

# The Future of News<sup>1</sup>

BILL KOVACH

Founding Chairman  
Concerned Journalists

ONE WAY TO READ THE STORY of the twentieth century is as a bloody competition between information systems to organize the power unleashed by the industrial revolution, a competition between open systems that use information to liberate public energy and imagination to shape social, economic, and political life and closed systems that control information to direct public energy and thought into predetermined systems.

This reading took root in my mind toward the end of the century at a conference of journalists from the U.S. and journalists from the crumbling Soviet Empire.

For three days in Prague we listened to speaker after speaker talk with deep emotion of his or her intellectual liberation as the Iron Curtain was breached by the new communications technology that allowed independent, uncensored information to pour through.

Vaclav Havel drove home the point when he said this open flow of uncontrolled information “allowed us to take back our language. A language which had been stolen by propagandists to convince us that show trials were ‘justice’ and slavery was ‘freedom.’”

“Only when the language had been freed,” he said, “could people begin to have honest thoughts about political affairs, about the real state of the world and about their place in that world.”

It was exhilarating to survey the rubble of an old order based on thought control, and eagerly discuss the role of the press in the dawning of a new age of information.

Now, not two decades later, as we drown in information many of us wonder whether information will continue to serve to inform a self-governing public or become the path through which the power elites restore centralized authority.

---

<sup>1</sup>Read 9 November 2007, as part of the symposium “The Future of Information.”

The question today is this: Does the public have the time, the motivation, and the skills required to inform themselves adequately for full participation in self-government?

If the answer is no, then the next question is, will a journalism in the public interest emerge to help citizens to find independent, verified information for making informed decisions in a cyberspace filled with mediating channels of information controlled by other powerful institutions?

Think just for a moment about the ability of these institutions to condition public thought and demand public attention. Government institutions daily grow more effective in substituting propaganda for information to create “conditioned” responses to government actions and proposals. It is propaganda that has been shaped by computerized databases of intimate details of each citizen’s behavior and private life to put information into its most appealing form.

That government sees this as a legitimate role was openly acknowledged by the senior adviser to George Bush who told a reporter for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, “You are in what we call the reality-based community. . . . [T]hat’s not the way the world really works anymore. . . . We’re history’s actors and when we act, we create our own reality. While you are studying that reality . . . we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too.”

The goal is a conditioned public, not an informed public. Now think about the worlds “history’s actors” have created:

- The world of economic success and enormous new wealth . . . not the reality, documented by Federal Reserve Bank studies, of the great majority of Americans who work in conditions of insecurity and stress with household income lower than in almost any other industrialized nation.
- The world of multilayered McMansions rivaling the manor houses of old England . . . not the world documented by UNICEF, in which the number of children living in poverty with inadequate health care is the highest among industrialized nations.
- The world of non-existent weapons of mass destruction . . . not the veterans’ hospitals with blasted young bodies or the need to expand Arlington National Cemetery to receive those who will never come home.

These worlds created for the rest of us are magnified by a retinue of other actors—self-interested mediating powers that elaborate, reinforce, and enhance a culture that encourages a pliant, passive public, not the informed public democracy requires.

Actors such as the entertainment industry mediating realities that engender and magnify fear on the one hand and nihilism on the other.

Actors with mediating powers such as lobbying groups disguised as news sites to create fictional political realities that warp any rational discussion or debate on issues and conditions.

Actors with mediating power such as politicized churches that do not create realities based on tolerance and compassion, but demean science and knowledge to encourage dependence on inspired individuals for interpretations of cause and effect.

Actors with mediating power such as the private military/industrial complex President Eisenhower warned of in his Farewell Address fifty years ago, which now has a career path for “information operations” dedicated to controlling the public’s understanding and awareness not only of current battlefields, but of prospective ones as well.

And this is not to mention one of the most powerful mind-numbing actors with mediating power—the consumption industry that sees self-indulgence as democracy’s greatest good and perpetual shopping as the public’s key civic responsibility.

If we think of the informational content spawned by the revolution in communications technology in this way, it becomes much clearer not only that journalism is the weakest competitor in this new universe, but also that it continues to fall behind as it invests less in research and training on behalf of public awareness than any of these competitors.

In contrast with the world we celebrated with Vaclav Havel little more than ten years ago, in our world language works to the disadvantage of self-government. Language may have been freed of unelected gatekeepers only to fall captive once again to proclamation and propaganda, self-serving advertisements, and self-referential assertions rather than the independently verified information that drove the Enlightenment’s notion of individual worth.

If an independent journalism of verification is to rise to the challenge of helping the public to escape from the centralized power developing in our society, then it *must* empower citizens to shape their own communities based on verified information.

We will never know what was in the mind of the prehistoric person who made the first record of the killing of an animal, but we can recognize how in the hundreds of thousands of years of human history since then we have performed similar acts of communication to create human communities of knowing.

The Internet has brought us wide access to material published in other media worldwide and to a vast world of opinion created by millions of bloggers who practice a form of journalism and fact-checking and, most important of all, it has created a greater transparency that journalists are beginning to address after a long period of defensive denial and loss of confidence, and a form of citizen journalism defined by

those on the scene as news happens, as occurred during the Asian tsunami, the London bombings, and Katrina.

Today journalists must open up the process of gathering, organizing, and developing information by using the interactivity of the new technology to allow citizens to become active participants in a community of verification and discussion. This can be done with well thought out tools to engage their knowledge and experience more directly as sources for reporting—as analysis experts, as assignment advisers. Synthesizing technologies can be used to help citizens build communities based on current news disclosures and to solve community problems.

In short, journalism can help citizens to develop the expertise required to search for what is out there that they can believe. If there are to be new realities, it can help the people to build those realities based on the verified facts of their own existence.

By utilizing the tools of image, sound, data mining, narrative, and interactivity, journalists can connect their work to the public in appealing *even if* educational ways. Can opportunities for more civic education be provided in a way that helps people to unlearn some of what they are being told by the popular culture?

The question is, can we do it quickly enough in the face of the competition, and in spite of the obvious decision by the market that journalism is a dying business?

Journalists are beginning to learn how to use the information-rich environment to build more immediate and powerful narratives in the limitless well and the multiple layering of story-telling forms that this new technology allows.

They are doing so by offering stories to different audiences in a variety of ways, using different kinds of data, different forms of data. They are experimenting with narratives like Henry Mayhew's nineteenth-century *London Chronicle* interviews with the street people of London, brief narratives that finally brought to public attention an entire layer of society that had gone unnoticed until his stories gave them human form and visibility; or Joseph Lyford's narratives in *The Airtight Cage* and *The Talk in Vandalia* in the 1960s, which changed America's views about the reality of poverty with the accumulation of minute detail of daily urban and rural life.

More recently, a nine-part series by Crocker Stephenson in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, "In a Child's Best Interest: The Tim Krahling Story," began as a conversation between Stephenson and his public through a reporting blog that made the public's views and insights a part of the reporting. The series was presented in a transparent fashion so everyone could see how the material was obtained and how it was verified.

These narratives with deeper wells of data and meaning verified and presented in different ways are beginning to take advantage of the aggregating power of search engines to direct traffic to their Web sites in the kind of new journalism that might prove, even to the market, that journalism is a rejuvenating industry rather than a mature or dying industry.

These narratives, once possible only in book-length presentations, can now more immediately inform audiences, allowing them to enter the stories and discover realities more exciting, more engaging, and more rewarding than any artificially induced world, the kinds of public affairs narratives that audiences can use to create new communities of interest based on verified realities we all actually experience, and must confront.

Think of the ways other institutions have learned to use technology to create new audiences. Major League Baseball and the National Football League are generating a new generation of fans by helping them become more knowledgeable as they create and interact with their own teams and leagues.

The Next Journalism is one in which coverage of public affairs will allow audiences to engage effectively in the decisions of self-governing. It is a journalism that can imagine interactive coverage of foreign aid, allowing audiences to track its impact, to see what is sent where and how it is used, or test alternative decisions.

This movement toward the Next Journalism is one of engaging, *verified* information that helps the public resist the popular culture's messages of fear and self-indulgence—messages that favor a passive, not an engaged and alert, public.

It is a journalism that protects our words so they become tools with which citizens engage and inform themselves. It is a journalism that adjusts to the irrevocable changes caused by the new technology to assure that the principles and purpose of journalism in the public interest do not disappear.

But another step will be required of the Next Journalism in order to achieve this purpose, and that is to help an overloaded and underfunded system of education fill the public's need for civic instruction. To do this the Next Journalism needs to recall John Dewey's challenge to Walter Lippmann when they were debating journalism's basic role in self-government in the era between the two world wars. Dewey believed that journalism's role is educative rather than mediating, that by informing the public deeply and factually journalists become "catalysts of conversation," and that it is the conversation that, in the end, is the medium of democracy.

The Next Journalism struggling to be born is one that accepts this educative function explicitly, helping the public to develop the skills

and insights to learn what they need to know and to get the information they need as citizens. It is a form of journalism that fortifies the grassroots by making it possible for citizens to ask the right questions of those to whom they have given the authority to make decisions.

This requires an understanding on the part of both journalists and the public of the interlocking nature of an informed public. This is just another way of saying what Thomas Jefferson said so powerfully when he asserted that “the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them.” It explodes the idea that the world is made up of elites and non-elites.

Democracy is predicated on this statement and accepts that everyone has some special knowledge and is a member of some elite knowledge group, and that the public is a complex web of knowledge in which the most knowledgeable and the least knowledgeable help balance one another so that together they are wiser than even the most knowledgeable elites are on their own.

As the philosopher Hannah Arendt reminded us, “freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed.”

It is to realize the guarantee of independently produced, verified information for a broad public that a Next Journalism is searching for its foothold in the new world information order. Thus it can be an active, aggressive, and thoughtful partner with a public that participates in debates and decisions about America’s future and its place in the world’s future.

The successful outcome of this search depends upon whether or not our free market system will find sufficient economic value in such an institution.

Thank you for allowing me to participate in today’s discussion.