

**Journalist Heal Thyself:
Towards A Strategy of Professionalization**

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ABSTRACT

The upheaval affecting news media is exposing journalism's biggest and potentially fatal flaw – its inability to act in a coherent and organized way to explain, promote and protect its distinct role in serving democracy. I will argue that if journalism's vital public-service role is to be preserved and preferably enhanced as the media industry evolves through its current crucible, journalists themselves should accept more responsibility for how journalism is defined and practised. They should do this in a way that transcends the rhetoric of individual autonomy that has typified discussions about journalism ethics and adopt the same collective, peer-based approach taken by other professions with public-service missions – in other words, journalists should reconsider their historical antipathy to organizing themselves into a self-regulating profession.

The media business is in a state of upheaval and journalism is heaving with it. Distributed network communication – exemplified by the Internet – is eroding the news media's traditional economic and content models. This has led to intense debate about what traditional media needs to do to survive. In the short term, declining or stagnant revenue has led to some cost-cutting and layoffs – particularly in the newspaper industry – and frantic efforts to develop new revenue sources (Schudson and Dokoupil). Many media operations are experimenting with Internet-based publishing and broadcast models and, in some cases, news operations are even opening their digital doors to citizen-produced content. Journalists and other media professionals are increasingly expected to

produce and package print, broadcast and Web-based media, sometimes at the same time (Doyle).

This upheaval and change is impacting journalists as well as their employers. Many traditional practices and assumptions are being questioned. Some journalists are embracing the challenge and working to develop new approaches to journalism, examples being the work done to develop and encourage “citizen media” by people like Dan Gillmor and Jay Rosen¹ and the creation of non-profit and philanthropically funded journalism organizations. (Dottinga) Some employers are trying to maintain and build their audience by experimenting with new ways of presenting information and reporting news, the most striking example being the Fox news networks’ blatantly ideological approach to reporting and commentary.

The upheaval and experimentation has left many in the journalism business in a state of anxiety. As Geneva Overholser observed: “With the old economic model of journalism collapsing, the people who do the work in the field have been uncertain that their craft will survive.” (2) But even before the rise of the Internet, the news business was facing difficulties as it struggled to maintain historically high levels of profit demanded by investors while trying to stem a long-term decline in readers and viewers. Indeed, as James Carey has noted, for more than a century the centrality of a culture of journalism in the news media business has been eroded by an expanding culture of entertainment. (335) The Internet challenge has simply worsened the confusion and doubt afflicting a news media system already accused of any number of sins, including bias (Goldberg, Alterman, Miljan), irresponsibility (Fallows, Isaacs), strangling democratic discourse through corporate conglomeration and a lust for profit (McChesney, Cohen,

Hackett) and a growing tendency toward sensationalism and superficiality (Hachten, Bird, Bennett). It certainly does nothing to alleviate the public's well-documented and widespread distrust of journalists (Ipsos; CMRC, 13-39) or the inability of many to distinguish journalism from other media activities. (Annenberg).

My purpose is not to add to this chorus of criticism but rather to contribute to the search for solutions. I will argue that the upheaval affecting news media is exposing journalism's biggest and potentially fatal flaw – its inability to act in a coherent and organized way to explain, promote and protect its distinct role in serving democracy. I will argue that if journalism's vital public-service role is to be preserved and preferably enhanced as the media industry evolves through its current crucible, journalists themselves should accept more responsibility for how journalism is defined and practised. They should do this in a way that transcends the rhetoric of individual autonomy that has typified discussions about journalism ethics and adopt the same collective, peer-based approach taken by other professions with public-service missions – in other words, journalists should reconsider their historical antipathy to organizing themselves into a self-regulating profession.

This argument is rooted in two vital suppositions: 1. Journalism is a form of media activity that is distinct in purpose and methodology from other media activities; and 2. Journalism matters. The qualities that make journalism distinct were described nicely a few years ago by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel in The Elements of Journalism. I agree with them that journalists owe their first loyalty to citizens rather than employers and their role is to serve those citizens by independently seeking, verifying and communicating information the public needs to perform its critical responsibilities in

managing, protecting and improving democratic society. This is what makes journalism distinct. The other supposition – that journalism matters – is rooted in the belief that journalism of this kind is essential to democracy – that, as Carey has observed, journalism and democracy are so interdependent, each would be meaningless without the other. (336-337)

Is Journalism A Profession?

My collection of journalism books includes the 1919 edition of a classic text written in 1912 by Grant Milnor Hyde. In the first sentence of the first chapter, he refers to newspaper reporting as “a profession.” (1) It is a term that has been used again and again when referring to the occupation of journalism, but is it accurate? One of the most complete and cogent examination of journalism’s status as a profession is a collection of articles published in the Journal of Mass Media Ethics in 1986. In a review of the literature of professionalism, Marianne Allison noted ongoing disagreement among scholars as to whether journalism could or should be considered a profession. Journalism was seen by some as lacking important qualities typical of other professions – journalists are paid by employers (and ultimately by advertisers) rather than clients, one isn’t required to master a systematic body of knowledge to perform journalism, journalists have no formal mechanism to lobby for their own interests and they are not viewed as professionals by the public. She also described some scholars’ serious objections to professionalizing journalism if it involved any form of government licencing, robbed individual journalists of their occupational autonomy or limited the sovereignty of citizens over public debate. However, Allison noted, other scholars argued that journalists were increasingly displaying qualities similar to other professions – particularly in their

commitment to providing a public service, the existence of strong occupation-wide norms such as striving for objectivity and the evolution of commonly agreed-upon ethical practices such as protecting sources.

This issue of Mass Media Ethics also includes an historical analysis of professionalism in journalism by Douglas Birkhead. He argued that despite “wrapping itself in the bunting of professionalism” since the late 19th century, journalists are far removed from any real claim to being professionals. The essential defining quality of a profession, he argues, is “a high degree of control over the fields of their work.” The work of journalists, however, is controlled by their employers. Any professional status accruing to journalists comes not from their collective efforts to deliver upon a goal of public service and not from having the right or ability to self-control their work, but through a connection to their employers and participation in the work routines of manufacturing a news product.

What eventually came to be classified as professional was not just the ideal of objectivity, a value claimed in some form by all professions, but virtually the entire newsroom process of handling news in the modern news production system. This process gained professional status as ‘expertise’ or proficiency requiring special discipline, skills, and training. The system defined a professional practitioner in terms of a journalist’s capability within and adherence to the system, from defining news to conforming to news style, from writing on deadlines to pyramiding reality. Professionalism in journalism has not demarcated a profession or even a semi-profession of practitioners that is distinct from the businesses that employ them. (41)

Indeed, Birkhead goes even further in arguing that the development of the notion of professionalism in journalism was encouraged by employers for commercial and managerial purposes and that, if anything, it severely limited journalists’ ability to set their own professional goals and standards.

What occurred in the name of professionalism primarily involved the legitimation of the press as a corporate or business institution. Especially in the case of reporters, almost the antithesis of professional autonomy came about. Professionalism became a standard and justification for *controlling* reporters in the news organization. ... Bringing journalists firmly under newsroom management was part of the professional solution. (39)

This may be overstating the case a little. For a time, at least, the newsroom was seen by many journalists as the protector of professional values. This responsibility was epitomized by the notion of the “Chinese Wall,” a symbolic but supposedly impermeable barrier between the newsroom and the business side of the media company that enabled newsroom leaders to make decisions about coverage based on journalistic criteria alone. The extent to which this barrier really existed is debatable but the idea that a newsroom should operate independently was widely accepted in the industry as the norm. However, that began to change during the 1980s, when the effort to battle declining readership led to the conclusion that newsroom isolation was part of the problem. From that time forward, newsroom leaders became part of a management team expected to play a significant part in formulating and executing the organization’s business and marketing plan. (Ureneck, 9-13; Kovach, 58-63)

In this sense, Birkhead’s description of the limitations faced by journalists was certainly applicable to a growing number of newsrooms in the latter decades of the 20th century. The newsroom had been the locus of journalistic professionalism and when that was eroded, there was nothing left to replace it, except what François Demers has called a “good employee’s model” of journalism.

The Argument Against Professionalization

An early argument against professionalization in the United States was made by the Commission on Freedom of the Press, led by University of Chicago chancellor Robert

M. Hutchins and financed primarily by a grant from Henry R. Luce's Time Inc. The commission's position seems a bit surprising given its enthusiastic endorsement of what is often called the "social responsibility" theory of the press, the notion that press freedom must be tempered and in some cases even restrained by the collective need of citizens in democratic societies for accurate and comprehensive information and a wide and representative range of analysis and opinion. The Hutchins report did not argue professionalization was undesirable – indeed, it noted with approval the ability of doctors and lawyers to set ethical performance standards and enforce them up to the point of denying someone the right to continue practising the profession. However, the commission argued, journalists could never duplicate the relationship that exists between lawyers and clients or doctors and patients because "the writer works for an employer and the employer, not the writer, takes the responsibility." Even though the Hutchins commissioners deemed it desirable for journalists to cultivate "professional ideals and attitudes," particularly through training at university-level journalism schools, they concluded "the effective organization of writers on professional lines is ... almost impossible." (77) The commission's argument against professionalism was based on practical rather than normative grounds.

The 1986 Mass Media Ethics series of articles did include a strong moral condemnation of professionalism in journalism, written by John C. Merrill. He denounced what he believed was a growing trend toward elitism in journalism and warned professionalization would rob journalists of their individuality, violate freedom of the press as articulated in the United States through the First Amendment and severely curtail journalistic diversity and pluralism. If journalists were organized into a self-

regulating professional body, they would turn increasingly inward and be more concerned about protecting their self-interests than the interests of citizens.

A kind of longing for peer approval and direction seems to be propelling journalists into the elite exclusivity of professionalization, where they in some way will become ‘special’ people with special training and special credentials. Non-professionals, under such a system, could not practice journalism. This attitude toward journalism as a profession, in addition to being contrary to the spirit of the First Amendment and American tradition, evidences a supreme arrogance. (56-57)

Interestingly, although Merrill was for decades a most ardent and outspoken foe of professionalization, as we shall see later, he recently reversed his position, becoming an equally ardent proponent. Canadian Nick Russell has also warned against any formal professionalization of journalists into systems similar to those adopted by doctors and lawyers because it would impose “a wholly unsuitable homogeneity on journalism.” His objection is founded largely on a fear that professionalization would require all journalists to earn a journalism degree as a form of professional accreditation.

Some of the best practitioners of journalism in Canada today have university degrees in philosophy, medicine, divinity, science, or law, in addition to, or even instead of, a journalism degree or diploma. (And some may have no degrees at all.) If they were all excluded in favour of a universal and exclusive journalism degree, for instance, most unfortunate mass production would ensue. Medicine, law, or accounting, may not need this endless variety; journalism thrives on it. (246-247)

The Argument For Professionalization

One of the bolder Canadian statements in favour of professionalization – though little noted then or since – was advanced in 1970 by the Report of the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media, better known as the Davey report, after its chair, Senator Keith Davey. Media controversy over the main committee recommendation – that media mergers be disallowed by government unless they can be proven to be in the public

interest – tended to obscure other parts of the committee’s report, but it’s clear the committee saw professionalization in some form as a key component of news media reform.

Physicians, lawyers, accountants, teachers, and plumbers all insist, in varying degrees, on the right to set the standards under which they perform their work, and to decide who is and who is not qualified to join their professional ranks. Journalists do not possess this status. They do not appear to have sought it, and their employers assuredly have not encouraged them to seek it. This wouldn’t matter if publishing and broadcasting were just another industry. But the whole thrust of the Committee’s thinking is that the media’s business is the public’s business. The failure of the media, owners and workers alike, to evolve anything approaching professional journalistic standards is thus a matter of public concern. For the plain fact is that only journalists and the people who employ them can achieve this status. Nothing about the media is going to change very much unless and until that starts happening. (121)

It wasn’t that journalists weren’t concerned with standards or didn’t have “a professional consciousness.” The committee argued most reporters did possess a professional attitude and “know, with a surprising degree of unanimity, what is good newspaper practice and what isn’t.” However, because of their status as employees, journalists were “powerless to effect any improvements.” (124)

The committee saw unionization as one route toward professionalization, based mainly on what it saw as the significant professional rights being bargained at the time by media unions in Quebec. It approvingly noted that some Quebec bargaining units had won clauses protecting journalists from having to write advertising copy, requiring a reporter’s consent if editing changed the meaning of articles and allowing reporters to withhold bylines if they objected to how stories were edited. “(O)ur parting word to the working press: if you’re dissatisfied with the way the news is handled, quit griping and start organizing,” the committee wrote. (124)

Media unions have, in fact, tried to help protect their members' professional autonomy by negotiating a variety of professional rights clauses into collective agreements – ranging from the right to remove bylines to the ability to refuse to write advertising copy. However, the results have been uneven. (Bergen, 33-46) There are other problems inherent in expecting unions to protect professional integrity. They don't protect editorial management, those responsible for newsroom decisions, and the nature of collective bargaining produces ongoing pressure to trade professional rights away for improved wages and benefits.

Two subsequent parliamentary inquiries into the Canadian media – the 1981 Royal Commission on Newspapers led by former journalist Tom Kent and the 2006 Senate Transport and Communications Committee Report on the Canadian News Media – did not propose any formal professionalization of Canadian journalists. However, the Royal Commission did suggest measures designed to provide journalists working in chain-owned newspapers with a direct reporting relationship to the public, independent of the employer, by legally requiring that every editor-in-chief have full authority over news content and that editors publish an annual newsroom performance report detailing, among other things, how much of a newspaper's revenue was reinvested in newsroom operations. (247-249)

Another argument in favour of professionalization was put forward in an article contributed to the 1986 issue of *Mass Media Ethics* by Louis B. Hodges, who argued the time was ripe even then for journalists to adopt a more formal approach to professional organization. If journalism was “perceived and defined” as a profession, Hodges wrote, it would benefit both journalists and the public by clarifying and reinforcing journalism's

public service mission. “Quality of service will supplant other considerations as the number one concern.... All decisions about news stories will be made from the moral viewpoint of the audience’s interests, not the interests of the journalist or the news organization.” (35) This, he added, “can modify, if not totally supplant, the crass commercialism that seems to me to have replaced professionalism in our midst.” (36) The benefit of professionalism for journalists, he argued, would be the opportunity to rebuild their status in the eyes of the public, to restore public trust and confidence in journalism. “I believe that if journalists are to gain the respect we need them to have, the profession must attain a larger measure of mental and moral force. That can come, I think, only when journalists begin to take themselves seriously as members of a profession.” (32)

The ambiguity and confusion over whether journalism is a profession continues to be evident. Although journalists are not organized into a self-regulating profession, many belong to voluntary professional associations, often representing occupational specialties like photojournalism or copy-editing. Indeed, the American Journalism Review website lists more than 80 “journalism organizations” in the United States, including a variety of research foundations and dozens of associations. The U.S. Society of Professional Journalists was founded in 1909. A similar body in Canada, The Canadian Association of Journalists, has existed since the 1970s (when it was called the Centre for Investigative Journalism). The U.S. Poynter Institute has offered professional training programs to working journalists since the 1970s. And a number of organizations devoted to studying and debating journalism have been created since the 1980s, the most notable being the Committee of Concerned Journalists and the Project for Excellence in Journalism, which publishes a well-researched annual “State of the News Media” report. These

organizations do a good job of bringing journalists together to examine and discuss issues of common interest, offer continuing education opportunities to working journalists and sometimes take positions on controversial journalism issues. But in all cases, membership is voluntary and, given their multiplicity, none can claim to speak for journalists with any real authority.

Journalism and Professionalization Today

Not surprisingly, given the economic upheaval affecting traditional news media in the wake of the development and penetration of Internet-based media formats, media reform is again a hot topic. As usual, media ownership issues – concentrated ownership and cross-ownership in particular – are high on the agenda. In the United States, arguments over ownership issues have dominated hearings of the Federal Communications Commission. In Canada, where decades of mergers have created one of the world's most concentrated media-ownership systems, public concerns about concentration led to the creation of yet another national inquiry, led this time by the Senate's standing committee on transport and communications. The United States has also witnessed the rise of a surprisingly virile popular movement for media democratization, the "Free Press" movement, inspired largely by Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols. Although demands to break up concentrated ownership are high on the Free Press list of demands, it is also motivated by a desire to encourage people to utilize the Internet to create local, grassroots media that can voice views and issues ignored or given short shrift by mainstream media.

The upheaval afflicting the news business is also sparking renewed consideration – at least by some – of the notion of professionalizing journalism. Philip Meyer, for

example, recently published a book called The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age. His main objective is to persuade media owners that good journalism can be profitable and to urge an end to cannibalizing media assets – particularly newsroom staffing – to prop up quarterly profits despite stagnant or declining revenues. He promotes a longer-term investment strategy designed to rebuild newspapers and the public-service journalism central to the corporate mission and identity of traditional newspapers. But in the concluding chapter, his argument takes a surprising turn. “Maybe the bean counters will get religion,” Meyer writes. “Maybe the suits who run media corporations will give more attention to social responsibility. Let’s not sit around and wait.” (228)

According to Meyer, the race to win valuable attention from an increasingly fragmented and indifferent audience and the need to adapt to new communication technology is transferring power and influence over news media content from journalists to “professional communicators” who “... are trying a number of things that, while not performed by real journalists, are not always distinguishable from journalism in the public mind.”

One is to make content as outlandish and shocking as possible. Another is to get information into print, on the air, or on the Web so quickly that there is no time for fact checking. Yet a third is to blend editorial content with paid advertising or public relations material so seamlessly that the consumer is unaware that he or she is receiving a commercial pitch. Even though these things are not normally done by legitimate journalists, there are enough highly visible infractions by real journalists to make the distinction fairly seamless in the public eye. (231)

Meyer argues that the growing pressure on journalism to compromise traditional standards and ethics “will slowly but irreversibly force it to move from craft to profession. It is time to band together for self-protection and for clearer identification.”

(231) Meyer is not giving up on his hope that newspaper owners can be persuaded that good journalism is good business. He sees professionalization as a necessary first step in that process. “[I]f business – including the news business – is going to be reformed, the initiative should come from those souls and bodies who toil in the field with professional responsibilities in mind. If journalism is to survive, it will need a professional apparatus as one of the tools in the fight.” (244)

As for whether journalism meets the criteria traditionally deemed necessary for professionalization, Meyer argues it does. The increasingly common requirement in newsroom hiring for a journalism degree as an entry qualification suggests journalism does require a specialized body of knowledge. The literature of journalism displays the development of a moral concern about the public impact of journalistic practice that is typical of the normative standards common to other professions. He describes conflict in the field during the 1990s over the agenda-setting concepts set out by advocates of civic journalism as a dispute between journalists with professional aspirations and those with a more traditional craft/employee orientation. He argues that journalism’s client is the public or community rather than employers or sources and that it doesn’t matter that journalism’s client is collective in nature rather than specific individuals.

Setting and enforcing journalistic standards, Meyer admits, is more problematic because that challenges traditional journalistic notions of freedom from censorship and could be seen as “a step toward licensing.” However, he argues journalists should demonstrate and document their competence to build credibility with both employers and the public. Certification in the form of a journalism degree or evidence that a person has mastered a specific skill such as computer-assisted reporting is an effective means of

assuring a certain level of expertise and training. Even if such documentation becomes a general requirement for employment, Meyer argues, it is no more a licence than a high school diploma. As for enforcing standards, Meyer suggests journalists take a route similar to professional pollsters, who peer-review each others' work and publicly censure anyone who grossly violates professional norms, without necessarily stripping them of a right to practice. "The main function of the censure resolutions is to draw a public distinction between legitimate polling practices and those outside the pale," Meyer writes. "And this is exactly what journalism in general needs if it is to retain its professional identity." (239)

The most surprising recent proponent of professionalizing journalism is the formerly outspoken critic, John C. Merrill. In a 2005 article published in *The Global Media Journal*, Merrill writes that he had come to realize relying on individual ethics is not enough to prevent the public service mission of journalism from being overwhelmed and distorted by powerful commercial and political interests. Journalists need to organize into a self-regulating profession devoted to setting and enforcing ethical standards for professional practice. This, he argues, would protect journalism's integrity without sacrificing journalism's independence from government, commerce and faction. "The idealistic goal for journalism worldwide seems to be to have a media system that is both free and controlled. This would mean the press would be free (of outside control) and at the same time held to high standards by somebody. Who would this "somebody" be? The only answer that seems viable: A PROFESSION."

Merrill does not attempt to weave around the question of whether journalism should adopt regulations similar to other professions. He argues strongly that journalism

can and should adopt similar rules and enforcement mechanisms, including the right to expel anyone who grossly violates the professional code of ethics and conduct.

“Licensing, yes. Entrance exams, yes. Quality control, yes. A method of expelling unprofessional members, yes. Mastery of a body of knowledge, yes. But all of these things would be done by the profession itself. No outside interference. No external control. The profession would be the authority.” Merrill goes on to describe in broad terms the kind of knowledge he believes a journalist needs to master to qualify for journalism certificate or licence, including “practical techniques”; a fundamental understanding of sociological, psychological, philosophical and economic concepts as they relate to communications; knowledge of national and international media history and systems plus demonstrated writing and speaking skills. He also argues that professionalized journalists be required to subscribe to a common code of ethics and participate in continuing education. As for his previous position, Merrill writes:

Professionalization of journalism is a touchy subject. It is often seen as a tendency to shut out people from practicing journalism, an attempt to create an elite body. And that is considered a bad thing for the media. But to have a profession of journalism – a true profession – would assure journalistic freedom and institutional autonomy and at the same time would create a structure to ensure high quality and morality among the professionals.

Overholser also reviews the idea of professionalization in a fascinating document entitled “Manifesto for Change,” published by the Annenberg Public Policy Centre. Overholser takes a shotgun approach to media reform, sympathetically reviewing a series of sometimes contradictory reform proposals ranging from persuading corporate owners to commit to public-service journalism, to encouraging the development of philanthropic and other non-profit news media organizations, to giving government a bigger role in regulating media and supporting journalism through tax incentives and other mechanisms.

Declaring that “journalism as we know it is over,” she urges journalists to open their minds to “apparently heretical notions” and specifically includes the notion of “credentialing journalists” as something journalists should think about. However, she acknowledges “the idea is anathema to traditionalists” and seems conflicted about it herself, concluding only that “whether through professionalization or a recommitment to mission, an agreement on core standards or enhanced accountability measures ... journalists need to reinvent their social contract with the public.” (14) So far, academic arguments in favour of professionalization have shown little evidence of catching fire with working journalists. However, the idea has edged onto the agendas of a few journalism organizations.

A comprehensive proposal to professionalize journalists was debated in 2002 at a conference of La Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec. It proposed that membership in the journalism profession be based on individual adherence to a common code of ethics. It called for the creation of a commission or committee of elected journalists and managers from companies that employ them to supervise the granting of credentials, which could later be revoked if a journalist violated the profession’s ethics code. Before earning the right to carry the title professional journalist, a person would work for two years as a journalist trainee. Besides setting out the obligations of professional journalists, the proposal also stated that professional journalists be accorded certain legal rights, including a right to obtain documents from public organizations without cost under existing freedom of information legislation, a right to protect the identity of sources and a right to refuse any assignment that violates the professional code of ethics. (FPJQ) The proposal also stated that its recommendations were in accordance

with constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press because it did not propose to block access to or employment in the media by people who were not credentialed journalists.

In 2005, a discussion paper suggesting British journalists consider becoming a self-regulating profession was published by the Professional Training Committee of the National Union of Journalists. Although less systematic and comprehensive than the Quebec proposal, it raised some interesting issues. It demolished the old argument about whether journalism was a trade or profession – at least as an argument against regulation – by noting that many trades were, if anything, more highly and intrusively regulated than self-regulated professions like medicine and law. The discussion paper stated that pressure was building from the public and those who dealt with media regularly for more transparency and accountability from journalists. “A major function of modern regulation is to empower the public by giving them the ability to check and verify that someone who claims to do a particular job is actually authorized to do so,” the paper states. “There are already many groups who want to see an approved list of journalists so they can talk to only those on the list of registered or approved journalists. ... The public also want to be able to complain and to have bad journalists removed from the register.” Regulation of journalism is inevitable, the paper argued. “The NUJ can either be involved in establishing that system, help shape it and support it, or it can be sidelined and left out.”

As might be expected given the historical antipathy of journalists to the idea of professionalizing, both of these documents were swiftly rejected by most members of the organizations. There is no question that for most journalists, professionalizing in any kind of formal fashion remains a subject not fit for serious consideration.

Has Anything Really Changed?

Despite the sense of urgency that permeates recent calls for professionalization and other reforms, it is worth noting again that many of the issues facing journalism and driving media reform initiatives have not changed substantially during the past 20 years. Media concentration and conglomeration; commercialization, trivialization and sensationalization of the news; political and commercial media bias; declining newspaper readership and civic disengagement – all of these are issues that have altered in their details rather than their essence during the past few decades. Even the concern that journalists are losing control of journalism is not new. Mario Pelletier, who edited a volume of essays about journalists published more than 25 years ago with the report of the 1981 Royal Commission on Newspapers, summed up the mood among journalists even then as “a feeling of malaise” and “a sort of existential anguish.”

The world of the press is clearly tormented with doubt and anxiety. Increasingly brought together under empires where the iron law of profitability holds sway, journalists everywhere are expressing the same concern. They are, perhaps more so than others, aware of a growing depersonalization in the ultratechnological age we are entering. The often unexplainable feeling of insecurity experienced by the ‘concentrated’ journalists ... comes not from ill treatment ... but from the feeling of having become part of a machine without a soul rigidly pursuing some goal of ultimate rationalization for which they may one day pay the price. And suddenly the work becomes less exciting, the dedication dies. There is a sense of having been demoted from journalist to wage-earning scribe. (Royal Commission, *The Journalists*, xii)

The fact is, many of the problems facing journalists in their efforts to fulfill a journalistic mission while working for media businesses are long-standing and unresolved. Even if nothing else had changed, this ought to be sufficient to trigger reconsideration of a strategy of professionalization. The arrival of the Internet, however, and its evolving

transformation of the global communications and media systems is affecting journalism in ways that are very different from what was happening 25 years ago.

The first is that Internet-based businesses are eating into the revenue base of newspapers to an extent no new medium has achieved before. This is having a critical impact on journalism because, despite the rise of broadcast and cable news in the 20th century, newspapers are still the main and most widely distributed source of original reporting. In cities throughout North America, the national and local dailies have the largest reporting staffs and do most of the digging that produces real news. (Project for Excellence, 9) In city after city, the news agenda followed by radio and television is most often determined by the news coverage decisions of the local daily. Newsroom staff reductions at many city dailies undercuts not just newspaper reporting but the very foundation of the journalism system, particularly as it applies to original reporting. The impact is made more severe because most of the large Internet operations that are siphoning away newspaper advertising revenues – such as Google, Yahoo, E-Bay and Craigslist – are not significantly investing in original reporting even though the presentation of news (mostly agglomerated from other sources such as newspapers) is a significant part of the Google and Yahoo content model.

The Internet's second critical impact on journalism is its unique characteristic as a ubiquitous and affordable publishing and broadcasting mechanism. Until the late 1990s, mass communication was controlled by commercial mass media. Anyone wanting to convey a fact or idea to a public that extended beyond personal contact had to find a way to convey that message through mass media. Advertising was one route, chosen mainly by those offering a commercial good or service. Lobbying for news coverage was the

other means – leading to the development of a huge public-relations industry devoted to that purpose. Today, however, businesses and other organizations can use Internet-production models to produce their own news, analysis and commentary, mimicking journalism while eluding the inconvenience of actually submitting to the journalistic process of verifying facts and checking claims with outside sources.

The Internet also enables ordinary people to publish and broadcast. New Internet-based media formats such as weblogs and podcasts make this technically simple. This democratization of media is breathing new life into the concept of freedom of the press and modernizes Jürgen Habermas' notion of a public sphere. These new forms of distributed media production are sometimes referred to as "citizen journalism." The ability to post photos, videos and text certainly empowers citizens by allowing them to bear witness, share experiences and express opinions before a potentially massive audience, but to call such activities journalism demonstrates only how much confusion exists about what journalism really is, even among some journalists. Very few forms of citizen media gather and verify original information in the planned and systematic manner that journalists do. It's interesting to note that most citizen-media ventures that are attempting to practise something like journalism – such as South Korea's OhmyNews – are actually organized and managed by experienced, professional journalists.

Citizen-based media is an important development in the media system and should be seen as a positive development for journalism. It can help journalists strengthen democratic discourse by infinitely widening the number and variety of sources available and known to journalists, potentially diluting journalism's traditional reliance on "official sources" that, as Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky have noted, can make news

media an unwitting accomplice in shoring up the hegemony of economic and political elites. It also widens and strengthens the public's ability to hold journalists accountable by challenging and correcting their work in a public forum outside of the control of commercial media and professional journalists – another positive development. If there is a threat posed to journalism by citizen media, it is that some media companies could decide to host citizen-produced media as a cheap content replacement for journalism – though one hopes few would go as far as KFTY-TV in Santa Rosa, Calif., which fired most of its news staff in January 2007 to make room for community-produced content. (Garofoli)

As Birkhead pointed out, the power or authority wielded by journalists in the traditional news process was vested in them through their association with the mass media industry, which during the newspaper age essentially created an occupation called journalism to perform the role of information gathering and gatekeeping. The dominant role of journalists in the media industry began to be diluted with the advent of radio and television, which employed journalists to produce news programs but devoted the vast majority of their resources to entertainment programming. Now, the process of disintermediation prompted by the Internet has given sources and citizens the tools to communicate directly with audiences on both a personalized and mass basis and to do their own news, information and entertainment gatekeeping. This affects all aspects of traditional media but its impact on journalists is particularly significant. In the old media model, journalists' authority was derived primarily from the power position they occupied in a linear information-flow model. As long as mass information had to channel through established media, journalists could take their authority for granted (as long as

they kept their employers happy), no matter what other pressures they might face. However, as the media shifts into a distributed network model, journalists are no longer a mechanical necessity. Sources don't necessarily need to go through journalists to communicate with citizens. Citizens don't necessarily need journalists to find out what the sources that interest them are doing or to communicate with each other. And media companies don't necessarily need journalists – at least not journalists as Kovach and Rosenstiel define them – to organize news and information content. It is possible to conceive profitable media business models with plenty of content – even news and information – accompanying the ads that can be compiled and packaged by employees (or, in Google's case, algorithms) who are not journalists. Such models already exist – exemplified by Google and Yahoo. Indeed, some web-based media organizations – such as E-Bay, Craigslist, MySpace, YouTube, and Facebook – don't even need employees to create most of their non-advertising content. Given the expense associated with supporting original reporting, it isn't hard to understand why committing to original reporting and public service journalism might be losing its lustre for profit-based media companies when so many other less-expensive content options exist.

Where does this leave journalists? I would suggest that if journalism is to continue to serve democracy as an independent source of information, investigation and analysis, journalists are going to have to do a much better job of publicly defining what makes journalism different from other forms of professional communications and why that difference matters. They must persuade the public that this difference is real and not just a matter of semantics. Journalists need to persuade people that journalism really is a pillar of democracy and demonstrate the truth of that in an accountable manner day after

day. It may still be possible for some journalists to assume these qualities will continue to be communicated to the public through their employer. However, at a time when even the New York Times is under shareholder pressure to be more profitable, this may not suffice for all. Journalists are going to have to work harder to create a public demand for journalism.

Towards an Ethics-Based Journalism Profession

What makes journalism a distinct and important activity are not the skills and techniques journalists use to package information. Many other media occupations share these abilities. The main characteristic that defines journalism as unique is its overriding commitment to independently seeking out truth from a variety of sources and reporting it to the public, even if this activity is contrary to the interests of employers, the market and government. To be able to carry out this mission, journalists need a measure of independence. They need a mechanism that enables them to account to the public how well they carry out that mission and protects their ability to continue to fulfill it. That mechanism used to be vested in the newsroom but newsrooms over time have lost authority and power in many media organizations. A new mechanism is needed.

There is a solid argument that professionalization offers a means to ensure journalism as a distinct and necessary activity continues to flourish in the future. Journalism may or may not be able to claim exactly the same characteristics as already established professions; I'm not convinced it matters. Indeed, some recent examinations into the nature of professionalism have been critical of past scholarship that tended to reduce the potential orbit of professions to those capable of meeting a checklist of criteria closely matching what Bruce A. Kimball has called the "sovereign" profession of the

20th century, medicine. Kimball, criticizing what he calls the “presentism of modern scholarship about professions,” argues that a more historical perspective produces a richer understanding of the nature of professionalism. He notes the historical origin of the idea of professionalism was the act of “professing” or vowing to perform public service and sees the historical continuity of professions epitomized by the qualities of “expertise, association and service.” (324) Other scholars have also found the subject of what constitutes a profession resistant to restrictive categorizations. “Flexibility seems to be a more fundamental criterion of professionalism than any set of properties that might be invented,” notes Rolf Torstendahl. “Professionals exist in the form in which society – market or state – finds use for their knowledge base.” (10)

If journalism is in fact a distinct occupation with a distinct public-service mission and role, journalists should be capable of developing a made-for-journalism approach to professional organization. What matters is whether organizing as a profession will help ensure the public service of active truth-seeking carried out by journalists can continue, and whether journalists can re-awaken and maintain public confidence in journalism and its importance to sustaining democracy.

What would a journalism-specific profession look like? This could only be determined after a thorough public debate among journalists and others. As this review of the subject has shown, enough ideas exist to start the conversation. I would suggest its core would be adherence to a basic common code of ethics defining journalism’s fundamental goals and practices irrespective of employer or medium. Both the Society of Professional Journalists and the Canadian Association of Journalists have developed such codes. These could provide a starting point for the development of a simple but

functional professional code of ethics. Journalists' adherence to this code could be symbolized by a public oath of allegiance, much like the Hippocratic oath taken by doctors.² Whether a journalism degree or other evidence of journalistic knowledge is needed as a basic entry requirement would have to be established, although the increasingly common demand for a journalism degree as a minimum requirement for entry into journalism employment suggests that decision has effectively already been made.

What matters most – and what a professional body should be able to monitor and enforce – is that professional journalists abide by their ethical code in practice. This is certainly what members of the public should expect from journalists. If they feel that expectation is not being met, they should be able to access a mechanism to make a complaint and have it investigated. This would help clarify in the public mind what journalism is and, one would think, raise public confidence. At the same time, journalists who are the target of complaints would be assured of due process, which exists today only insofar as any individual employer or union local lets it. Indeed, one of the major benefits of formal professionalization would be the creation of a dues-payment stream of revenue to fund an independent professional body representing all journalists. This could become a powerful and credible force in speaking up for journalism and journalists on issues like shield laws and freedom-of-information regulations. It could also help working journalists sort through difficult professional issues as they arise – an example being the question of whether journalists should expose anonymous sources who manipulate or deceive the press to achieve political or other objectives, an issue that has come up recently in both the United States through the Valerie Plame controversy and

Scooter Libby trial (Rutten) and in Canada through the Maher Arar case (Mitrovica). It should be able to mediate differences of opinion between employers and journalists over professional issues. It should also be able to offer a systematic program of continuing education for journalists. Eventually, it may even be able to take charge of administering tasks like credentialing journalists for major events such as political conventions and sports championships, instead of leaving that to event organizers.

As for traditional arguments against professionalization, the only one with philosophical weight is the notion that it would violate freedom of the press. But this argument is based on a confusion of terms. Freedom of the press is a pre-condition for journalism – journalism could not exist without it. But they aren't the same thing. Freedom of the press gives anyone the right to publish or broadcast without censorship. But journalists by definition accept significant restrictions on what they publish – that's what makes journalism a distinct activity. Making sure that anybody claiming to do journalism actually does only violates freedom of the press if other forms of writing and broadcasting are forbidden. Perhaps the fear of exclusion was justified in the days when commercial mass media was the closest thing to a functioning public sphere society could claim. If there's anything we can guarantee in the Internet age, it's that clarifying and enforcing standards for journalism won't stop anybody else from publishing anything they want. However, it would be harder to disguise propaganda, marketing, public relations and mistruth as journalism.

No one would deny the incredible challenge posed by bringing journalists together during a time of economic upheaval and occupational uncertainty and getting them to agree to a definition of journalism, a common code of ethics and an acceptable

method to determine who meets the criteria and standards required of journalists. The public will need to be convinced that protecting their democratic rights is journalism's ultimate objective in professionalizing. Employers may oppose it because it would impose limits on their ability to control employees; they would need to be persuaded of a branding benefit to employing credentialed journalists. (Of course, if it turns out that the continued existence of journalism requires measures like tax incentives, as suggested by Overholser, being able to clearly identify journalistic activities would become a business necessity.)

The process of professionalization will require diplomacy of the highest order. It will also require innovative thinking because journalists will need to develop principles and mechanisms of self-regulation that are different from those of lawyers, doctors and other professions. But it may well be the surest way to ensure journalists continue to serve the public and democracy by doing journalism. It may be the only way to ensure that journalism as a distinct activity continues to thrive. It may be the only way to ensure journalists have some control over their professional norms. Over time, I suspect more journalists will reach the same conclusion. In the meantime, let's at least put the option on the table.

End Notes

1. Dan Gillmor is the director of The Center for Citizen Media (<http://www.citmedia.org>) and Jay Rosen is the founder of Assignment Zero (<http://zero.newassignment.net>), which seeks to foster collaboration between professional journalists and citizens.
2. I first heard the idea of a journalistic equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath suggested at a presentation by Canadian journalist Mark Schneider at a Canadian Association of Journalists conference held in Vancouver in May, 2004. The text of his presentation can be found at http://www.caj.ca/events/conf-2004/CAJ_speech-mark-schneider-ethics-2004.htm

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