



# **A New Information Environment:**

**how digital fragmentation is  
shaping the way we produce  
and consume news**

**by Ricardo Gandour**



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*In honor of David Klatell.*



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**Ricardo Gandour** is a Brazilian journalist and a visiting scholar at Columbia Journalism School.

**@rgandour**





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## Executive summary

A new journalistic environment is being built. It is characterized by consolidation and fragmentation, two conceptually opposed phenomena that advance simultaneously.

People received news from professional newsrooms, and journalistic companies sustained themselves with that exclusivity. With the Internet, information became abundant and mostly free. With social media, content from newsrooms is replicated in broken pieces. And everyone has become capable of creating and distributing content and having a public voice. There is now more information, and this is undeniably good.

But through social media, professional and other qualified news is mixed with un-checked information and opinions. Rumors and gossip get in the flow. We call this digital fragmentation. Journalistic companies are facing serious difficulties. Many are forced to cut costs, lowering their capacity to offer more corroborated news, context, and analysis. This can lower the quality of the whole news environment.

One effect of digital fragmentation is polarization. Non-fact-based opinions and rumors accelerate the behavior of quickly taking a shortcut to “like” or “dislike”. The debate loses nuance. The other effect is on media literacy. People may be losing the skills to differentiate information from opinion.

When companies can't afford their costs, we say they are losing scale. One solution is to merge. Another is to acquire. Both strategies lead to a context of bigger, but fewer companies. This is called consolidation.

Consolidation will reinforce conglomerates. They manage portfolios with both highly profitable mass media and prestigious but modestly profitable vehicles.

Another effect of fragmentation is the emergence of small vehicles dedicated to specific topics, often under a new model of nonprofit journalism, funded by donations. They complement the news arena and help to mediate the public debate. They are sometimes seen, correctly or not, as advocacy or lobbying. Transparency is a must.

New media ventures may be future targets for more consolidation. Mid-size enterprises will find little or no space.

Working processes are undergoing huge transformations. The separation between journalism and entertainment, journalism and advertising, journalism and advocacy and information and opinion, is, in many cases, unclear or fading out.

In some circumstances, journalism is being applied as a simple tool or a format. Journalism is a method.

Newsroom practices must be preserved. These can determine the quality of – and the accountability for – the new ecosystem that is being shaped.

In this new environment, journalism schools must, more than ever, be in charge of providing professionals and organizations with the fundamentals of the craft. Otherwise, journalism will face the risk of faltering as one of the mainstays of freedom of expression and democracy.

(A video-animation version of this executive summary is available at [http://www.cjr.org/analysis/why\\_the\\_news\\_isnt\\_what\\_it\\_used\\_to\\_be.php](http://www.cjr.org/analysis/why_the_news_isnt_what_it_used_to_be.php))

## Introduction

When Chris Anderson, Emily Bell and Clay Shirky wrote the seminal “Post Industrial Journalism – Adapting to the Present,” published by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism and Columbia Journalism Review in December 2014, they began with the following statement: “this essay is part survey and part manifesto.” The piece is one of the most important recent milestones in the debate on the directions journalism is taking and how news companies can survive in the post-internet, social-media age.

I’ve never forgotten that line, which I see as every bit as precise as it is necessary. In addition to research, journalism is in dire need of manifestos.

So, for this introduction, I take the liberty of borrowing that phrase and appending a third element. This essay is part survey, part manifesto, and part warning.

A sea-change is taking place in the informational environment. The internet has made information abundant and free. Now anybody can edit, publish and disseminate content; have a public voice. The social media have become mega distribution platforms. Much more information is now available and accessible, and this is unquestionably a good thing.

But by reducing the commercial value of information to near zero, the digital revolution has checkmated the main producers of original information—the so called “traditional” newsroom, which now finds itself fighting for survival. This has affected not only media companies, but journalism as a profession.

This transformation, the type of environment under construction, and the effects this transition is having on journalistic method were the main foci of my research as a visiting scholar at the Columbia Journalism School from January to June 2016.

After almost thirty years as an executive, mainly at newsrooms, and an enjoyable five-year stint as a book editor, everyday interaction with the academic world taught me some unforgettable lessons, chiefly:

- never jump to conclusions;
- a sound hypothesis is often better than a premature conclusion;
- hypotheses drop warnings and make us study more.

I'm recalling these points in order to underscore that the theses and ideas set forth here are hypotheses, albeit very strong ones, that remind us to stay alert and redouble our attention.

Rounding out my own reflections and studies in Brazil, the research I conducted over the six-month period includes a bibliographical review, visits to newsrooms (of the "traditional" and "new" varieties), and interviews and discussions with the academics and specialists I was fortunate enough to work alongside during my stay. This essay is a thorough account of everything I read, saw and heard. I hope it proves a significant contribution to the debate on the directions journalism is taking. The digital media have ushered in marvelous communication possibilities, vastly improving many aspects of the social and political interaction within and among peoples, societies and nations. The aim of this work is to warn of the risks this transition poses to one multidisciplinary practice in particular—journalism.

A recurring problem in this debate is the failure to understand that the positives and negatives of this transition are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes, the act of warning or mapping dangers is taken as a negation of, or resistance to, the incontestable advances these new technologies have brought. Misgivings are also often disregarded as the nostalgia of "traditional" editors, but this dismissive approach can only drain and impoverish the much-needed discussion on the future of journalism as a method and practice.

A big portion of the current generation of editing professionals—who have had the pleasure of working with the typewriter and telex as well as the social media and smartphones—has a duty to influence and help construct the future. I have no appreciation for the expression "follow the trends." Trends are something we can help shape and forge. Like the future to come.

New York City, Summer of 2016.

## 1. Fragmentation: the defining characteristic of the new news and information environment

We are experiencing a sea-change in the information ecosystem and in the ways people and societies stay informed and build their standpoints and worldview. We are living through another chapter in the fascinating history of the media that began with Gutenberg's first printing press. Prior to the invention of movable type, knowledge was transmitted orally or through manuscripts. But with Gutenberg's contraption, knowledge and information could be distributed in large scale across vast distances.

In different ways and to varying degrees, changes like those witnessed today have always occurred when media transitioned. The history of the media is a tale of successive cycles of new platforms rising to prominence and falling by the wayside.

In the analogical world, emerging possibilities came either as new transmission channels (radio, telegraph, TV, cable TV) or as some novel physical support (black and white print, color print, high-quality print, vinyl records, CDs, CD-ROM, DVD...). Each new medium impacted and threatened the existing platforms and channels of communication.

In 1844, the first telegraph line was inaugurated between Baltimore and Washington.<sup>1</sup> The following year, touting their "New York and Offing Magnetic Telegraph Line," Samuel Colt and William Robinson noted,<sup>2</sup>

It is evident that the system of telegraphing news is destined to supersede, in a great degree, the publication of commercial newspapers in this and other northern cities. Who in New Orleans, for instance, would subscribe to New York newspapers, and wait eight or ten days for the receipt of commercial news brought by an Atlantic steamer, when they can be in possession of it in as many minutes by our telegraphic correspondence?

Telegrams were the emails of the day, and Colt and Robinson saw them for what they were: breaking news, a clear and present danger to the daily newspaper! In the 50s, the invention of television was thought to have sealed the demise of radio, expected to disappear in a matter of years.<sup>3</sup>

As each new channel or platform arose, it took a while for the novelty to consolidate and achieve a standard and format that allowed the market to get a true measure of its possibilities,

especially the commercial potential that could underpin a business model—the prerequisite for long-term viability. At the same time, the existing mediums (declared doomed) tried to adapt to the new competitor, either by repositioning themselves or by effecting structural changes.

For the British historian Peter Burke, with whom I spoke in March 2016, we are now seeing increasingly shorter cycles, with changes taking place much more frequently and quickly. Hence, for Burke, it is still difficult to predict just how far the present transformation will go. “It was hard to gauge the consequences of the print revolution because the change happened so slowly. On the other hand, it will be hard to assess the consequences of the digital revolution for the exact opposite reason; because it’s happened so fast,”<sup>4</sup> Burke said.

The change we’re seeing now is of another nature. By “today,” we mean the digital cycle that began with the advent of the commercial internet in 1995, and which, as Burke reminds us, subdivides into short, swift innovation cycles.

Today, the transformation is not confined to physical supports or distribution platforms, but pervades the logic by which communication is established.

In pre-internet times, the prevailing logic was that of supply (newspapers, radio and TV) meeting demand (from readers, listeners and viewers). The suppliers undertook to package something and “deliver” it to the customers, whose sole role was to “use” what was delivered. The client’s function was passive and receptive.

The digital revolution changed all that by giving a voice to whoever wanted one. This put an end to the primacy of what I call “stable platforms of production and publishing,” chief among them the traditional newsroom (let’s call it that), where the practice of professional journalism is (still) pursued. The newsroom is a place where professionals hired, trained and paid for that purpose gather to mine, screen and publish news, analysis and commentary. It’s an established enterprise.

It’s different today. The plethora of two-way digital channels, empowered by permanent forums of exchange and interaction (social media), have given just about anyone the power to edit, publish and opine. There’s so much more information available, and that’s undeniably good.

But there are aspects to this new scenario that need to be assessed, along with their possible impacts:

1. People today are exposed to an informational mishmash of professionally-produced news, or snippets thereof, laced with rumor, gossip and opinion drawn from various different sources;
2. The mechanisms by which social media groups are formed tend towards a clustering of like-minded individuals. This natural tendency can be catalyzed by algorithms that manage content distribution based on user preferences;
3. The weakening of stable production and publishing platforms (newsrooms) can cause general informational impoverishment, a degradation of the information ecosystem.

“Traditional” newsrooms are still a major source of supply for the news environment, but if they are undermined, what type of content will be replicated, even in snippets, on the social

networks?

4. The decadence of these stable platforms of production—the established media, responsible for the logic of supply—could enfeeble the setting of what social scientists call a “common public agenda”;
5. The consolidation of social media as the main distributors of news sparks anew, and more urgently than ever, the old debate on algorithm transparency (or lack thereof). Are these sophisticated recommender systems and their administrators the de facto new “editors” and “publishers”?

This new environment in which the “stable platforms of production and publishing” are deteriorating, while the Internet enables anyone with access to publish, edit and republish information, suggests a single word whose meaning is as powerful as it is ample: **fragmentation**.

The concept is relatively new and there is still a lot of research to be done on it, as Tewksbury and Rittenberg warned in 2012: “The single term ‘fragmentation’ has been used to refer to audience behavior, media content and outlets, audience interests, public discussion, and public agendas.”<sup>5</sup>

For the authors of *News on the internet: Information and Citizenship in the 21st Century*, “fragmentation is the dissolution over time of audience news exposure, public affairs knowledge, and political beliefs into smaller units in a society.”<sup>5</sup> Using television as an analogy, Tewksbury and Rittenberg describe fragmentation as “a process by which the mass audience, which was once concentrated on three or four news options, becomes widely distributed. As a result, the average channel audience becomes smaller.”

They added that “fragmentation can occur when news outlets specialize.”<sup>5</sup>

Specialization is another characteristic of the present transformation—not necessarily a new one, but significant and occurring now in another context—and we will return to it further on. The authors alerted to an important effect of fragmentation and the loss of relevance of the so-called “dominant medias”: “In a fragmented society, the public agenda and mass political behavior are unpredictable.”

When the logic of supply and demand still prevailed, it was as if society as a whole (demand) had only one or a few sources to look to (supply). The internet in general and the social media in particular have broken that logic, placing supply and demand on the same level, with demand, the audience, perhaps wielding the greater “power.” Yet total fragmentation can severely abrade the concept of a “public agenda.”

Not long after Tewksbury and Rittenberg, in 2013, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein<sup>6</sup> also broached the concept of fragmentation: “Although some authors have proposed that the use of online sources of information doesn’t diminish the influence of the media on the public’s agenda, others have hypothesized that the online environment may erode editorial influence over the public’s agenda as a result of the multiplications of news outlets and the resulting fragmentations of the audience.”



The authors<sup>6</sup> added:

The conceptual and political import of a diminution in the power of the media to set the agenda is particularly critical during periods when the citizenry could benefit most from information about public affairs –periods marked by major political or economic events, such as elections or crises. (...) The loss of leading news media as sources of information for debate would lead to the overall impoverishment of public deliberation and the fragmentation of our shared public space, as national mainstream media are replaced by smaller niche outlets as scenarios for deliberation.

Boczkowski and Mitchelstein cited the German philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas: “The rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tends (...) to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated-issue publics,” wrote Habermas. And they argued that “within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication when newsgroups crystalize around the focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines.”

Therein resides an apparently conflicting aspect. Even fragmented, the news ecosystem is still being supplied—in the literal sense—by the so-called “traditional press,” which produces material which the social media then chop up and distribute—i.e., fragmentize.

In short:

- social media, especially Facebook, have come to the fore as the main channels of distribution and are, in the sense we are adopting here, the main agents of fragmentation;
- “traditional” newsrooms are still the primary sources of original, quality content for the conduits represented by these media and their algorithms;
- fragmentation undermines these newsrooms. Forced to cut costs, they weaken their reporting power and so also their ability to supply the new media;
- the user may not notice, but there is likely a considerable drop in the overall quality of the content being produced.

Conducted in 2009 and updated in 2015, a study by the Pew Research Center,<sup>7</sup> a Washington D.C.-based fact tank that specializes in the trends and issues affecting US politics, observed “a significant decline in the reporting power of mainstream media.” The institute focused its report on the Washington press corps, specifically the “daily newspaper, historically the backbone of American journalism, whose robust Washington presence and aggressive reporting has uncovered scandals that toppled a president, sent members of Congress to jail and does the daily job of covering

congressional delegations and federal agencies.”<sup>7</sup>

This streamlining is not exactly new: “From the mid 1980s to 2008, the number of papers with bureaus in Washington, according to Hudson’s Washington Directories, has fallen by more than half.”<sup>7</sup>

It has, however, accelerated in recent years: “In the last decade (1997 – 2009, with numbers updated to include the 2009-2010 session), the number of newspaper reporters accredited to cover Congress in particular has fallen by 30%.”<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, they wrote, “the number of specialty newspapers, magazines and newsletters has risen by half since the mid-1980s. Newsletters alone are up nearly two thirds. And from 1997–2009, the number of staff from these outlets accredited to cover Congress, a count of Congressional Directories shows, grew by nearly 50%.”<sup>7</sup>

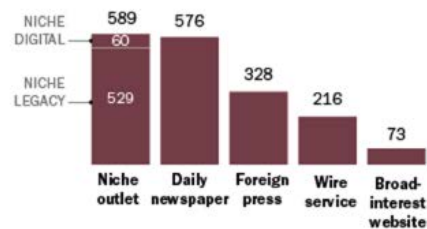
We will return to this explosion of smaller niche vehicles later on.

### In the Washington press corps, niche, digital media expand as print scales back

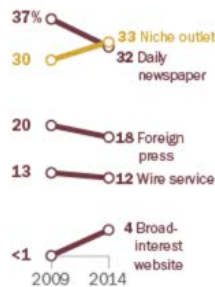
Four U.S. Senate galleries accredit journalists to cover Congress. This analysis focuses on the Press Gallery.



# of journalists accredited by the Press Gallery in 2014 from each media sector



% of journalists accredited by the Press Gallery



# of journalists for all digital-native outlets accredited by Press Gallery



Source: Congressional Directory, 113th Congress (February 2014), 111th Congress (December 2009).

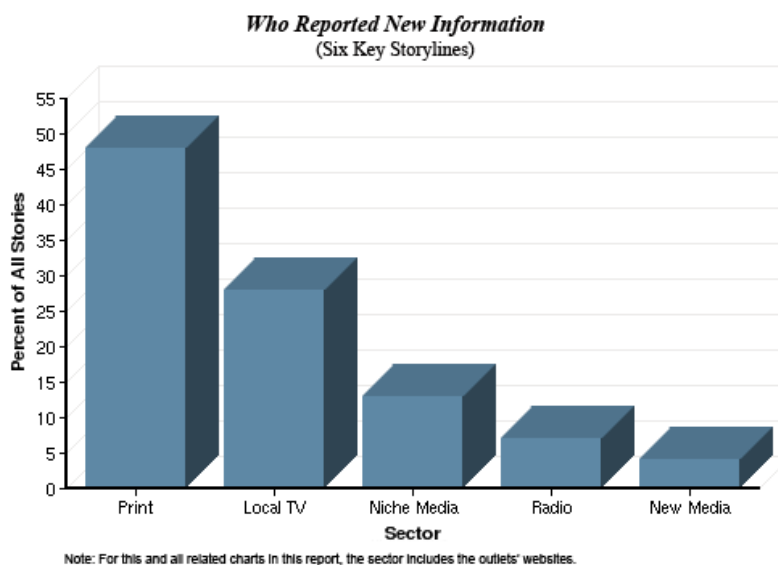
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The Pew Research Center had already rung the alarm bells in 2010, with a study<sup>8</sup> of the information ecosystem in Baltimore, Md.:

The questions are becoming increasingly urgent. As the economic model that has subsidized professional journalism collapses, the number of people gathering news in traditional television, print and radio organizations is shrinking markedly. What, if anything, is taking up that slack?

The study found that the news environment, whatever the channel of distribution, remains heavily reliant on the original content produced by traditional newsrooms. “While the news landscape has rapidly expanded, most of what the public learns is still overwhelmingly driven by traditional media—particularly newspapers,” the authors wrote.

The study, which examined all the outlets that produced local news in Baltimore, Md., for one week, surveyed their output and then did a closer examination of six major narratives during the week, and found that much of the “news” people received contained no original reporting. Fully eight out of ten stories studied simply repeated or repackaged previously published information. And of the stories that did contain new information, nearly all, 95%, came from traditional media—most of them newspapers. These stories then tended to set the narrative agenda for most other media outlets. The local papers, however, are also offering less than they once did. For all of 2009, for instance, the Sun produced 32% fewer stories on any subject than it did in 1999, and 73% fewer stories than in 1991, when the company still published an evening and morning paper with competing newsrooms.<sup>8</sup>

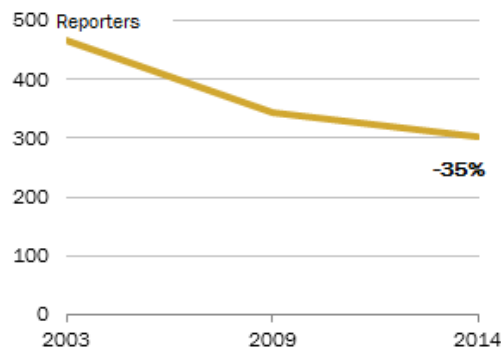


In other words, if the “traditional” or “legacy” outlets are still responsible for most of the credible original content produced, what could come of the decline of these organizations and their ability to gather and publish original, reliable news?

In 2014, Pew also tracked the decline of statehouse reporting.<sup>9</sup>

### Newspaper Statehouse Reporters Decline

# of full-time newspaper statehouse reporters



Note: Figures are based on a subset of newspapers, identified in the AJR studies and the current Pew study.

Source: Pew Research Data Aug. 2013 to March 2014 and American Journalism Review.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

“I do think there’s been a loss in general across the country, and that’s very concerning to me,” said Patrick Marley, of *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

“I think you’re seeing fewer stories,” said Gene Rose, the longtime former communications director for the National Conference of State Legislatures. “The public is not being kept aware of important policy decisions that are being made that will affect their daily lives.”

Schudson<sup>10</sup> was categorical on this:

In sum, the losses to democracy are real and impossible to calculate. And they may be greatest (...) in local and state news reporting, not in national and foreign reporting. The news functions that require the greatest investment in the time and skill of journalists and the resources of their news organizations – investigation, analysis, and social empathy – are the parts of journalism most in jeopardy. They often require persistence and even courage, not only on the part of the reporter but on the part of the news organization that hires the investigative journalists and that may be asked to stand behind them, even in the courtroom if necessary.

In Brazil in 2016, I conducted two quantitative studies that had never been done before. The first of these was among National Press Association “quality papers.” Editors-in-chief and executive editors responded to a detailed questionnaire comparing the environment in which news is produced and edited today versus that of ten years ago. Editors from sixty dailies took part in the survey, together representing 80% of the total circulation of the Brazilian quality press. The main conclusions were:

- more newsrooms had reduced the number of journalists on their staff (83% of the respondents) than had the number of printed pages per issue (78%);
- Local and national politics were the sections least affected; even so, 34% of the respondents had reduced the number of pages devoted to local politics and 43% the size of the bureaus assigned to the issue. In terms of national politics, 38% of the respondents had reduced the amount of coverage while 33% had cut the number of assigned staff;
- this relative “preservation” of political coverage was more evident in the Southeast where the above-mentioned percentages were lowest. This would appear to make sense in the light of the political turmoil that has swept Brazil since 2005, when investigations began on the corruption scheme known as the “Mensalão” (payouts to legislators in return for congressional support).
- both the production of content and use of content produced by third parties (newswires) saw significant reductions (between 29% and 53% of newsrooms cut back on in-house news production, while 47% to 55% bought less content from news wire services).

In another study, I tried to compare the digital activity of professional newsrooms with that of state governments. In each Brazilian state, the study monitored:

- the number of posts on a chosen social media outlet (Facebook);
- the number of interactions (“likes,” “shares” and “comments”) per post.

We compared data for a chosen news vehicle from each state and the governments of those same states over different periods:

- immediately before the wave of street protests in June 2013;
- the end of 2013;
- the beginning of 2016.

Between 2013 and 2016, those selected newspapers increased their average number of posts per day by 6%. The number of interactions per post rose by 354% during the same period.

State governors increased their average number of posts by 91%, attracting a 654% hike in interactions.

It should be noted that the state government postings were growing by a far lower volume. Before the 2013 protests, 17 of the 27 state governors had no online presence whatsoever. By 2016,

all but 2 of the 27 governors had taken to social media.<sup>11</sup>

The study<sup>11</sup> provides quantitative data for a discussion on the future quality of the information ecosystem as a whole, and on the kind of information citizens and societies will be able to access. The study revealed a decrease in information processed by professional newsrooms and an upsurge in official government propaganda and content propagated through government shells.

In Brazil as abroad, the fragmentation of the “traditional media” and its corrosion as the gatekeeper of the public agenda is a fact—in my view, an alarming fact.

Clay Shirky<sup>12</sup> sees the current transition as an inversion of the classical criteria for news processing: filter first, then publish. Today, it’s “publish first, filter later.”

The media landscape is transformed, because personal communication and publishing, previously separate functions, now shade into one another. One result is to break the older pattern of professional filtering of the good from the mediocre before publication; now such filtering is increasingly social, and happens after the fact.

Martin Baron, editor-in-chief of The Washington Post, is also alert to this fragmentation. “As we can see, newsrooms are shrinking and covering fewer stories.” For him, there’s been a surge in niche-specific sites “with an agenda of their own, a political agenda.”<sup>13</sup>

“In this fragmented scenario, people will ‘farm’ for their preconceptions, seek out ‘facts’ that aren’t facts. Recently, it was all over the internet that President Barack Obama was born in Kenya. People took that as fact,” Baron said. The information was false. Obama was actually born in Honolulu in the U.S. state of Hawaii.

## 2.The effects of fragmentation: polarization

Discussing fragmentation, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein<sup>6</sup> drew attention to one further impact: “The erosion of the agenda-setting influence of mainstream media organizations could lead to the disappearance of broadly shared national concerns, thus diminishing the ability of the public to come together on common issues and maximizing social polarization.”

Polarization is a hot topic at any time, but especially during election season. Dictionaries define it as the “division into two sharply contrasting groups or sets of opinions or beliefs.”<sup>14</sup>

There is strong empirical evidence to suggest that fragmentation feeds polarization. I went in search of evidence to support this contention in studies and reports. The superficiality of the debate on the social media is another catalyst. People want shortcuts (speed being a key trait of the current informational environment ) to rapid “likes” or “dislikes,” and this further impoverishes the debate by eradicating all semblance of nuance.

One of the most frequently mentioned examples of polarization is the herd mentality of the “peer group.” However, this cliquish online behavior is not the only case. The so-called “traditional” media have also waded into the fracas, exacerbating the polarization.

Prior argued that the traditional media reacts to the Internet and social media, fomenting polarization. The traditional media’s reaction to social media is, in a sense, an attempt to “compete” with these new platforms by jumping on all the same bandwagons.

Social media raise the possibility that technology unobtrusively selects contents for users. (...) Recommender agents and search engines such as Google News exercise selectivity and may “learn” and reinforce the tastes of the user. (...) Filtering by humans –e.g. recommendations through social media– may be more effective in generating de facto partisan selectivity because people’s personal networks tend to be more homogenous than their media environments. Yet, social media networks may not have the same properties and composition as offline interpersonal networks.<sup>15</sup>

Allegations of “biased interference” in the findings of the Facebook algorithms came out in May 2016. In a report on the site *Gizmodo*, former Facebook news curators spoke of routinely suppressing conservative-interest stories from the trending topics list.<sup>16</sup> The revelations gave rise to a series of reports in the *The New York Times*, which devoted a great deal of interest to the story.<sup>17</sup>

Mutz<sup>18</sup> said:

Social network studies have long suggested that likes talk to likes; in other words, people tend to selectively expose themselves to people who will not challenge their view of the world. Network survey after network survey has shown that people talk more to those who are like them than to those who are not, and political agreement is no exception to this general pattern. Moreover, many people do not have much desire to engage in political debate to begin with, even the informal variety. Exposure to diverse political viewpoints may be widely advocated in theory, but is much less popular in actual practice. In this sense, the extent to which people are exposed to oppositional views demonstrates some of the same patterns as exposure to diversity along other dimensions, such as race and class. While diversity is a much-lauded public goal in the aggregate, few individual people live their everyday lives so as to maximize their exposure to difference.

Shapiro<sup>19</sup> made an analytical reading of Mutz' work and credited much of the "withdrawal" from (real) political conflict to the traditional media, too, not just to the social media phenomenon of peer grouping.

In *Hearing the Other Side*, Diana Mutz poses a conundrum: The more one is exposed to political disagreement, the more likely one is to withdraw from political engagement. This behavior may result in part from the political polarization of recent decades, but it may also be due to the traditional media, which tend to magnify political competition and portray it as a bitter conflict. The rise of the Internet and social media offered hope that people might more readily encounter the arguments of the other side. Recent research suggests, however, that people thus far tend to consume political information online just as they do offline: selectively.

"Toward the end of *Hearing the Other Side*, Mutz recognizes that the expansion of mass media, especially online media, can provide a heterogeneity of viewpoints that might offset the public's hesitance to seek out divergent viewpoints. However, she suspects that people will self-select and gravitate toward congenial information sources and opinions. A recent flurry of research supports Mutz's skepticism."<sup>19</sup>

However, Shapiro takes a more optimistic view of the effects of fragmentation and these "group behaviors" on social media and offers some counterweights. "There are more information sites and sources, with ease of access eliminating barriers to information. Even if users self-select which sites to visit, or avoid sites where they would encounter those with whom they disagree, they will still be likely to come across some opposing viewpoints serendipitously. This is consistent with sociological analyses: a social network as a whole can be characterized by heterogeneity, even while parts of it are homogeneous and polarized."<sup>19</sup>

"There is also accumulating evidence that the Internet and social media provide more exposure to differing viewpoints than do traditional media. (...) This is likely due to the tendency among political junkies to become Internet junkies, too, and to access a wide range of news sources and outlets. Even though only a small portion of the possible national news audience is exposed to diverse news and opinions, that portion may be increasing."

For Shapiro, "while the internet makes it easier to avoid attitude-discrepant information, online news seekers engage in this avoidance only to a limited extent."<sup>19</sup>



### 3. Effects of fragmentation: media literacy

The concept of media literacy is comprehensive, covering everything from the discussion on how individuals understand and assimilate what they read and hear about complex subjects to how we grasp stereotypes and issues related to violence.

No in-depth study has so far looked into how the fragmentation of the digital media can affect our capacity to interpret facts and data, or distinguish them from information, analysis, and opinion. I spoke to various educators and specialists about this specific issue, and they all agreed that it is a theme that needs more thorough exploration.

Yet, it has attracted interest from the Stony Brook University School of Journalism, a part of State University located an hour and a half northwest of New York City. This interest was no accident: Stony Brook is home to the Center for News Literacy, conceived, founded, and directed by Professor Howard Schneider.

Before talking about how to recognize information credibility and quality, Schneider<sup>20</sup> said he looks to teach his students to recognize “what neighborhood they’re in.”

They have to learn to scout the terrain first, by running some checks. First of all, you have to look for signs of fact-checking. Has the information been verified? Second, is there independence from political parties, companies or ideologies? Third, can you identify the credentials and qualifications of the publisher—the source of that information? If these three factors check out, then you’re in the news neighborhood.

Only then, said Schneider, will readers, especially young readers, be able to find their way through the “abundant and confusing environment” in which we live. “There is so much information that looks journalistic, that looks verified and independent, but it’s actually not. It’s false news,” he wrote.

This “journalistic appearance” has the power to aggregate credibility to a given piece of information that is not necessarily journalistic. It’s in situations like these that journalism is used as a support tool, a format.

“The borders between journalism and other information neighborhoods are becoming blurred, ill-defined,” he said. By other “neighborhoods,” he means areas like entertainment or advertising. What about the difference between journalism and opinion? “The latter is a sub-division of the former,” said Schneider. Having verified that you are in the news neighborhood, a second step is to determine whether it’s factual or assertive.”

But, Schneider also sees warning signs in this mix: “The problem is that all of these pieces,

of different natures, some informative and others opinion-based, are packaged as one and the same thing: news.”

Schneider said that he trains his students on two fronts, as consumers and publishers. “As everybody today is a reader and a publisher at the same time, we show them how important it is that they apply the same principles they were trained to as information readers/consumers.”<sup>19</sup>

## 4. Forces of consolidation

Can you manage a journalism company the same way you would a bakery? The question sounds old and outdated, and we all know the answer, but it’s worth returning to nonetheless. Most companies, and this holds for the bakery, too, can be analyzed through the simple lens of general managerial practice. You produce the bread and pastries, control the quality and costs, take steps to boost sales, and track the results.

We know that a journalism company is different, but the differences go farther than we might expect. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein adopt the bakery analogy to illustrate the dilemmas that come with approaching journalism as a business. In their illustration, they tell the story of a neighborhood bakery that decided it wanted to do more than make money: it wanted to contribute to its customers’ wellbeing. So, in addition to popular refined-flour goods that sold well, they introduced a 40% quota of whole-wheat flour goods that sold less, but were better for their customers’ health. The problem was that 10% to 20% of the whole-wheat flour stock went unsold each day, representing losses and waste, while the refined-flour stuff sold out.

The owners of the bakery decided to persist in this social health-promoting mission by continuing with the whole-wheat flour supply despite the low demand.

However, things have changed in the past few decades. The neighborhood has continued to grow at a normal pace, but the bakery now has much more competition from other bakeries. In addition, convenience stores offer mostly the top-selling breads and make it easier for customers to avoid the healthier options. This has decreased the revenues of the neighborhood bakery and threatened the viability of its business. The people currently in charge of the bakery would like to keep its social mission alive. Should they go on making about 40 percent of their goods with whole-wheat flour, with the expectation that the preferences of consumers may change? Or should they cut their losses and give customers more of what they want, even though that may not be conducive to their well-being?<sup>6</sup>

In other words, should we go for healthy or tasty? Boczkowski and Mitchelstein used the comparison to analyze the journalistic dilemma of making supply meet demand, something that would absolutely be the normal way to pursue any line of business except the provision of news, analysis, and opinion.

The example of the bakery parallels the predicament of the media organizations. They provide readers with much of the news that circulates in the society, particularly the news that is essential for healthy functioning of the body politic.<sup>6</sup>

Does the glut of choice afforded by the digital environment—marvelously positive in many ways—lead to overconsumption of “superfluous” items to the exclusion of the information that is actually indispensable to public life and citizen-formation? The authors, who conducted empirical studies on various news websites, found that:

Although the news organizations disseminate news about politics, international and economic matters, the stories that garner the most attention from the public tend to be about sports, crime, entertainment and weather.<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, this is not to say that staying informed about sports, crime, entertainment, and the weather has no relevance or value in itself. To return to the bakery analogy, there’s nothing wrong with the occasional sugar-coated doughnut. The problem is when personal demand preferences dictate all intake to the detriment of contact with the wider—and, in this case, healthier—supply.

What we have here is an important reflection on how to manage the supply of journalistic content. If the convenience stores had not opened in the neighborhood, would our bakery have been able to keep up its 40% quota of whole-wheat flour baked goods, and so contribute to some degree to its customers’ health?

There’s maybe a paradox here. The appearance of new competition is always positive for the client/customer relationship. That’s a clear, basic precept of general management. Classically, increased competition leads to better, cheaper supply, which benefits demand with a wider selection of goods at a wider selection of prices.

In terms of journalism the (mis) match between supply and demand acquires graver tones: where does audience volume and scope leave quality and specialization?

## **A new type of competitor**

It is interesting to note that we have so far been analyzing a market context—taking the neighborhood bakery as a case—in which the competitor shares our base concepts, in other words, the

competitor is offering similar goods through similar channels at similar prices. There's a level playing field.

But, what happens when a competitor turns up who is operating from another set of premises? This leads us to address two contemporary phenomena. The first is news aggregators (such as Google News, Yahoo News, blogs), and the other is social media, such as Facebook. Both of these tools, each with its own characteristics, are robust distribution channels for content produced by third parties.

The aggregators rose to prominence in the 2000s, sparking debate about the legitimacy of their operations, seeing as they harvest and present information content (a ranking of news links compiled by algorithms and sometimes accompanied by some human curation) without remunerating the original producers (the publishers, newsrooms, "legacy" media). In their defense, the aggregators argue that the publishers benefit from the web traffic they redirect.

Athey and Mobius analyzed the effect aggregators have on web-users' news consumption, with special focus on the French and Spanish markets. One of their main conclusions was that the mass-distribution effect the aggregators have does actually increase the users' contact with the news.<sup>21</sup> (In other words, going back to the bakery, those who'd never had contact with any bread before, now did, so the aggregators manage to feed more people than the bakeries do on their own). Basically, this means that even little-known media companies start to become more widely visited because of these aggregators.

That's the positive side identified by the study: an increase in the mass distribution of content produced by media companies. Aggregators are considerable digital news multipliers. However, the same study also notes that the power these rankings wield has a sapping effect on media company curatorship. They conclude that, in practice, the aggregators end up becoming competitors of the companies whose original content they extract and distribute.

Even so, Athey and Mobius<sup>21</sup> highlight the role of newspapers—front pages and home pages—in that curatorship.

In offline newspapers, editors select which news makes it to the front page and how prominently each story is displayed. In online newspapers, the index page takes the role of the front page. Aggregators like Google News bypass the publisher's index page – they essentially replace the publisher's front page with their own index page.

In Brazil, the case of the ANJ, the country's National Newspapers Association, was analyzed at conferences the world over. "Brazil's main newspapers abandoned Google News after the world's top search engine refused to compensate them for the rights to their headlines. The mass rush started last year when the National Association of Newspapers in Brazil, or ANJ, began recommending its members to opt out of the service. ANJ's recommendation was followed by all of the 154 newspapers

that belong to the organization and account for more than 90 percent of the country's newspaper circulation. Google argues the company doesn't need to pay for the rights to use headlines because Google News benefits newspapers by redirecting large volumes of user traffic to their websites,"<sup>22</sup> wrote Isabela Fraga.

At a lecture on the economics course at Columbia University's School of International Public Affairs (SIPA), American economist Susan Athey,<sup>23</sup> the Economics of Technology Professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, outlined the main findings of her research. She underscored the fact that the aggregators fish their news from the legacy media and distribute it massively across a wide area to a vast audience.

The problem—she said—is that this audience is not willing to pay for news content. Mass distribution overcomes news scarcity, but also reduces its face value. As abundance tends toward the infinite, face value slumps toward zero.

My conversation with Athey made me return to the bakery analogy, and its dilemma of sating versus nourishing.

Imagine a food production company that, for the sake of comparative symmetry, we'll say also controls product distribution, which is the case of the traditional media. Picture a competitive environment composed of various producers and distributors that sell their foodstuffs for profit.

Now imagine a new company comes along that specializes in the free, mass distribution of the foods it obtains from these producers. The new company's fleet of trucks sweeps by the producers every morning and gathers up a pick of what each makes and distributes samples of those goods (in a selection far greater than any one producer would be able to provide alone) for free in the same neighborhood those companies cater to. The distributor doesn't pay for these samples, arguing that giving people a taste of the goods on offer drums up interest and custom for those companies.

Certain aspects are important to underline here:

- the distribution of these "samples" is not limited to a specific promotional period, as would normally be the case with "teasers" (which are exactly what the aggregators claim to be offering);
- the samples are distributed free of charge;

Over time, most users content themselves with these free snacks. Some may go to the original producers in search of larger portions, but, in the long run, the free provision of samples ends up reducing the producers' sales.

A slump in sales—considered temporary at first—brings the producers' profits down and that reduces their capacity to invest in product quality and development. But the producers don't want to cut back on supply, because they truly believe these free samples will start to bring in more customers to revive their shrinking profit margins. This is the backbone of the mass-distributors' argument

and it's the promise the producers are banking on coming true.

After a while, the producers begin to lower their quality bar. The mega-distributor doesn't complain because the end consumers aren't complaining—after all, the product's free and does the trick. However, what we observe is a gradual decline in overall product quality, including that of paid merchandise. In other words, people are getting their fill, but the nourishment value is less.

It's important to note that, if the mega-distributor were to pay for the samples it gives away, the producers would be in a better position to invest in product quality, and this would result in a generally higher-caliber commercial environment.

We know that the economic challenges facing journalism companies, especially those that produce print editions, pre-date the Internet age. Declining advertising revenues stretch back to the early 90s, before the first browsers made the internet, hitherto restricted to academic environments, a global phenomenon. Nobody is suggesting here that the advent of free mass-distribution platforms—news aggregators and, later, social media—are the sole culprits in the decreased investment capacity of original news producers.

What we are proposing is that we analyze this specific variable: the glut of free supply, but not only in terms of its economic impact on legacy media outlets, but on the characteristics and quality of the new information ecosystem it's engendering.

## **Loss of scale and mergers**

Let us first look at the issue of declining profit margins and the subsequent drop in investment capacity. We know that, in any market, one of the immediate consequences of loss of scale (when profit margins no longer compensate for fixed costs, such as installations and administration etc.) is consolidation.

When two companies facing loss of scale merge they give rise to a new company that is generally more robust. The new organization shares the same fixed costs, but has a larger product portfolio. With more products on sale (the sum of the two prior companies) and proportionately lower fixed costs, profit margins rebound and investment capacity is restored. On the downside, mergers usually lead to layoffs, especially in the administrative areas (finances, HR, maintenance etc.).

Journalism companies face a specific range of issues that are challenging if not restrictive when it comes to consolidation strategies. To understand these difficulties, it is interesting to remember that organizations largely consist of a backstage and a frontstage, the back office areas and those directly engaged in plying products and services to the end customer.

Normally, mergers start backstage. The merging companies will each have its own financial, legal and administrative departments, and these functions need to be combined together, resulting in immediate gains for the new company.

The first result is that you have two companies being managed at the cost of one, or a little more than one –or less than two–, depending on the specificities, as they are now running off the same back office.

But, what happens on the front line, where the company interfaces with its public, selling its products and services? Frontstage mergers take place at a slower pace. Imagine a chain of doughnut and coffee shops that merges with a burger chain. Gradually, the new outfit will analyze the shared or similar functions and trim off the excess and overlap—for example, the production of desserts and juices, etc. Many industrial and storage processes can also be unified.

Consolidation follows the equation  $1+1 < 2$ . When it comes to costs, the new company is never the sum of its parts. Gains in consolidation are always significant for the business, which recovers (or maximizes) its profit margins allowing it to resume investment in innovation, quality and market share. Mergers lead to layoffs in the short term with a view toward long-term employment growth through business expansion fueled by new investment.

Public perception post-consolidation tends not to be affected, unless the merger results in an organizational culture that is completely unrecognizable. This aspect is most critical in the service industry, where customer service is key. In these sectors, mergers may affect the customer's service perception and satisfaction. In the case of companies producing tangible manufactured goods end quality may not be affected at all, though this depends on the decisions taken by the new management.

Mergers are more likely in organizations with professional boards of directors. When founders or their successors are still in charge, there tend to be more impediments to mergers and acquisitions. Decisions taken in family-run businesses are not always objective or rational, which can disrupt and even derail potentially healthy mergers.

But, the M&A culture is progressing in media industry. Even in countries like Brazil, where family businesses (i.e. where the founder and/or majority shareholder is at the helm) are still prominent, professionalization is increasing.

The challenges facing mergers between journalism companies go beyond the fact that most of these are still family businesses. As we shall see, the frontstage/backstage dichotomy is more sensitive in journalism, especially at the front line.

Behind the scenes, mergers tend to proceed smoothly, even in media companies. However, as in every line of business, even the support functions have to adapt to suit the core business objectives; in other words, finances and admin need to morph according to what's going on frontstage, but this tends not to be so problematic, as their founding concepts are fairly universal.

Things are much more complicated on the journalistic frontstage. How do you merge two publications that have different editorial lines and styles? Of course, certain newsroom tasks can be amalgamated relatively painlessly. Round-the-clock bulletin services? Video production? Photography?

But, I must consider that the above analysis is mostly based on the past, on the analogical

age. The information industry, boosted in recent decades by digital technology, may be accelerating a different scenario, as described by North American professor and researcher Tim Wu in *The Master Switch*. For Wu, mergers are not only possible in the information industry, but inevitable. Wu presents facts and data to illustrate the inexorability of what he calls “the irrevocability of the Cycle of information empires, their eternal return to consolidated order however great the disruptive forces of creative destruction.”<sup>24</sup>

Wu sees characteristics in the information industry that make its competition process and profit wars unique, unlike anything seen in any other line of business.

We now face squarely the question that the story told heretofore is meant to help us answer. Is the Internet really different? Every other invention of its kind has had its period of openness, only to become the basis of yet another information empire. Which is mightier: the radicalism of the Internet or the inevitability of the Cycle? While perhaps not immediately obvious, such deeper questions are in fact at the heart of the ongoing struggle over the future of the Internet. And to come at these problems afresh in the twenty-first century is to be struck by an obvious reality: information has become exceptional as an industrial category even in relation to that industry’s own history.<sup>24</sup>

For Wu, the main difference is that “one universal network carries not a few things, but everything: voice, video, news, culture, and commerce. It is therefore strange that as the stakes get higher, the conventional wisdom has leaned toward a purely economic, as opposed to political, approach. Now is precisely the wrong time to assume that the public and political dimensions of the information economy have somehow disappeared.”<sup>24</sup>

Wu made it clear:

Over the long haul, competition in the information industries has been the exception, monopoly the rule. Apart from brief periods of openness created by new inventions or antitrust breakups, the story is mostly one of dominant firms. There is strong reason to believe that there is nothing new under the sun, that the great universal network is as disposed to monopoly as its predecessors.

One important point emerges out of the dynamics of lost-of-scale driving to mergers and acquisitions. The classical analysis is not enough anymore to frame the current markets impacted by digitalization and fragmentation. It is the so called “network effect,” mainly a result of the fall of geographical barriers, a strong characteristic of the digital age.



As Wu pointed out:

More important than efficiencies and cost and functionality, the defining principle of network economics is the so-called network effect, or network externality. It is the simple, but powerful idea that unlike most products, a network becomes more valuable as more people use it. No one joins a social network like Facebook without other users. And a network that everyone uses is worth fantastically more than the sum value of one hundred networks with as many users collectively as the one great network. Growth of a network adds more value than the marginal sale of a conventional product.<sup>24</sup>

Which means, in this sense, size matters a lot, taking the general landscape of the information industry. In many sectors, consolidation is a natural tendency. Yet, as Wu sees it, in the information industry in the wake of the digital revolution, it has become an inevitable future.

In conversation with Wu in June 2016,<sup>25</sup> he agreed that consolidation and fragmentation have walked hand-in-glove. “What’s interesting is that consolidation ends up stimulating fragmentation,” he said. The emergence of so many niche publications, which complement the information environment, will be looked at in the next section.

## **5. Complementing the Information Environment: specialization under new models – non-profit journalism**

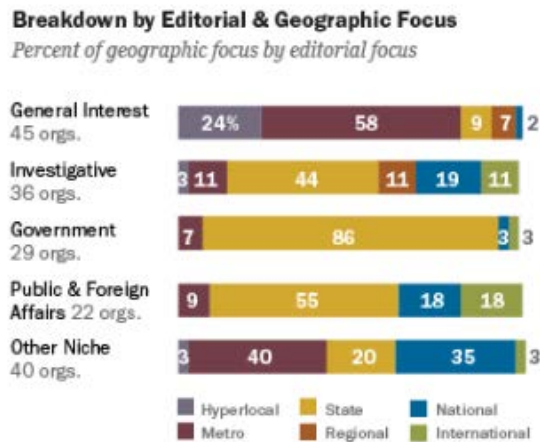
“Journalism has always been subsidized by someone,” you’ll often hear veteran reporters say, sometimes nostalgically. As the debate continues on whether or not the news industry will find a sustainable model on its way forward, there has been a marked rise in the number of nonprofit news organizations in the U.S., generally smaller-sized outlets specializing in niche themes. The country’s tax legislation favors and even encourages the practice of philanthropy and donations, and “philanthrojournalism” has benefitted from that.

The phenomenon is not exactly new, but it has gathered momentum in recent decades. Of the 172 nonprofit news outlets mapped by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, from the Pew Research Center, in the Fall of 2012, 71% were founded after 2008<sup>26</sup> —hardly incidentally the year the financial crisis hit the media hard, sending already sliding advertising revenues into free fall.

Besides philanthropic capital, the new model also attracted seasoned professionals from the major “legacy” newsrooms, who lent their talents and prestige to these new vehicles. The main char-

acteristics most nonprofit news outlets share are:

- seed grants from one or two major donors in the beginning, though a more diversified donor profile develops over time;
- the vast majority deals with niche themes or takes an independent investigative approach; according to the Pew Research Center’s findings, in 2012 roughly 57% of the 172 nonprofit news outlets were investigative and targeted “public & foreign affairs” or other such niches.



Perhaps because they are more recent, niche-specific nonprofit news organizations tend to stand out more, and have become the poster boys for the category.

Former editor-in-chief of *The New York Times*, Bill Keller, heads *The Marshall Project*. The outlet’s homepage declares its mission in the following terms: “The best criminal justice news from around the web, delivered daily.”<sup>27</sup>

Hired in March 2014, Keller launched the site in November that same year. By April 2016, he had a staff of 25 journalists packed into half a floor in an office building in midtown Manhattan. Bill opened the door to me himself and brought me a glass of water.

Keller believes that some traditional newsrooms, such as *The New York Times*, will survive the present sea-change, “but they will possibly need to depend on big investors, or even benefactors,” he said,<sup>28</sup> citing as examples the billionaire Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, who bought *The Washington Post* in 2013, and Michael Bloomberg, founder of the news network that bares his name.

He said that *The Marshall Project* values its neutrality and deals only in facts. The outfit has no columnists, though they do run opinion pieces by contributors.

The site is a newspaper with a single, hyper-specialized editorial line. It publishes three to four reports a week, but everyone on the team pursues a major project on the side. In all, they run 12 to 15 long-form reports per year, said Keller.

As we will see further on, these niche outlets strive to maximize their impact through partnerships, especially those that can garner wider audiences.

By “partnership,” read “co-reporting,” which can occur in many ways. Sometimes, they simply supply the finished product for the partner paper to run, but on other occasions, they actually pool their resources and decide the agenda conjointly. *The Marshall Project* has worked this way with *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker* and the sites *Vice* and *538*, for example.

Keller is emphatic: he thinks that to survive the future (which may be here already), journalism will need to rely on good will, whether from large foundations or some sort of crowdfunding.<sup>28</sup>

## Independence

During a class at the Columbia Journalism School in March 2016, a question arose: which is more “dangerous,” a big advertiser or a big donor (foundations or individual benefactors)? How journalistically independent can an outlet be when its financial health depends on just a couple of donors?

Pedro Abramovay, director of Open Society Foundations (OSF) for Latin America, said, “we have to be very careful to ensure that philanthropy comes in guaranteeing viability, but without affecting independence.”<sup>29</sup> The OSF was founded by the investor George Soros with the mission of working “to build vibrant and tolerant societies whose governments are accountable and open to the participation of all people.”<sup>30</sup> The organization has a suite of investments in new journalistic initiatives.

Another emblematic case is the site *Inside Climate News* (ICN), which specializes in the environment. Having started in 2007 as a simple blog, it now has a staff of 14 journalists crammed into some office space in Brooklyn, overlooking the Hudson Bay and the Statue of Liberty.

In 2013, ICN won the Pulitzer, journalism’s highest accolade. The reporters Elizabeth McGowan, Lisa Song, and David Hasemyer “took top honors in the category for their work on ‘The Dilbit Disaster: Inside the Biggest Oil Spill You’ve Never Heard Of,’ a project that began with a seven-month investigation into the million-gallon spill of Canadian tar sands oil into the Kalamazoo River in 2010. It broadened into an examination of national pipeline safety issues, and how unprepared the nation is for the impending flood of imports of a more corrosive and more dangerous form of oil,”<sup>31</sup> said ICN.

Other “native” digital initiatives have taken the Pulitzer before, such as ProPublica (see below) and *The Huffington Post*—a commercial for-profit enterprise now controlled by Time Warner/AOL.

David Sassoon had enjoyed a successful career as a photographer and documentarian before co-founding ICN with Stacey Feldman. The first “donor” was the Rockefeller Foundation, which bankrolled the venture 100%. Today, Sassoon said<sup>32</sup> Rockefeller donations account for no more than 15% of the outlet’s funding. The rest comes from a growing number of philanthropists. Unlike many news vehicles, ICN is hiring. The plan is to close 2016 with a staff of 25—though without any change of address.

“*InsideClimate News* is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that covers clean energy, carbon energy, nuclear energy and environmental science—plus the territory in between where law, policy and public opinion are shaped. We are staffed by professional journalists, many of whom bring decades of experience from leading media organizations in the nation, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *ProPublica*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Bloomberg News* and *Frontline*,”<sup>33</sup> the website declares. “Our mission is to produce clear, objective stories that give the public and decision-makers the information they need to navigate the heat and emotion of climate and energy debates.”

Sassoon does not see the operation as a crusader with an agenda, as some analysts and even fellow journalists have claimed. He feels they “fill a gap, dealing with issues which big media tends to overlook.”<sup>32</sup> “Our idea is to be an example of good journalism and influence dialogue. We’re not doing advocacy, we’re doing good journalism, with accountability,” he said.

Sassoon believes that “nonprofit journalism is the most independent journalism there is today.” “Freed from the need to bring in financial returns, and striving only for social impact, we can work far closer to our journalistic mission.”<sup>32</sup> He also guarantees that the donors are not involved in editorial discussions.

There is no consensus on the subject. Professor, researcher and former editor-in-chief of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Michael Massing sees things rather differently. In January 2016, he wrote in the *The New York Review of Books*:<sup>34</sup>

Over the last fifteen years, the number of foundations with a billion dollars or more in assets has doubled, to more than eighty. A significant portion of that money goes to such traditional causes as universities, museums, hospitals, and local charities. Needless to say, such munificence does much good. The philanthropic sector in the United States is far more dynamic than it is in, say, Europe, due in part to the tax deductions allowed under US law for charitable giving. Unlike in Europe, where cultural institutions depend largely on state support, here they rely mainly on private donors. (...) When donors approach a nonprofit, “they’re more likely to say not ‘How can I help you?’ but ‘Here’s my agenda,’” Nicholas Lemann, the former dean of the Columbia School of Journalism, told me.

Some representatives of the philanthropic sector are quite open on this. In October 2013, the Pew Research Center held a roundtable discussion on the nonprofit journalism business model. On the occasion, Daniel Green, deputy director of strategic partnerships for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, took part in the debate.

According to the Pew Center report<sup>35</sup> “some members of the philanthropic community noted

that funders are more likely to open their wallets under certain circumstances. The Gates Foundation, said Green, is more likely to provide long-term support if the grantee is engaging an audience around a specific issue that the foundation considers a top priority.”

However, as said before, nonprofit journalism is not all specialization. Founded in 2009, *ProPublica* is probably the best known of the generalists. Its “specialty” is investigative journalism.

Editor-in-chief Stephen Engelberg, formerly of *The New York Times*, where he worked for 18 years, is a veteran newsroom commander. Of the 45 journalists on his staff, 24 are experienced full timers. The team has four editors, eight data reporters, three visual arts reporters, and three social media specialists.

The site’s starting capital came from a donation from Herbert Sandler, an American millionaire who set up a foundation after selling his Golden West Financial Corporation, an investment fund he’d been running since 1963. Today, Engelberg said<sup>36</sup> that Sandler’s foundation accounts for 20% of the site’s total budget. Another 30% comes from private donations, and a further 20% from revenues the site generates through events and other sources of income. In 2011, the site started accepting hand-picked advertisers and sponsors.

Their declared mission:<sup>37</sup> “To expose abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by government, business, and other institutions, using the moral force of investigative journalism to spur reform through the sustained spotlighting of wrongdoing.”

The most striking difference from Engelberg’s previous routine as a newsroom editor is not waking up with the day’s breaking news. The focus here is on what are usually called “specials” or “stories,” and they run some 600 of these a year.

Engelberg believes fragmentation is really underway. “The major structures are downsizing and have less clout. The real power lies with the citizens. But that’s not enough.”

*ProPublica* also does partnerships, for example with the *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *National Public Radio* (NPR). Whatever it takes to “boost impact,” the sector’s most important metric.

## Metrics

Schiffrin and Zuckerman<sup>38</sup> explored the issue.

All around the world, media outlets are learning that some funders are uncomfortable with supporting journalism merely as a ‘public good.’ They want to see proof of impact.(...)Despite these concerns and caveats, several organizations are taking steps to develop usable standards for measuring media effects. Among those groups are the Gates Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight

Foundation, the Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University, the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, the Pew Research Center, and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Analyzing the criteria that the various nonprofit outlets have adopted as performance indicators, Schiffrin and Zuckerman<sup>38</sup> distinguish between “REACH (how many people engage with a given body of media content), INFLUENCE (how that content affects public dialogue) and IMPACT (how the content helps drive policy change or movement building).”

They cite a comment by Robert L. Bartley, who was editor of the Wall Street Journal opinion page for many years, who once said, “It takes 75 editorials to pass a law.”

However, impact metrics must be applied with care. They wrote:<sup>38</sup>

Media organizations, meanwhile, must watch out for threats to newsroom independence. The increasing focus on measurable impact may become an excuse to decide that only some kinds of coverage are worth supporting. If newsrooms limit their reporting to stories that can have immediate effects or quantifiable results, they might be unwilling to cover large, persistent—yet vitally important—social problems. Ultimately, the impact that journalists can have on society will erode if they must serve the whims of funders. That is true whether the funders in question are government officials, advertisers, corporate owners, or well-intentioned philanthropists.

If we consider that the recent, significant “explosion” in nonprofit journalism only started in 2008, less than ten years ago, we have every reason to debate how lasting these undertakings will be, especially as they have largely arisen as complements to the existing information environment.

In 2013, the Pew Research Center<sup>39</sup> analyzed this and concluded that: “The study finds that all but nine states in the U.S. have at least one nonprofit news outlet. Most are not trying to replicate all the editorial functions of mainstream media, but instead work in specialized journalism niches.”

The institute contacted 172 nonprofit sites and 93 (54%) of these responded to its questionnaire.<sup>39</sup>

The authors concluded:

While many nonprofits initially rely on big grants, that funding source may not provide long-term sustainability. Nearly two thirds of the survey respondents

(61%) began with a startup that accounted for at least one third of their original funding, and a majority of those grants were for USD 100,000 or more. But at the time of this report, only 28% of those organizations reported that the funder had agreed to renew that grant to any degree. (...) Nonprofit outlets are taking steps toward diversifying revenue streams, but even many of those with multiple streams still rely heavily on one main source for the bulk of their funds (...) Optimism is the prevalent feeling among those working at nonprofit news organizations. Four times as many outlets predicted they will hire new staff in the coming year (40%) than said they will reduce staff (10%).<sup>39</sup>

The fact is the model is undoubtedly one of the rare pieces of good news to emerge from the news sector in recent times. So much so that the French economist Julia Cagé devoted a whole book<sup>40</sup> to defending the adoption of a specific media model which she calls NMO.

The New Model I propose, which I call the Nonprofit Media Organization, (NMO) is a hybrid model, inspired in part by the model of the great universities, which combine commercial and noncommercial activities. One goal is to secure permanent financing for the media by freeing their capital. A second goal is to limit the decision making power of outside shareholders with constraining bylaws.

However, not all of these new niche outlets are nonprofit organizations. The best-known for-profit example is perhaps *Politico*. Founded in 2008 by Robert Allbritton, who hails from a family of regional TV network owners, the site declares its mission as follows: “We created *Politico* with a simple promise: to prove there's a robust and profitable future for tough, fair and fun coverage of politics and government. To do this, we cling to a simple principle: always hire the most talented editors, reporters and newsroom staff and then set them loose on many platforms for modern media consumption: print, online, mobile, video and events.”<sup>41</sup>

The site has a staff of 200 journalists at its headquarters in Washington D.C., a further 40 in Europe (as part of a 50/50 partnership with the German Axel Springer group), 20 in New York and 10 correspondents posted across the country.<sup>42</sup>

The focus is politics and power, which, for the North American edition, means Capitol Hill. *Politico* runs a daily newspaper Tuesday through Friday with a print run of around 15,000 copies, plus a bimonthly print magazine.

Another single-focus outlet, *Politico* has already grown to a considerable size. In early 2016 it moved into the premises that previously housed USA Today on the other side of the Potomac, in the federal capital.

## 6. The risks of fragmentation: is journalistic culture advancing or retrogressing? Will a new standard be set?

Can these new news ventures, whether for-profit or nonprofit, compensate for the decline in traditional newsrooms? Peter Micek, lawyer and lecturer in internet policy and governance at the School of International Public Affairs (SIPA) at Columbia University, doesn't think it is so guaranteed. "Blogging platforms can't take up all the slack left by journalism, but they can complement the news environment,"<sup>43</sup> Micek said.

Micek is particularly concerned about how cost-cutting is affecting editorial standards. "If fragmentation is total, the social media will dominate distribution," he said. "The problem is, on the social media, everyone talks, but no-one listens."

As "legacy" newsrooms adapt to the digital world and "native" digital outlets come online, newsroom practices (practices of "content production") are being transformed. What dangers does this pose to journalism as a method?

*BuzzFeed* is one of the most eye-catching and—for the time being, at least—successful champions of the "new practices" behind information supply today. The site does not run "normal" ads, such as banners and displays, but rather pieces that look like edited, fact-checked copy.

One of the most controversial "new" advertising formats is "native advertising," which is basically a paid ad dressed up as "journalistic content" and embedded by the advertiser with the purpose of promoting goods, services or even a concept. The practice exists in the "legacy" media as "branded content," but in these cases it is usually distinguished from the news platform by graphic style or labeling. In *The New York Times*, these pieces are packaged under the "NYT Brand Studio" seal, and the graphic style is different from that used for news in print or on the site. In the case of *BuzzFeed*, the only indication that the in-feed content is embedded advertising is the tag "promoted by company X" and the byline "brand publisher."

Caira Conner, new markets director, received me one February morning in 2016 at *BuzzFeed's* new premises in Manhattan. Conner said<sup>44</sup> that the native ads and news teams work separately. She told me about some typical newsroom rituals that have been preserved, such as morning briefings and insistence on thorough copyediting—which is basically quality control prior to publication.

As of February 2016, the company had a staff of 600 in New York alone, of which 300 were journalists, including an investigative journalism team. Yes, *BuzzFeed* does investigative journalism too. "They hired a journalist exclusively to cover the criminal justice system,"<sup>28</sup> said Bill Keller, from *The Marshall Project*, for whom *BuzzFeed* could be a potential competitor in the niche.

Midway through 2016, the *BuzzFeed* site started running a hard news sub-area called "BuzzFeed News" and created a specific app for this content, BuzzFeedNews, which, up to June 2016, was available in only a limited number of countries. Also in 2016, the company's emails started carrying



the signature “*BuzzFeed*: the social news and entertainment company.”

In February of this year, *BuzzFeed* had 1,200 employees worldwide among its teams in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington D.C., in the U.S., and its international offices in Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, India, Japan (in partnership with Yahoo), Mexico, Spain, and the UK.

But, why did *BuzzFeed* start flagging a news channel on its own website and adopt a signature on its corporate emails that seemed to want to “explain” its hybrid activities across the areas of news and entertainment?

For an answer we might look to Michael Massing’s tour of “new newsrooms” and the resulting essay series published by *The New York Review of Books*.

Massing sees in these initiatives a tendency to veer back towards “classical” formulas over time, so that the outlets can garner more recognition and prestige, and, as a consequence, greater repercussion—which is hard currency in the news industry.

“These sites, which all seem to blend into one another, rarely break news or cause a commotion,” he wrote,<sup>45</sup> referring to *The Huffington Post*, *Slate*, *Salon* and *The Daily Beast*, all purely digital ventures. “In my tour of digital sites, I did find one pioneer that has evolved: *Politico*. In the last few years, however, *Politico* has become more and more like the Post—in a good way.”

On *BuzzFeed*, he wrote: “One way or another, *BuzzFeed* needs to become bolder and brasher. Otherwise, it will remain known mainly for its cat photos.”<sup>46</sup>

He later said:<sup>46</sup>

When it comes to impact, traditional news organizations retain an overwhelming edge. It’s hard to think of Web-based stories that have produced as big a bang as Jane Mayer’s report on the Koch brothers in *The New Yorker*, Dana Priest’s exposés on Walter Reed Hospital and CIA rendition sites in *The Washington Post*, Alan Schwarz’s stories about football concussions in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*’s baring of the British phone-hacking scandal, and Peter Beinart’s analysis in this publication of the failure of the American Jewish establishment. Even the revelations of WikiLeaks and Snowden, while involving leaks of digital information, were delivered to the public via print-based outlets.

For Massing<sup>46</sup>, given the resources and attention lavished on these new players, they should by now have contributed more real value to the information environment than they have:

When one considers the amount of resources that the sites I've mentioned have consumed, the level of attention they've received, and the number of people they employ, the results thus far seem dishearteningly modest. That's especially so when compared with the consistently high-quality material produced by such traditional institutions as *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *The Guardian*. These organizations are commonly referred to as "legacy" institutions. (...) When it comes to actual journalistic practice, however, it's the media startups that in general seem the laggards.

In his recent *The Watchdog that Didn't Bark: the Financial Crisis and the Disappearance of Investigative Reporting*, Dean Starkman<sup>47</sup> went even further.

It should be said that all of the new entrants put together do not offset the losses of major metropolitan newspapers, like the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, which together have lost nearly 1,000 journalists and have severely cut back on business coverage. It is the difference between journalism on an artisanal scale and an industrial one. (...) But even granting the value of new entrants and the promise of journalism's digital future, if accountability reporting is to be the public's lodestar through the current journalism storm, and I believe it should be, it faces threats from two powerful forces now dominating the new ecosystem. One is old: corporatism, with its longstanding hostility to the difficulties, risks, and subversive nature of accountability reporting. The other is 'new'; let's call it 'digitism,' which seeks to dispense with traditional journalism forms mainly because digital models cannot accommodate them. While they come from different intellectual traditions, they have meshed together with an uncanny exactness to undermine what is most valuable in the news.

Starkman<sup>47</sup> goes on to comment on what he's been calling, since 2010, the "future of news consensus."

Under this consensus, news is seen as an abundant and nearly valueless commodity. News organizations would become less producers of news than platforms of community engagement, and journalists would act as curators and moderators as much as they would reporters. Digital news, as originally conceived, was meant to be free –the better to interact with readers in a global 'conversation.'

The question is formulated with precision by the Pew Research Center report mentioned above. The production of original information is still concentrated among the “traditional” newsrooms, and these are all dwindling fast. “This is only to say that what appears to be an increasingly lively and abundant news environment actually rests on—and masks—a shrinking fact-gathering infrastructure. And it is on the traditional media, ultimately, that the vast majority of people rely.”<sup>7</sup>

If we want accountability, we must preserve the institutional side of journalism. Starkman adds<sup>47</sup>: “Institutions—flawed as they are—have proven over a century to be the best, most potent vehicles for accountability reporting. They deliver the support, expertise, infrastructure, symbolic capital, and, still, mass audience that makes for journalism at its most powerful.”

## 7. The role of journalism schools in the new information environment

Journalism is not exactly a science, but it is a method derived from the confluence of various disciplines, an amalgam of concepts drawn from other fields of knowledge—history, the social sciences, psychology, knowledge theory and, more recently, even computer science and statistics—, and all of that is rounded out with its own set of specific techniques, for interviewing, text-construction, audio and video editing.

There is one very particular characteristic that is proper to this profession: continued training and learning. This occurs in other sectors, too, and it’s commonly known as “on-the-job training,” but in journalism, mentorship of young reporters by seasoned editors is a staple of those long days and nights spent toiling away in the newsroom. There’s a sense of ritual and liturgy in the way the journalistic method is carried through, from agenda-setting and fact-checking, through source screening and verification, down to the final criteria of text and image editing.

In the transition to this new, fragmented information environment, in which the borders between journalism and non-journalism (advertising, advocacy, etc.) are becoming increasingly blurred, the role of superior schools and research centers is more essential than ever if we are to preserve the fundamentals of the profession—or “culture,” as the business analysts like to say.

Folkerts, Hamilton and Lemann<sup>48</sup> see this digital transformation as an opportunity for schools: “It’s exciting to think that journalism schools have an opportunity, if they can take advantage of it, to turn themselves, and therefore their graduates, into masters of the new world of digital journalism. (...) That journalism is going through profound changes does not vitiate—in fact, it enhances—the importance of journalism schools.”

For the authors, the fact that journalism is a “borrowing discipline, using the theories and methods of others,” in no way weakens its structural standing in the academic environment.

Rather than fighting this, journalism educators should embrace it as a strength and broaden interdisciplinary study still further. Journalism teaching and research can benefit from incorporating industrial psychology, computer programming, economics, psychology, management, and other disciplines that have the tools to understand the functioning of news media and make them more effective.<sup>48</sup>

The new demands introduced by the digital media have taken up significant time and energy in the formation of new professionals, and in the recycling of veterans. New skills must be mastered, such as blog management, image capture, video and audio editing and podcasting. However, for Folkerts, Hamilton, and Lemann<sup>48</sup> neither students nor educators should let this distract them.

It is critical that educators and professionals recognize that digital skills, while necessary, do not constitute professional journalism. (...) As journalism education embraces the digital age, as it should, it's crucial that that project not be understood as entailing a narrow focus on skills. In fact, the new age especially demands of journalists the kind of broader understanding that universities are set-up to provide. Journalism education should not ignore the larger contours of the digital age—the rise of an information society and the nature of convergence that goes beyond multi-platform applications and transition to mobile devices. (...) These subjects demand the kind of broad social and historical understanding that universities are much better than news organizations at providing.

## 8. Closing Considerations and Suggestions

The history of communications has seen various critical transitions, what scientists like to call “tipping points,” major changes followed by irreversible rupture, after which things can never be the same again.

In the present work, I looked to systematize some of the issues I consider fundamental to this particular period of transformation. Whether or not they correspond to critical points of transition, history alone will tell. Yet, I see them as near-obligatory subjects of study and research that will have real impact on newsrooms and journalism classrooms and, ultimately, on public policy.

Below is a brief run-through of these points and some ideas for consideration by public and private stakeholders:

## **Fragmentation: from “search engine” to “context engine”. How can “native journalism” survive?**

Fragmentation strikes me as an inevitable phenomenon, the result of the internet hyper-connectedness and network behavior that now permeates the information arena. All information, regardless of origin, moves in multiple directions and very often under the same guise, that of fact-checked, verified and therefore credible news. How can we teach modern readers/citizens to understand what they're being given and act accordingly?

The answer may come from technology itself. How can we come up with algorithms that combat fragmentation and restore some level of informational typology and hierarchy?

We need to move beyond the age of the “search engine” and enter that of the “context engine.” It's a task for programmers, linguists and researchers, but also for the companies, markets, and foundations that can finance these projects.

One subject that will continue to cause a certain anxiety is the information environment's dependence on the original content produced by the so-called “traditional” newsrooms, which we know are now facing the challenge of adjusting to the future without compromising their quality as an information pipeline. Could the “context engine” be a way forward for “native journalism,” if I might call it that?

Or are we looking at the build-up to a new historical cycle in which early adopters choose to draw straight from the original sources, and thus contribute toward finally making digital subscription a viable business model for the legacy media?

“Combatting” fragmentation will also help neutralize or at least curb the effects of polarization.

## **Consolidation: the large and small working in tandem**

Being midsize is an enormous challenge in any business, especially when survival requires permanent investment (as in technology) and swift adaptation to new habits and standards (such as web behavior, and group and community formation).

With significant variations between countries—depending on how professional is their business administration, and on the tenets of the local regulations —consolidation will stomp onwards, leaving less and less space for medium-sized companies.

The size and influence of one particular distributor have become cause for debate in recent years. As I complete this text, discussion rages over Facebook's rapid ascendancy as a distribution platform. Fanning the flames of the debate are the doubts widely harbored about the transparency

and objectivity of the algorithms used. As we know, algorithms are not as automatic as they seem, but can be manipulated by “human” bias or preference.

Therein resides a very important subject for discussion, especially when we consider the fact that more and more users are turning to this social network as their main or sole source of news, as the 2016 edition of the Reuters Institute “Digital News Report” showed.<sup>49</sup> It was released in the USA in June 2016, in the same week the Tow Center for Digital Journalism (associated with the Columbia School of Journalism) kicked off its ambitious “Platforms and Publishers” project.<sup>50</sup>

## **Specialization and niches: transparent complementation**

Specialized and niche initiatives are now complementing the informational arena, and becoming increasingly essential in that role. At the same time, they might also be future merger-fodder themselves.

It will be interesting to follow the development of these outlets, many of which operate as non-profit organizations, especially in the U.S., where tax incentives encourage charitable giving.

How many of these will last the distance? Just how far will the philanthropists be willing to carry them? How transparent will their agendas be or be seen to be?

## **Media and news literacy: a new discipline for changed times?**

Governments and educators are racing against time to adapt to the fact that students come into the classroom armed to the teeth with information on a range of subjects and with quick-fire answers (and indeed questions) only a smartphone away.

It’s one more challenge they have to face. Perhaps not from middle school, but certainly from high school on, I see the need to introduce a course on how to read and interpret the news, identify its genres, discern its sources, hierarchies and modes of presentation. Being able to understand the context of news is now essential to the citizen’s education. In the fragmented environment we face, readers will find themselves increasingly at the mercy of confused and hybrid signals, and they will have to know how to deal with that.

In addition to technology, the possibilities of which were mentioned above, it seems inexorable to me that the school environment will have to adjust to the new informational reality to which students are exposed and find ways to help them learn how to unpack what they read. Schools will need to teach their students how to analyze text and distinguish between the informative and the assertive —that alone will stand them in very good stead.

## **Work, teaching and research processes: the new will have to live with the old and preserve the fundamentals of journalism**

If traditional newsrooms are still the main suppliers of the information environment, as countless studies show, then what we are seeing is a renewed responsibility and immense opportunity for journalism. Newsrooms should seize the moment to ensure the perpetuity of their brands as seals of quality and credibility. As the “origin” of content, they lay claim to two fantastic derivations: “origination” (bringing forth) and “originality” (singularity).

As for the “new” newsrooms, the so called digital natives, as mentioned before, many of those that survive will grow towards the “traditional” model, both in terms of internal organization and the way they offer their news. This shift is natural, almost obvious and certainly inexorable. Journalism is journalism, and there are no half-measures. Journalism is not a format, it is a method, and has to be applied in full, from start to finish, from gathering and analysis through to fact-checking and publication.

The “new newsrooms” will have to ensure constant interchange between generations so as to consolidate the handing-down of the profession’s values and fundamentals.

In this new landscape, there is no doubt that schools of journalism will play an even more important role, both in teaching and in research. There is a dual challenge to meet in structuring and updating curricula and classroom methodologies. We have to stay up to speed on the fresh possibilities in interaction, distribution and data analysis offered by new technologies. And yet, at the same time, we need to put those new tools to the service of fact-checking, investigation, contextualization and the journalistic narrative. These wonderful tools cannot be allowed to be purely cosmetic; they have to serve the essence of journalistic craft.

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