

*Note: The following are introductory remarks for our Citizens' Journalism class. It is an example, and its cited specifics may target news of the moment. Pick and choose any portions and craft your own statement on the meaning of Journalism for news consumers.*

— Frank Garred

## **A 'thoughtful' recap of where traditional news media are today**

Today's news media business models are collapsing because Wall Street, not main street, sculpts them; anchored by portfolio managers, not readers-consumers.

News media executives talk to each other, and commiserate and bleed with each other rather than out listening to and talking with their readers-listeners-viewers.

The fate of newspapers is swept up with broad-brush surveys evaluated by statistics experts who know little or nothing about the Journalistic ethic, whatever that means today.

And those speculating on this fate seldom consider the growing value (to readers-consumers) of the community and non-daily newspapers. Why are they successful while the "Newspaper Industry" is failing? Because they can survive on less than a 10 percent profit margin, and produce capital returns that make for a very comfortable relationship within the business community they serve. It's not top down, or bottom up Journalism they emit, but a shared commonality with readers.

News Corp.'s Rupert Murdoch is right. Editors of the major dailies select stories based on their news values. Fine, but what about readers' news values? They don't know; they don't talk with them, only to them.

Citizen Journalism is a cute response to editors' isolationism, but it won't replace the professional Journalists experience, education and judgment in maintaining their integrity, fairness, objectivity (such as it is), accountability, reliability with facts, balance and accuracy.

Dewey's, Lippmann's and Black's (Journalism legends) matrices of doom, as recounted here, certainly aren't inspiring. Historically they may have perspective, but could instead be exploring a Journalistic future based on meaningful and insightful "news" accounts that make a difference, that mean something to the "reader" rather than fill an information matrix crafted from detached surveys of anonymous consumers that tend to relate to technological means of delivery rather than content.

Some news providers proudly display their connectivity with readers by citing their on-line feedback volume. Yet they thump their chests to proclaim their connectedness, while the responders to these feedback web pages remain anonymous and vitriolic. These aren't Citizen Journalists, only a corps of mostly curious and callous news consumers who find

it more tempting to sling the mud than to contribute meaningfully to a community dialogue. (Check out the Steamboat Springs, CO, Pilot website, or review your own for examples.)

Where are the meaningful contributors/respondents? They're too embarrassed to participate in those feedback mosh pits, and too reluctant to provide thoughtful responses in a "letter to the editor" because that same editor they might reach is the one who offers and allows the tripe to flow in those on-line feedback columns.

Television news is no better, maybe worse. We view news anchors and their on-camera colleagues emotionally involved with the stories they report . . . or so they act. News viewers certainly want detail and impact, but do they want the related entertainment: empathetic and sympathetic language and images? Compare the differences between network news and PBS, for an example. Check out the BBC and al Jazeera.

Then we have the bleeding hearts of Journalism, the on-line, radio and cable commentators-cum analysts: Rush Limbaugh, Jon Stewart, from right to left, top to bottom. Limbaugh's website, for example, touts his commercial offerings where you get a coffee mug for a price and a call to advertise with his program. Stewart is a satirist, yet some of my students believe he offers the first word in news of the day. Seriously.

Weblogs (blogs) have joined the news media network. Here you find the blogger's perspective on the "news," yet so many provide their analysis and conclusions on speculative assumption, not reliable, accountable sources. The cell phone photos of a plane crash don't tell us what happened and why; they only reveal the devastation without meaning or context. Does this represent our news values, news judgment and news consumption? You bet! And our news standards get shallower from there.

So here's what we should do:

Journal your news consumption. First list your news resources (specifically name newspapers, radio stations and their voices, broadcast and cable news programs and anchors, web-based news products). Then list specific stories, graphics, commentary and analysis that drew your focus. List elements from any and all that to you were patronizing or not essential. For radio and television news especially, name the reporters/anchors that impress you or distress you. We'll review these next class.

Focus, too, on major local, regional and national events that should affect you: the current economic debacle; the forthcoming election; the crime of the moment; state transportation issues such as our ferry and bridge "crises."

And let's talk about what's missing. What aren't the news media providing that we believe they should, and where can we find the "missing" details? Are those details essential to understand and evaluate the news, or are you just curious?

One of our outcomes here is to give us the inspiration to respond to our news media resources in a thoughtful manner. But can we? Are our news media so disconnected from the consumer that two-way communication — dialogue we call it — is impossible? Let's find out.

Remember, the news we read, view and hear is OURs, not THEIRs. Another outcome is to enfranchise us to demand and receive news media accountability and responsibility for fair, balanced, accurate and complete reporting, preferably objective and without reporters' bias.