

Audiences, Citizens and the Future of Journalism

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Good Morning.

Thank you for inviting me. There has been much talk here in the last 48 hours about the future of journalism and even the future of the future of journalism. So it is truly a pleasure to be here with you this morning and look out at the future of journalism.

Indeed, it is even more of a pleasure for me than you may realize for me to be here at the convention of the Online News Association. I have been to many newspaper journalism conventions in recent years and, frankly, they are often like attending a wake for some one who is not quite dead yet.

Those of you who work for web sites that are part of newspaper companies, or big old line media companies of any sort, live every day with the pressure and anxiety that comes from what I can only describe as the panic about our future among some of our journalistic colleagues.

This panic is so great in some quarters that [Matthias Doepfner](#), the great German publisher, actually had to counsel some of his colleagues not to commit suicide out of a fear of dieing. That is a pretty jarring idea...and I think it is valuable for us to understand what he meant. So in a minute I will return to why he gave that warning.

But first, as a good old fashioned newsman let me begin with my conclusion, my lead. It is what all of you already know in your bones. The panic is wrong. The future of journalism is bright. But to get to that future we have to face the challenge of today, the crisis if you wish, that has scared some of our colleagues.

That challenge is substantial. And how we solve it, how you solve it, will shape the future of journalism and, even more important and very much related, your actions will do something more. They will help shape the future of democracy as well.

It may seem like I am putting a lot on your shoulders with that statement. For many of you just getting your site up every day may seem like enough to worry about. But what I hope I can convince you of in our talk here today...is to leave Toronto thinking about that daily work in this larger context. In the context of our responsibility for the future of journalism AND the future of democracy.

The subject of journalism and the subject of democracy are of course often tied together. But why am I tying them together here today?

Let me give the short answer...and then I will try to expand on each part.

The future of journalism is bright because there is a large and growing audience in the world hungry for what we as journalists do. To reach and hold that audience in a digital world we must build new forms of journalism and new models for media businesses. You know that... and you are doing it.

As we do this it is important to include in our thinking that some of what works best on the Internet may sometimes actually work against what democratic societies need to remain strong.

Hilary Schneider of Yahoo said yesterday that fragmentation was a reality. Well fragmentation is also a business challenge and a problem for Democratic society.

As journalists, that conflict lands on our desk. I am glad it does. We have a responsibility to work with our business colleagues to build strong new forms of journalism that sustain viable businesses that then help support our journalism. But in doing that we also have an important role to play in preserving journalism's place as a key pillar in democratic society.

Let me take you through how this all fits together. I will speak first about the present challenge to journalism... and then I will conclude with a brief discussion of how the manner in which we face the challenge to journalism will also affect the health and well being of democracy. I promise not to ramble on...so we can then have time for your questions, comments, diatribes and complaints.

Any discussion of journalism reminds me of something said 100 years ago by an American writer and philosopher named Elbert Hubbard. In his day, Hubbard was the most sought after lecturer in America and a correspondent as well for the Hearst chain of newspapers. From that experience Hubbard formed his definition of an editor. An editor, Hubbard said, is a person employed by a newspaper, whose business it is to separate the wheat from the chaff ... and to see that the chaff is printed.

Hubbard clearly had an astute understanding of the journalistic process.

Our job as journalists is to separate, to sort. One sharp editor once said that to edit is to choose. I hope we sometimes make better picks than Hubbard seemed to credit us with... But that is for our audiences to decide. Of course mentioning our audiences begins to bring us toward the heart of today's discussion. Elbert Hubbard died long before the birth of the Internet, or even of television or radio. But to belabor his agricultural analogy, living in the digital age is like standing at the bottom of a grain elevator as they pour in the wheat.

Our audiences are literally drowning in information, unrefined wheat and chaff and all the muck raked up with the harvest. You can call this the digital age, or the Internet age, or the information age...to a lot of people it must seem like the age of information overload.

At first that overload seems like a problem to journalism, perhaps a fatal problem, but I suggest it is in fact our opportunity. Indeed, information overload is THE opportunity that we as journalists cannot afford to miss. For our own sakes and, as I will explain, for the sake of the democratic societies that need what we journalists do. It is the opportunity to reshape what we do so it survives well into the future.

Now, most of you in this room today are journalists. A few of you are publishers or business managers and most of you business folks might actually like journalists. But all of us know that the news business is in a time of crisis. The talk at those newspaper journalism conventions I mentioned at the outset is all about how the future is already rushing past us.

It was that sense of panic that prompted Dopfner, the savvy ceo of Axel Springer, to warn his colleagues—that is to say, to all of us-- not to commit suicide out of a fear of dying. But what is all the panic about and what does Dopfner's advice actually mean? I will come back to what he means but first let's examine the panic.

Even news people have trouble explaining it, although that doesn't stop us from writing endlessly about it. The cover of The Economist not long ago said: "The Death of Newspapers?"

I am grateful they at least ended with a question mark.

Now a lot of people would probably say that newspaper people are upset because newspaper circulation is declining. That would be true, but only partly true, because it is only partly true even that newspaper circulation is declining. The circulation of paid for newspapers in Europe and North America has been declining. That is true.

But the total circulation of paid for newspapers all over the world is continuing to climb. And in Europe where I live, the distribution of newspapers given out for free is soaring. So, the total circulation of all newspapers all over the world is up, substantially. In other words, there are still millions of people all over the world who want the news...and even want the news in that old fashioned form of a newspaper. And that of course is not even beginning to count the large and growing audiences for news on The Internet.

In other words, there is an audience out there. There is considerable evidence that the appetite for knowledge and understanding of an increasingly tangled and complex world is as great or maybe even greater than it has ever been.

This should hardly be a surprise. We are in the midst of an incredible cycle of history. Out of sheer self-protection and self interest, people want to know what is going on. The passion with which our web readers at NYTimes.com, IHT.com and at many of your sites respond to stories is one of many signs of the intensity with which people are following the news—hundreds sometimes thousands of people post comments and reactions when we offer them the chance.

One of my favorite examples, from IHT.com, came during the recent French elections. We had readers from France and from the United States and from other corners of the world telling each other how to think about the elections in France. Global village indeed. Moreover, it has become clearer and clearer that the growth of the internet and other new ways of distributing news and information can be a positive not a negative for more traditional forms of journalism.

A survey by Gallup for the world economic forum found that interest in printed newspapers and magazines actually goes UP among Internet users when they are seeking analysis and context. That is entirely consistent with our day-to-day experience. When the British government announced it had broken up a plot to bomb aircraft at Heathrow airport the story received blanket coverage across Europe the first afternoon on TV and on the Internet...

Despite that coverage, or maybe because of it, sales of the International Herald Tribune the next morning in Western Europe were up 20 percent. So there is an audience out there. Whatever audience issues we have are not all that different from the audience issues we always have had—finding creative new ways to grab and hold people's attention in a busy competitive world.

What is causing panic among some of our colleagues in the news business, particularly in Europe and North America, is a huge business model crisis. There is a large and growing audience that wants news and information.

But here in the heart of the developed world there are fewer people who want to pay for their news and more opportunities for advertisers to reach their audiences in new ways. As the headline on the front page of the IHT said not long ago, for many media companies, free is the new paid.

And that is no small thing. For more than 100 years journalists have been sustained by a virtuous circle of readers who were willing to pay for the news and advertisers who were willing to pay to reach those readers. Publishers made money and journalists made a living and democratic society was better off for the bargain.

But now that bargain is breaking down, the large news organizations that have created much of what we have thought of as quality journalism are under extraordinary business pressures that threaten their ability to sustain that journalism. And that of course brings us right back to the question of the future of journalism in an age of information overload.

The solution to information overload, at least part of the solution, is journalism.

The Internet offers us this alluring idea that all information is available to everyone all the time. But no one in their real life has time to absorb all that information, to make sense of it, to separate the wheat from the chaff.. That is what journalism is for, as Elbert Hubbard told us long ago.

[Mathias Doepfner](#) said that what audiences want more than ever now is ORIENTATION—direction through the overload of information that is daily life. That is what journalists know how to do. The more society is inundated with information the more we need the service of journalism.

But the very forces that are increasing the need for journalism are also the forces undercutting the business model that has sustained the journalism we need. So clearly, new models are needed. As we develop them, we as journalists have a very specific responsibility. It is to remember, and to remind our business colleagues, who we are and what we actually know how to do. Change is essential. You are leading the way as we learn to distribute our work in new ways, and to create new forms of journalism that fit the new forms of distribution.

We need to adapt to the new attitudes of our audiences, too. Our authority and credibility used to come from our exclusivity and our control over the sources and distribution of information. In the future it may come just as much from our transparency and our willingness to interact with our audiences.

In this new world we are no longer gatekeepers. So what shall we become? Guides, perhaps? Color Commentators? Referees? A Greek Chorus? That question alone could keep our discussion going for some time. But whatever image we adopt for what we should become I think it is clear what we should NOT become. We must not be conveyor belts.

The Internet is a medium with enormous power to bring people together and allow them to communicate in new ways. We don't need to be in their way...

But as journalists we add something important. And as we adapt and invent new forms for our new medium it is our job to reassert the basic value, and the basic values, of journalism.

We are the independent observers of the world, who go places our audiences cant go, dig where our audiences can't dig, study and interpret what our audiences do not have time to study and interpret. And we do all this with no agenda other than to help our audiences understand the world.

I was very heartened by Hilary Schneider's presentation yesterday, particularly her affirmation of the core values of journalism. Those values are more valuable than ever. But in the panic to change there is a risk we will lose sight of—or lose our grip on-- those core values.

THAT was what Mathias Dopfner was trying to tell us when he warned journalists not to commit suicide out of a fear of dieing. He was saying that if journalists change so much that we lose who we are we will be just as dead as if we had not changed at all.

Civilians are always coming at us journalists with advice on the responsibility of the media—responsibility to inform the public, or hold politicians feet to the fire, or expose injustice or whatever. We all WANT to agree with that and I will speak in a moment on our continuing role in democratic society. But to preserve that role in democratic society we have an even more immediate responsibility.

That responsibility is to complete the mission you have begun...to reinvent the media business to assure that it can continue to sustain the quality journalism that is so vital.

To do that we must listen to the market...We must listen to the social networking entrepreneurs who are tapping the Internet's power of community. And to the bloggers who have revived that fine old art of pamphleteering in a powerful new way by combining it with the Internet's power of aggregation.

We must hear them and understand the message of change...but then we must combine that message with what we know inside ourselves to be the value of what we know how to do as journalists. And from that synthesis of tradition and change there will come a new future for journalism

Now, it is not hard to understand why you and I should care about that future. If nothing else it will give us interesting and hopefully decently paid work for a long time to come. But I want to leave you with a second, even more important thought: How we shape the future of journalism is very related to the future of democracy ...and of course THAT matters more to many, many people.

The notion that journalism matters to democracy is not just some airy fairy bit of romanticism that journalists like to tell each other. It is a proven fact. [Tim Besley](#) at the London School of Economics has actually charted the relationship. For example, as press freedom goes up, so does national income per person. Similarly, as press freedom goes up, corruption goes down.

Countries with a free press are cleaner and wealthier.

Professor Besley's study used a measure of NEWSPAPER press freedom. But there is no reason to think that the method of distributing our journalism is the crucial factor. Indeed, as many of you know, the most independent news operation in Malaysia is in fact a web site: <http://www.malaysiakini.com> What matters to the quality of democracy is the quality of independent, honest, accurate, journalism, not the means by which it is distributed.

Communication is what is fundamental. So is discovering what is happening and using information to control one's destiny. This is why we should all be confident that the demand for quality news and information will remain strong.

James Madison, the star of my new book, eloquently captured the connection between quality information and Democratic freedom. He said: "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives." Good journalists understand this and have always sought to provide that knowledge. This is what inspired Isaiah Thomas, the publisher of the famed Massachusetts Spy, as he courageously printed essays considering British rule and gave an exciting eyewitness account of the battles of Lexington and Concord.

These actions, at the very founding of The United States, continue to inspire brave members of our profession, who are risking life and limb to cover Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and dozens of other places around the globe.

This desire to inform will become even more important for future generations of reporters, as they will be required to explain the growing interplay between such subjects as science, politics, economics and geography. As we are already discovering, journalism will require a much greater level of training, versatility and expertise.

For all the talk that hyper local and hyper personal are the new new thing, The 21st century journalist will also have to have a global perspective, even when covering stories that seem only local. For instance, the governor and legislature in New York State are fighting over whether to provide driver's licenses to illegal immigrants. While it would be easy to just focus on the infighting in Albany, a full analysis would

also bring in the situation in South and Central America, Mexico, Washington, D.C., and the upcoming presidential election.

I have been thinking a lot lately about the interplay of journalism and democracy. I am a news guy and have been my whole life. I now run a newspaper, The International Herald Tribune, and a website, IHT.com, that circulate in virtually every country on earth—some countries, like Canada, are long, proud and successful democracies. But in others, and I don't have to name them, just getting distributed is a triumph over censors and autocracy.

So the relationship between journalism and democracy is very much a part of my day job. At the same time, I have just finished writing a book, as Jon was kind enough to mention. It is about democracy, specifically about the invention in Philadelphia of a new form of representative democracy that has been so extra ordinarily effective that it has now lasted longer than any other democracy in history.

In working on that book, its called *The Genius of America*, I became aware of a growing disenchantment in many long time democracies with how well democracy is working. I call this the midlife crisis of democracy. At least I hope and believe it is a midlife crisis.

This midlife crisis has been developing for a number of years. Indeed, it means that we entered the Internet age with our long tradition of democracy in a fragile state. Many people argue that the Internet can help democracy. That may be true. But for it to be true we have to understand what democracy actually is.

Democracy is not a synonym for unlimited freedom, and maximum personal choice, and total individual independence. Democracy is a system invented so we could govern ourselves without outside authority—without king or the will of god—to preserve order. It is a system to allow us to live together despite our differences. It is a system designed to reconcile those differences not eliminate them. It is a system to find in all our discordant personal interests areas of common cause, common agreement, common good.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution learned these lessons the hard way. They created a country in 1776 with maximum freedom and minimum government. This experiment in liberty nearly fell apart as everyone pursued their own interests and nobody had the means to resolve conflicts. We wrote the *Genius of America* to recall this history because it seems very relevant today.

In many ways the debates about the Internet today resemble the arguments about American government between 1776 and 1787. Freedom is a very good thing. Personal choice is a very good thing. But unlimited freedom and total personal choice, in the context of government and democracy, is chaos. That was America between 1776 and 1787. That was why the framers wrote a constitution that created ways to force people to debate and confront their differences. That pushed people to the middle. That slowed action until the people found consensus. That encouraged compromise.

But why am I telling you all of this?

Because many of the trends we find most exciting on the Internet push us in exactly the opposite direction. Greater personalization. More individual choice. More independence. More association with “people like me” and less need to encounter people or ideas we don't want to encounter.

You could feel these questions bubbling up in that excellent panel Jonathan Dube and the CBC organized on Wednesday. Leonard Brody of NowPublic.com was describing one possible future of news, the news feed on Facebook.com, which he described as reporting “the solar system of you.” That is okay, but the essence of Democratic society is a recognition that the world doesn't actually orbit around any one of us.

I can frame our challenge by asking you to think about three words, each of which is vital to us in our jobs. Those words are: Audience . . . consumers . . . citizens. Of course we deal with all three each day. Our audience is made up of consumers who are also citizens.

But as Professor Cass Sunstein of The University of Chicago points out satisfying the consumer desires of our audience may be very different from fulfilling their information needs as citizens. Most businesses don't have to worry about that balancing act. But ours does...or society will suffer.

How many of you are building "verticals" for your web sites, for example. Well think about the word. For a consumer, a "vertical" is a great thing, allowing them to focus more on what they want and less on what they don't want. But vertical thinking can be different from democratic thinking. Vertical is going further and further into what you already are instead of broadly out into things you never knew.

MY purpose is not to get you to resist verticals. They are vital to the success of our businesses and the success of our businesses, as I hope I have made clear, is vital to the sustenance of our journalism. My purpose is to urge you to think about yourselves as catalysts to do even more.

We as journalists must find ways to encourage use of the Internet horizontally...as well as vertically. We as journalists need to find a way to make our news websites recreate one of the great democratizing experiences of reading the newspaper...the serendipity of encountering a story you did not know you were interested in...until you spotted it while flipping the pages.

We as journalists must build communities that are broad and not just deep. Where people encounter people NOT like them...with different views...different backgrounds...different politics and interests. Democracy does not function well unless citizens are exposed to views and opinions and people they did not want to hear from or did not even know about.

We as journalists on line are perfectly positioned to create the places where these encounters occur. If we are doing our jobs as journalists correctly we should have the trust of people from many and varied corners of our societies. That trust is our most valuable asset...we can use it to strengthen our businesses and expand the reach of our journalism

But most important of all we can use it to strengthen democratic exchange ... to bring together factions, as the framers would have called them—whether left and right, red and blue, or big ends and little ends—and encourage them to exchange positions, perspectives and ideas within our websites.

A diversity of voices has always been good journalism, and it is true democratization. If we can build that we will have built not only a bright future for journalism but a bright future for democracy as well.

Thank you

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