

The Decline of “News” and the Rise of Stakeholder Media

by Mark Lee Hunter¹, prepared for World Press Freedom Day 2010

I’ve been in the business of telling stories I believed were true, and hoped would change something, for 35 years. I started in the US right after Watergate, when reporters were heroes. That didn’t last long, and I don’t care; one does not need to be a hero to be a useful reporter. I lived in France during the great investigative movement of 1982-95, which fell apart and is now coming back together. Five years ago, the investigative reporters I know were all depressed, talking about nothing but job and budget cutbacks. They are no longer depressed. They are realising that people still need them, and that what they do has enormous value not only within, but also beyond the news industry. But that does not mean it will be simple to regain ground that was recently lost, for freedom of expression in general and investigative reporting in particular. I will start with the reasons that freedom of expression for investigative reporters is struggling in the places I know about, and then I will tell you why I think that the overall trend is on the side of people who care about telling the truth.

I. Why professional reporters are finding it harder to say what they know

One day I heard an investigative journalist from the USA complain that in her town, there was a hot story that no one would ever publish. It concerned cars that were bought by drug traffickers. Every car dealer she knew offered new vehicles for \$US 9999. That price was exactly one dollar under the amount at which Federal authorities must be notified of a cash transaction, and drug dealers paid cash. Car dealers were the biggest advertisers in her newspaper, so the newspaper preferred to ignore the story. Every reporter at the table agreed that such was the situation in their towns, too.

No one that I know of, anywhere, anytime, has ever been able to report all the stories that should be told. Sometimes telling the story will hurt your employer’s business. Sometimes it will cost you the best friends you have. (I remember a young woman reporter in Burkina Faso asking me to tell her a way that she could investigate wrongdoing in her tribe. It occurred to me that if she did so, she would lose the only social support system that counted for her. Is that true? I asked. “Yes,” she said. I did not tell her, “Investigate them anyway.” I said, “You can’t investigate everyone, all the time.”) Sometimes it will cost you a job. (That happened to me, though I did manage to find another job thanks to the same story that got me fired, and publish it.) Sometimes it will cost the job of someone whose only fault was to trust you enough to tell you the truth. And sometimes it will get them or you killed. That happened to a couple of my friends in this profession. I presume it will happen to others.

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Even for honest, committed reporters, using one's freedom of expression is a daily struggle between what one wants to say, what one can prove, and what one thinks he or she can get away with and survive. There are certain things I would like to say but can't yet prove. Ethics and prudence dictate that I do not say them, even when I know for a fact that they are true. (For example, there are facts I cannot relate without putting someone else in danger of ruin or worse, and that means I must keep silent.) I have not yet been in a position where I could prove something that I did not dare to say, but I certainly do not feel superior to reporters who find themselves in that situation. Telling the truth is a power game, and reporters, regardless of their legend, have very little power. Their only power resides in getting others interested in what they think is important, and in some cases that is not enough to save them.

In my experience, telling the truth is in large part a game of poker in which winning certain hands depends on how well you can bluff. The bluff usually consists in making the objects of your attentions believe that they are better off leaving you alone, no matter how angry they may be with what you have reported. It is somewhat like putting your head in the mouth of a wolf while persuading him that biting down will either break his teeth or give him indigestion. (You can, for example, try to demonstrate to the wolf that what you are publishing is only part of what you know, and the rest of it will suffice to put him in a cage, if anything ever happens to you.) Meanwhile, you can only hope that the wolf will not be so offended by your smell, or so hungry, or simply so mean that he bites you anyway.

I have the distinct impression that there are more two-legged wolves in the world these days. The emergence of new organised crime syndicates – in Latin America, in the ruined inner cities of North America and the rotting suburbs of Western Europe, in the struggling states of post-Soviet Eastern Europe, in the post-colonial battlegrounds of Africa, to name only the places I am aware of – seems even more worrisome to me than the globalisation of political or religious terror. (If the British historian Eric Hobsbawm's 1969 study, *Bandits*, was accurate we can expect that as organised terror declines, organised crime will thrive, because it will inherit the cadres and foot soldiers of terrorism.) To take only one example, as I write, journalists are being driven into exile from the northern border of Mexico, because they will be murdered if they remain. This means that their former neighbours no longer see their daily lives recounted in the media, a sensation formerly reserved for inhabitants of dictatorships where official news is the only news one may speak. It also means that because fewer and fewer observers are exposing the nature and extent of the crisis, it becomes continually harder to solve. To broadly paraphrase Amartya Sen, how can you – and why would you, if you had the power – fix a problem that no one recognises?

I recently heard Julian Assange, one of the founders of the very important phenomenon called Wikileaks, observe that a great many more policemen get killed on the job than do journalists, and that brave, honest policemen are no less valuable to society. (I agree.) He also suggested that if more journalists were doing their job correctly, more would be killed. He was being deliberately provocative, and he was certainly not endorsing the murder of reporters; in any case, there is some truth in what he said.

A great many journalists do not do their jobs properly, either because they are lazy, or incompetent, or frightened, or cynical. Any of these failings may suffice to convince

a reporter that there is no point in telling a story that might comfort the victims of injustice, or even, just possibly, reduce the injustice and suffering that invade life as we know it. A few journalists are given large offices, comfortable salaries and benefits, and a measure of fame precisely because they have spent their careers carefully saying what their chosen masters want them to say, with the appropriate dose of arrogant certainty. (This is a form of self-deception. There is nothing particularly noble about such jobs.) Such prominent figures are exceptions even among the corrupt, of course; I always tell my students, “The problem isn’t that journalists can be bought; the problem is that so many can be bought so cheaply.”

More common is a journalist who is struggling to survive on piecework that pays badly, or who has achieved a certain mediocre comfort and has no idea what he or she would do if it were lost. These people are afraid of making enemies; they do not have enough experience of conflict to know that telling the truth earns one more respect and friendship than hatred, and that the respect comes from a better class of human being.

Often they become journalists not from a profound desire to tell the truth, but from a profound lack of self-respect. They hope that being a journalist will allow them to frequent better company than their own. Every year, I see this trait in a few of my students. It emerges when they undertake an investigation, discover something important, and then betray their own work by denying what they have found. They do not dare to imagine that all of the prominent people they have interviewed, and who have subtly intimated to them that they are insects, could do something that is wrong, even by mistake. They are not yet capable of understanding that by telling the truth – more exactly, by doing the job of finding and proving the truth – they may attain a higher sense of self, if not a higher state of being. This transformation is not imaginary, and it is not unique to journalists. I have seen it in prosecutors, in scholars, in politicians and in housewives who defend something that deserves to be defended on behalf of others. Telling the truth is a means to *se dépasser*, in the extraordinary and precise French term for going beyond oneself.

I said above that it is cheap to acquire the complicity of a reporter. In fact, journalists are getting cheaper lately, but in large part through no fault of their own. Since the 1980s the news industry has undergone massive restructuring at the ownership level. In essence, an increasingly larger number of media have migrated into an increasingly smaller number of hands. The debt incurred by these transactions, and the consequent financial pressure on media owners, has led to massive and recurrent downsizing of the media workforce. As in other industries, the impact of downsizing has been unequal: A disproportionate number of those who left their jobs (and in many cases, the profession) were older, experienced journalists. And, as in other industries, a certain number of those who remained in their jobs were not the sharpest knives in the kitchen. They were simply the most reliable and inexpensive implements for their new owners, who tend to view their acquisitions more as instruments of personal power and prestige than as vectors of the public good.

It is not entirely or only true that “freedom of the press belongs to the man who owns one”, of course. But the man or woman who owns one does have quite a bit to say about how that freedom is used. I have personally seen very good news media that once acted as watchdogs, but turned into lapdogs after a change in their ownership

structures. This trend has affected even newspapers and broadcasters of record in the markets I am familiar with. It is most visible in terms of what is *not* reported – meaning that only those who possess prior knowledge of key facts may be aware of their sudden disappearance. In France, my home base, I have repeatedly been astonished in recent years by the glaring holes in ongoing coverage of certain major events that I and other reporters previously investigated. At a certain point, facts that were in the public record vanish from the latest version. In the meanwhile, a new minority or majority owner has appeared who can only be relieved by his media’s amnesia.

By no coincidence, at least so far as I am concerned, surveys of public opinion toward the media have shown a long-term, steady, and accelerating decline in the confidence of news consumers toward the news they are offered. In general, people think that the news media are not telling them the fundamental, underlying facts behind their stories. Nor do they believe that the news media are serving the public interest. On the contrary, they believe that the news media are serving occult interests. We are not speaking here of crazies who see conspiracies everywhere; we are speaking of majority opinions. Put simply, reporters and the industry they work for have clearly lost the trust of the major part of their public.

Less apparently, a certain number of the people who own the industry are running it as though they wish to destroy it. By eliminating content that can transform the lives of its users, they make their product valueless. It is not “Internet” that is killing the news business. It is this decline in the user value of the news, which bestows equal value on free competition.

Thus declining capacity brought on by the financial leveraging of the news industry and private agendas have combined to erode a key pillar of freedom of expression. After all, expression is not only a matter of making noises: It is also a matter of being heard and of being taken seriously. This erosion has been exploited and furthered through the confounding of news and publicity. I never buy the “people” press, and I never look for it on Internet, but I can tell you most of the latest rumours about Brad Pitt, because every time I pass a newsstand they are in my face. If it is true, as research into the agenda-setting effects of news tells us, that what the media treat as important is considered important by society, then the industry has spent several decades persuading people that Brad’s marriages matter more than the growing level of social injustice on our planet. In the process, the industry has lost much of the interest of the public that cares about something besides someone else’s marriage, even if that someone is Brad Pitt.

That interest is migrating out of the news industry, into another sector of the media. In the next section of this article I will try to describe that emergent sector and what it means for freedom of expression. I know from experience that some of my argument will make journalists and responsible publishers and citizens very unhappy. I am going to tell you that the great period of objective reporting, from the end of the Second World War until the beginning of the 21st century, is coming to a close. Some of the self-proclaimed neutral news media of the objective era will remain, but their reach and scope may be further reduced.

But that is not necessarily bad – and in some ways, may be very good – for freedom of expression in general, and for investigative reporting in particular.

II. The rise of stakeholder media

Around the same time that I met the American reporters who couldn't tell the story of cash for cars, I was following France's extreme right party, the National Front, on campaign. One day in a provincial town, dozens of militants from elsewhere in France showed up to canvass voters door-to-door. "How did you get here?" I asked. They told me that they'd been listening to the Front's radio station, and answered its morning call for help. Soon after, I read Sara Diamond's extraordinary history of the American Christian Right, *Roads to Dominion*, which recounts in detail how conservative militants in the US patiently constructed their own media networks to tell the truth as they saw it. In both cases, the hostility or indifference of mainstream news media did not prevent these activists from reaching the people they wanted to reach, and from providing them with a coherent (though partial) worldview. Moreover, unlike the news media, the activists did not only raise questions, they provided answers.

You may not like the kind of answers the extreme right provides, and neither do I. But in France and the US, the only countries I have observed closely over long periods, they were among the first forces to sense and act upon a profound shift in the nature of news consumption. That shift has two key pivots.

The first is that *as the standard of objectivity erodes, the standard of transparency replaces it*. Viewers increasingly do not care if the person who tells them information and what it means adopts a neutral stand. Of course, a great many news media around the world have always represented the interests of a particular party or regime, but since the end of the Second World War, the global standard and expectation was that they nonetheless present information fairly and in a balanced way. That expectation has been disappointed from the top of the business – for example, at Fox News, whose slogan, precisely, is "fair and balanced", and which may fairly be called neither. But it is also being discarded, and massively, by people who create their own media.

One key vector here was user forums on the Internet, beginning in the mid-1990s. If you ever read online user reviews of products, you cannot help but notice that if the reviewers love a product, they are careful to say that they don't work for the manufacturer. They expect others to question their motives, so they make their motives clear. If they don't, especially when they harshly criticise, other forum members will ask why. No one in these forums – which in 1997 were estimated by Carlo Revelli to account for 40 percent of *all* Internet content; the current figure may be smaller but is still substantial – expects anyone else to be neutral. They *do* expect everyone else to make their biases clear.

The second pivot point is that *the goals of information providers are shifting from "what to think about" to "what to do about it"*. The idea behind telling "all the news that's fit to print" (in the words of the New York Times) is that once citizens are aware of that news, they will decide what must be done about it. An objective news

media does not tell its viewers what to do, except in clearly labelled editorial opinions, or it is no longer objective.

I confess that I have been struggling with this rule all my life. I did not realise why until I read a book by Robert Miraldi, *Objectivity and Muckraking: Journalism's Colliding Traditions*. Miraldi identified a structural paradox between neutral news media and investigative reformers. Investigators do not merely hope to expose injustice, they hope to end it, and that is a profoundly subjective stance. Under the rules of objectivity, reporters are not supposed to say how that might happen, or support the side of a given issue that might make it happen. In practice, the smart ones do find and support such allies, of course. (In their book *The Journalism of Outrage*, David Protess et al. call this the “coalition model” of how journalists achieve change.) But also in practice, investigative reporters are regarded with confusion, suspicion or outright hostility by their “objective” colleagues. They have “agendas.” Their agendas lead to conflict. And they are certainly not neutral about who wins.

This structural confusion is now being resolved outside the news industry. In the new media world that is taking shape, people do not look at media in order to know what they should think about. They already know, or they would not have googled the subject in the first place. They are looking for something they need, or they would not make the effort. (Remember, they are not required to make any effort to know which star is getting divorced.) In a word, they are seeking *solutions*.

What kind of solutions? If you spend time looking at media users, and not just providers, you notice that a lot of the solutions they are seeking turn around money. They want to know how best to save it, invest it, and spend it. Objective news media provide some of that information, but nothing like the scope, detail and transparency of criticism that is available through an Internet search. They can't, so long as advertising is key to their revenue models. Advertisers do not like appearing in media that proclaim their products and services are worth less than they pretend. I happen to play the guitar, and I recently opened a French guitar magazine in which a letter to the editor directly demanded an opinion as to which of two products gave more value for money. The editor's reply dodged the question. Which leads to another question: If you can't provide a clear opinion to someone who paid you 5 euros for it, who are you working for instead?

The users that we in the media are ultimately working for, like us, are flooded every day with “information” that is designed to distract, confuse, or stimulate them in ways they might not appreciate if they were fully conscious of it. (Personally, there are media I no longer watch, unless I am investigating them, because I can't help being conscious of it.) By no coincidence, they are seeking media that help them find a path through this muddy, polluted mental swamp. They no longer have time, if they ever did, to reflect on every single choice that is shoved in their faces. Nor do they have time to seek the background behind the noise, to understand the motivations and goals of those who are making that noise. No wonder they are happy to find people who do that work of keeping track and keeping score, and who make it plain from the start why they are doing it and to what end.

We call these people “stakeholder media” at the INSEAD Social Innovation Centre, but there are other names. A scholar named David Deephouse calls them “infomediaries.” Another scholar named Yves Fassin calls them “stakewatchers.” Whatever you call them, they share several characteristics. They do not give you all the news that’s fit to print. Instead, they give you all the news that fits their agendas. They do not claim to be objective (except to mislead or by self-deception), though they certainly claim that the facts they report have an objective reality, meaning that they are not simply invented. They assign a meaning to those facts, and describe the implications. And they tell you what you can or must do in order to save your money, your family, your community or your planet, not necessarily in that order.

Let me repeat an example and give you some others. The extreme right’s homemade media networks are stakeholder media as we use the term. So are Greenpeace’s reports, tracts, and website, and the hundreds of smaller environmentalist websites that relay Greenpeace’s messages. So are the reports of financial analysts, which in one case we studied brought a multinational corporation to its knees in the absence of news media coverage. (In other words, the news media were irrelevant to the outcome. They are not the only gatekeepers in the game.) So are user forums on the Internet, which my colleague David Soberman and I found to have sufficient power to counter-balance the advertising expenditures of major brands. So is Wikileaks, which has become one of the world’s most important sources for documents released by whistleblowers within governments and organisations. (Not incidentally, the fact that Wikileaks has become one of their preferred destinations in a very short time says something dreadful about the confidence of whistleblowers in the news industry.)

I could extend this list, but you get the point. There is a huge and growing number of media whose goal is to make a certain community of practice or interest prosper in hard times, if not to save the world or a piece of it. And in at least some cases, they are doing a better job of it than the news media.

I will admit that I am glad to see it happen. For one thing, at least some stakeholder media are creating jobs. (That should not be a surprise; small and medium-sized enterprises typically create more jobs than big organisations.) As I write, the ensemble of journalism schools in Europe is producing approximately two graduates for every position that is open in the news industry. I want my students to have a future doing what they love, and the news industry is not doing a great job of providing it. Stakeholder media are beginning to do it.

But there is another reason. The news media, to a far greater degree than I am comfortable with, have ceased to be a counter-power, and have become a power, period. As such, their interests are increasingly aligned with those of other dominant powers. I can’t help but suspect that this helps to explain why, in the financial sector, with few exceptions the news media fed the bubbles that burst in 2001 and 2007. (I am pleased to see that exceptions like *The Economist* remain among the few profitable news media. People are still willing to pay for the truth they can’t find elsewhere.) Stakeholder media appear more and more, at least to me, as the new counter-powers.

Are they fully professional? Only some. Are they truly ethical, even by the standard of transparency, let alone by the standards of accuracy and fairness? Only some. Are

they any worse than the news media in this moment of crisis? Some, sure. *But not all.* That is why they are eating more and more of the news industry's lunch – not just because they are freely available, but because they are creating value.

Can they replace the news media? Not at present. Few stakeholder media, so far as we can tell, have a sustainable business model. (I am not talking only about profit, I am talking about the resources necessary to do work that one deeply believes must be done.) Moreover, the ones most crucial to the public interest, such as the foundation-supported investigative journalism centres that have multiplied in recent years, remain largely dependent on the news industry to distribute and publicise their work. (So, not incidentally, are stakeholders like Greenpeace and Human Rights Watch.) Nor is it comforting that a growing number of governments and corporations are seeking to interdict, prosecute and otherwise harass web-based stakeholder media, just as they previously censored their news industries. It is particularly appalling in this regard that the United Kingdom's antiquated libel laws, in a country that considers itself the birthplace of modern democracy, have become shield laws for criminals around the world. How does it serve the public or democracy to turn your pasture into a global wolf farm?

It is particularly hopeful, however that organisations like the Global Investigative Journalism Network, founded in 2001 (a transparency moment: I belong), are increasingly forming trans-national projects to make certain that a story blocked in one place will swarm from others. This is a stakeholder media strategy, and it will remain effective. Stakeholder media, like the independent news media that will be forced to surpass them in professionalism and expertise in order to survive, are not going away. If projects like the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative, which is approaching a parliamentary vote as I write, meet their promise we will see the creation of free zones for them. Some of those who migrate to these zones where libel laws favour the truth will surely abuse their liberty. That eventuality will require monitoring and perhaps correction. But it is no reason not to move forward.

The paradox of free expression in this moment is that the news industry is in growing trouble while its ostensible product, information that can change people's lives for the better, is in growing demand. Our job in this moment is to find ways to satisfy that demand that enable us to live from our work. If the industry helps, great. If not, fine. The demand is not going away, so neither will we.