core beliefs and institutions, however, the more its existential struggles generate defense and

support. The professional ethics of journalism are deeply intertwined with the civic morals of democratic practices and institutions, and have been for centuries. Only if we comprehend this centrality can we understand why a crisis of journalism exists. Only by clarifying the cultural roots of this crisis can we comprehend how it can be reconsidered.

7 Pathways of *Re*construction

Journalism is not facing the creative destruction that Schumpeter, focused on the entrepreneurs of technology and markets, proclaimed as capitalism's fate. The prophesized transition from news journalism to infosphere—the brave new world of every citizen-a-reporter—is not on offer. Money making machines of Internet technology—whether Google, Facebook, Amazon, or such aggregating engines as the *Huffington Post*—are compelled to directly or indirectly support journalistic modes of news gathering and reporting. Otherwise, there would not be any news to sell, to aggregate, to advertise, to analyze or satirize.

The pathways of journalism's creative *re*construction are not set in concrete. Whether on-the-ground-hybridity will allow private companies to generate enough profit to finance journalism is not a question that can be definitely answered at the present time. In the United States, private enterprises marketing journalism nationally appear increasingly resilient. The *New York Times*' second effort to erect a paywall succeeded in 2011, and America's preeminent news platform now has 750,000 digital-only subscriptions to its website, the most visited worldwide.[14] The newspaper's financial free fall having been broken, the Sulzberger family owners of the *Times* are not going anywhere soon. The *Wall Street Journal* installed its own paywall in 1997 and currently has one million online subscribers. Purchasing the family-owned company in 2007, Rupert Murdoch so expanded the breadth and depth of its national coverage that the once primarily business-oriented daily now put a full court press on the *Times* (Pew Journalism Research Project 2011). The *Washington Post* presents yet a different pathway to sustaining profitability on the national scene. Purchasing the company from the Grahams in 2013, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos has begun upgrading, significantly increasing staff and infrastructure.[15] Does this move mark the beginning of new political economy for

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[14] "The pile of paywall money is still growing, and for the first time, the Times Company has broken out how big it is: More than $150 million a year … To put that $150 million in new revenue in perspective, consider that the Times Company as a whole will take in roughly $210 million in digital ads this year. And that $150 million doesn't capture the paywall's positive impact on print circulation revenue. Altogether, the company has roughly $360 million in digital revenue" (Chittum 2013). By the end of 2013, NYT.com had 30 million unique visits monthly within the U.S., 45 million worldwide, and an additional 20 million visitors from mobile devices and tablets. On all platforms combined, the paper had 1,926,800 daily paid subscribers and 2,409,000 Sunday (The New York Times Company Annual Report 2013). When it called off 2-year paywall experiment in 2007, the Times' circulation from all platforms totaled only 787,000, including 227,000 online, and its website generated 13 million unique visitors monthly (Perez-Pena 2007).

[15] "In his first conspicuous move as the new owner of *The Washington Post*, Jeff Bezos has approved a budget hike this year that will enable the paper to boost staffing after years of cutback … Several blogs

journalism, its autonomy underwritten by those who control the post-industrial means of production? Will Internet billionaires displace old-time industrial money, plowing their surplus into the creation of hybrid journalism?[16] At least on the national level, Downey and Schudson (2009) are right to observe "consumers of news have more fresh reporting at their fingertips … than ever before."

The economic condition of regional and local newspapers is significantly less sanguine. Hundreds of small town papers are disappearing, and larger city and regional papers have significantly contracted (Downey and Schudson 2009). Competition from Internet advertising is one major economic factor, as classified ads move to specialized blogs and local marketing shifts online (Starr 2009). Yet, there are also self-inflicted wounds. As Anderson (2013) and Ryfe (2012) both have documented, local newspapers have sometimes resisted the transition to hybridity until it proved financially too late. A variety of factors are actually at play in the long-term weakening of local journalism in the United States. From the 1950s onward, there has been a gradual, significant, and seemingly ineluctable decline in news reading among the general public, revealing a shrinking appetite for long-form, non-tabloid news reporting of the local scene (Lemann 2013). Most of the nation's major metropolitan areas became one-newspaper towns decades before the Internet. Meanwhile, national news chains began buying up small town papers by the dozens, displacing serious reporting with tabloid news and entertainment that tracks the transformation of local television reporting. Finally, leading family-owned regional newspapers began selling out to meta-media holding companies. The Chandlers sold the *Los Angeles Times* to the Tribune Company, and the McCormicks gave up their control of the *Chicago Tribune*.

Underlying institutional processes are at work in the debilitation of local and regional journalism. With cultural homogenization, Americans' interest in locality has weakened, even as it created conditions for the emergence of national newspapers for the first time. There is also the political economy of family capitalism, with family properties founded in the industrial period cashing out for more generalized media of exchange. With so much path dependency, causal claims become difficult. Linking the weakness of local newspapers exclusively to the rise of Internet is another reduction-driven mistake.

Footnote 15 continued

and print sections will get more resources and staff additions throughout the year …The Fix, a political blog, will get more reporters. The paper is also starting a new blog that will use data to explain public policies. "Our staff of politics reporters will grow by five early this year," [editor Marty] Baron said. They will work with an expanded staff of photo editors, data specialists and graphics and photo staffers, he said. The paper's website will be redesigned this year, which will require new hires. A new breaking-news desk will operate from 8 a.m. until midnight with the mission of posting stories more quickly online. Money will be spent on print products as well. The Sunday magazine will be given more pages and a new design. A new Sunday Style and Arts section will be introduced in the spring … Adam Kushner, executive editor of the *National Journal*, was named recently to head a new digital team for online commentary and analysis. The paper is currently hiring for the team. Fred Barbash, who was running White House and congressional coverage for Reuters, is returning to the Post to oversee an overnight staff that will refresh news for morning readers" (Yu 2014).

[16] "Steven Hills, Washington Post president told the Financial Times, "Bezos is focusing on developing a great digital audience 10 years from now, 20 yeas from now, rather than immediate profits" (Luckerson 2014).

Whatever the causes, however, the business form that sustained journalism on the local and regional level is no longer in good health. It is striking evidence of the turn toward hybridity that, in response to the crisis of local newspapers, online news-gathering sites have emerged with the aim of taking their place. In the Seattle metropolitan region, for example, Ryfe (2012: 159ff) recently counted more than a hundred such new sites. Many, if not most of these small, ultra-local efforts will not survive (Ryfe 2013), but others will appear. Is there enough profit to finance more efficient, better networked, and more creatively managed online news sites—to balance the decrease in local newspapers? Some local and regional platforms for American journalism may have to be removed from the commodity chain. Just as contemporary capitalist societies have made art, education, and sometimes television and radio programming into so-called public goods, so they may have to decommodify (Kopytoff 1986) segments of the journalistic field. In the USA, such de-commodification efforts have come principally from philanthropists and nonprofit foundations, with $128 million invested in financing online platforms in the 5 years from 2005 to 2009.[17] While contemporary American politics make any sweeping effort to extend government subsidies unlikely (Pickard 2011), more indirect support via changes in tax laws is possible (Downey and Schudson 2009). Outside the USA, it may well be that local, regional, and national governments will step in.

8 The Performativity of Journalism

How many well-financed platforms for serious news are necessary for the professional ethics and civic morals of journalism to be sustained? To frame an answer to this question, one final theoretical revision must be made. Just as news should be conceived as discourse rather than information, so must the notion of informed reader give way to that of interpreting audience. As Internet instanta-neously spreads news far and wide, the civic impact of journalistic judgment becomes ever more a matter of performativity (Alexander 2011). The spatial and temporal projection of news discourse has dramatically increased. When actions and events seem threatening to civil ideals, and are reported by an authoritative forum, they immediately become national and international "news." Whether millions in a mass audience actually encounter the content of such informational warnings is not

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[17] Nonprofit financing of digital platforms for professional journalism in the USA has begun to play a significant role on the national level as well: "Bill Keller, a columnist at The New York Times and its former executive editor, will leave the paper to become editor in chief of The Marshall Project, a nonprofit journalism start-up focused on the American criminal justice system. "It's a chance to build something from scratch, which I've never done before," Mr. Keller said, "and to use all the tools that digital technology offers journalists in terms of ways to investigate and to present on a subject that really matters …" Formed late last year by Neil Barsky, a journalist turned Wall Street money manager, The Marshall Project is a non-partisan news organization dedicated to covering criminal justice. "Since the day I was born, I have been aware that the criminal justice system in American is bizarrely horrible and weirdly tolerated," Mr. Barsky said. "The main reason is that it's been that way for such a long duration that we don't challenge it anymore." With The Marshall Project, Mr. Barsky said that he hoped to ignite a national conversation about the criminal justice system" (Somaiya 2014).

as important as the act of signaling itself (Spence 1973).[18] As Philip Meyer (2009: 213) suggests, "not all readers demand such information, but … the educated, opinion-leading, news-junkie core of the audience always will." Asking "won't democracy be endangered if the newspaper audience shrinks down to this hard core," Meyer answers "not at all" (ibid.).

> The Paul Lazarsfeld two-step flow effect can only be enhanced by the Internet. It is being converted to a many step flow. The problem is not distributing the information. The problem is maintaining a strong and trusted agency to originate it. Newspapers have that position of trust in the minds of the public. That trust – or influence – is their core product. If the product is directed at the hard-core news junkies and opinion leaders in the community, circulation will shrink, and that's not a bad thing … Those readers are the most valuable – not just for their consuming habits but for their influence on others. (ibid.)

If an audience of critical and influential citizens is presumed to be in place, then authoritative publication of critical news judgments triggers a self-fulfilling prophecy. To repurpose John Austin (1975), the cultural effect of a news story can mostly be achieved by the very act of publishing it, whether in print or online. Members of the citizen-audience assume one another to be reading and deciphering the same journalistic judgment, and those in positions of social power make the same assumption at the same time.[19] "News becomes a theatre," Schudson (2010) observes, "regardless of whether the public audience is large or small."

> Journalism can perform its institutional role as a watchdog even if nobody in the provinces is following the news. All that matters is that people in government *believe* they are following the news. If an inner circle of attentive citizens is watchful, this is sufficient to produce in the leaders a fear of public

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[18] Michael Spence (1973) conceptualized "signaling" as a way parties to an economic exchange can communicatively overcome the problem of asymmetric information. He did so by drawing from the theorizing of Erving Goffman, who developed a micro approach to the performative dimensions of social life.

[19] The deeply damaging controversy that linked New Jersey Governor Chris Christie to a three-day traffic jammed on the George Washington Bridge is a case in point. On September 9, 2013, two traffic lanes were closed on the Fort Lee side, bringing outgoing traffic to a snail's pace. In their initial response to complaints, officials claimed the closings were part of a traffic control study, but suspicions of a political vendetta by Christie-appointees soon surfaced. Only when these were reported in a small town weekly, *The Record* newspaper in Bergen County, N.J., did a de-legitimation process begin that culminated in a national scandal engulfing the prominent Republican Governor, until then a leading Republican contender for President in 2016. In an exhaustive reconstruction of the scandal-creating process, the *New York Times* emphasized the power of small things: "As a news story, the bridge backup seemed minor. After all, if you were going to write about traffic jams in New Jersey you might as well also report on someone getting a cold sore or the fact that a man had his driveway paved. But at The Record newspaper in Bergen County, the publisher heard from a friend that it was taking hours to cross the bridge, a tidbit that founds its way to John Cihowski, who writes the paper's 'Road Warrior' column. His first thought was, 'Oh gosh, the George Washington Bridge is tied up every day." On the other hand, he reasoned, 'I tend to follow-up the dumbest things.' He poked around, found that delays had persisted all week and wrote a column that was published on Friday, September 13" (Kleinfeld 2014).

embarrassment, public controversy, legal prosecution, or fear of losing an election. (Ibid., italics added)[20]

The cultural and institutional vitality of journalism is being sustained, but the platforms for projecting news are becoming fewer, the readership for serious news diminishing to a smaller circle of committed readers. Such voraciously interpreting citizens, however, constitute an ample audience. Civically oriented news is projected in widening spirals that compel responses from other institutions, shaping public opinion and shaking up the powers that be.

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[20] Such a performative approach to the cultural effects and democratic potential of journalism connects with Schumpeter's (1975 [1942]: 235–283) anti-classical, realist theory of democracy: "The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (269). Rejecting the classical ideal of the body of rational citizens participating in a polis, Schumpeter introduced a minimalist definition of democracy, requiring not full participation but competition for votes and the institutional separation of powers and rule of law that allow it. Just so, the idea of news media providing information to rational citizens, while normatively compelling—and culturally powerful—is not sociologically realistic. The discourse of civil society assumes rationality and widely inclusive participation, but it is their presupposition not their empirical reality that allows interpreting journalists, empowered by their professional institution, to affect judgments and actions vis-à-vis the powers that be.

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