

Journalism, Transparency and the Public Trust

A Report of the Eighth Annual
Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society

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Rapporteur



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Foreword

Technological advances, audience behavior, and industry economics are changing the landscape for traditional journalism in the United States. Digital technologies now allow anyone to publish and allow for greater user control over the content received. Audiences are more fragmented in terms of pure numbers, ethnicity, and viewing or reading habits. Moreover, the consequences of these technological and audience behavioral shifts raise significant economic questions for traditional business models in journalism.

Amid these changes, journalism is a profession under constant strain and tension. As a result, during a time when successful new styles of journalism are emerging in the United States and abroad, we have seen executives blur the business with the profession, journalists violate the basic tenets of their craft, and journalistic enterprises falter. It comes as no surprise, then, that ethical and management issues have become more visible and more contentious. News media that serve as a watchdog over other powerful societal institutions are now being called upon to exhibit greater transparency and accountability in their own affairs.

This context was the backdrop for the Eighth Annual Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society, convened by the Communications and Society Program at the Aspen Institute Aspen Meadows campus in Aspen, Colorado, July 16–18, 2004. The Conference on Journalism and Society is a unique forum for leaders at the highest levels of American journalism and media to address new trends in the news business and the rising level of concern over how these trends are affecting the quality of journalism. This year, 24 leading media executives, journalists, and consultants came to Aspen to examine the policies and practices that enable ethical entanglements to occur and to explore strategies by which news organizations can strengthen the public's confidence in the integrity of their journalism.

The conference came in the middle of a challenging year for American journalism—a year that provided constant reminders that technological, economic, and social forces have conspired to raise the level of public accountability expected of journalism.

“With the changes in communications technology, can you afford *not* to be transparent?” This is the question Charles Firestone, executive director of the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, posed to conference participants. It also is the central challenge posed to journalists and news executives in this report.

Jon Ziomek, associate professor at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism and author of this report, captures the conference participants’ interesting, often contentious discussion concerning transparency in journalism—from the ideal vision of journalism promoted by the emerging weblog culture, which often privileges transparency over other values, to the practical limitations that necessarily constrain how much of the inner workings of a news operation journalists can or should lay open for all to see. From this discussion emerged the ultimate advice in this report: Good journalism should be *as transparent as practical*.

This report begins with a summary of the forces and factors contributing to the troubling lack of public trust (as gauged by ongoing public opinion research) in the news media. The report then explores why rapid changes in technologies—especially the diffusion of affordable publishing and communication technologies—and the search for new business models for journalism, will require successful news organizations to become more responsive to their communities, more *transparent* in how they go about their work, and, ultimately, more accountable to the ideals and values embodied in the best American journalism.

In small-group working sessions, participants considered how to calibrate the right amount of transparency and what measures for increasing journalistic transparency news organizations might consider to ensure high levels of performance in journalism. Participants considered which approaches to public disclosure might be better than other approaches and, with regard to public and peer accountability, which approaches would be more constructive and would strengthen newsrooms for the future. The initiatives discussed, several of which already are being used by some news organizations, fall into three main categories:

- Strategies for enhancing public knowledge and engagement that demystify journalistic practices and clarify journalistic values,
- Increased opportunities for audiences to “talk back” to journalists, and
- Investments to strengthen newsroom operations and professional performance.

Within each of these categories, conference participants recommended several initiatives designed to enhance the public’s understanding of journalism and the accountability of news organizations to the public and peers. The range of ideas included virtual newsroom tours to educate the public about the hows and whys of news coverage; retooling the corrections process; increased transparency in sourcing; regular communication with the public through editor’s columns, published e-mail addresses, and community fora; and internal investments to strengthen the newsroom, such as periodic internal audits and increased professional training for journalists.

As with each of the previous seven conferences, the more we have sought to learn, the more we have uncovered deeper, more complex issues to probe. Participants acknowledged that transparency, by itself, is not a panacea to cure the deeper causes of public distrust that afflicts journalistic organizations as well as other societal institutions. They also acknowledged that there are necessary limits to transparency: As participant Andrew Tyndall stated, “Transparency in the extreme is not a virtue.” The participants also concluded, however, that transparency is a value that journalists and newsroom leaders ignore at their peril—a value that successful newsrooms in the future will use to forge stronger connections with their communities and leverage in the creation of new business opportunities. In other words, they are banking on the proposition that shining a little light can help the business grow.

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advice and guidance received from Eric Newton at the Knight Foundation and Jon Funabiki at the Ford Foundation. We also thank the members of the Knight Foundation's Journalism Advisory Committee who have supported this and past conferences, and especially members Merrill Brown and Barbara Cochran, who lent their considerable experience to this year's conference as participants.

The Aspen Institute was extremely fortunate to enlist the participation of notable leaders from news organizations and media enterprises in the United States and Canada. We thank each of them for their candid and insightful contributions to the discussion and this report. (A complete list of participants appears in the appendix of this volume.) We also extend a special note of thanks to conference participants Jeff Jarvis, Barbara Cochran, and Jose Lozano, who provided informative and provocative introductory comments to lead-off individual discussions on technology, changing the culture of the newsroom, and the relationship of audience changes and business environment, respectively.

In the eight years the Communications and Society Program has convened the Conference on Journalism and Society, this year was the first time the conference was moderated by executive director Charles Firestone. He did a superb job of keeping the discussion on point and driving the entire process to produce a set of clearly articulated "best practices" for newsrooms. I thank him for his important executive role in bringing about a successful conference and this report.

Conferences can have a powerful impact on the people who participate, but their impact is limited if the proceedings and insights are not shared with a broader audience. Accordingly, the Communications and Society Program engaged Jon Ziomek, associate professor at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, to write the report of the conference. He has done an excellent job of bringing order to a wide-ranging, complex discussion and presenting an interesting report for the reader's consideration.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge with appreciation the expert guidance and hard work of the Aspen Institute staff, especially the Communications and Society Program team: Charles Firestone, execu-

tive director of the Program, who moderated this year's conference and oversees the direction of the Conference on Journalism and Society and all other projects of the Program; Patricia Kelly, assistant director, who kept everything related to the conference and this report moving forward; Maria Medrano, project manager, who stepped in to manage administrative and logistical matters in Washington and on the ground in Aspen; and Mridulika Menon, project manager, who provided just-in-time administrative support when it was needed most. This publication would not be possible without the talents of our publication designer Steve Johnson, copyeditor David Stearman, publications manager Sogand Sepassi, and Alexa Law, web editor. I thank them all.

Amy Garmer
Director of Journalism Projects
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The Aspen Institute
January 2005

Executive Summary

The American media have always been intimately connected with American public life. The newspapers of the colonial era helped generate public support for the idea of separation from England and the creation of a democratic state. The newspapers of the 19th century fed the urbanized public life of a young industrializing nation. The media of the 20th century reflected the national and international political and social movements of their era.

And now—where are we?

The American news-consuming public is changing in several ways. Right now, early in a new century, some would say that most of those changes look bad—or, minimally, confusing. On the crucial issue of how Americans get news and contemporary information, we are becoming a house divided. News consumers of traditional news outlets are getting older and older Americans aren't sure that younger Americans are even getting news. The method by which young people—the future of America—are getting the information they need to make choices about American public life seems to be centered on the World Wide Web and entertainment.

In addition, more people seem to be mad at many of society's institutions—especially the media. The stability, credibility, and integrity represented by mainstream newspapers, news magazines, broadcast news organizations, and early cable news operations has given way to rising public skepticism about the media, along with skepticism about many societal institutions.

Increasing numbers of consumers have begun to look for news outlets that agree with them ideologically. This trend, in particular, challenges nothing less than the core methodology for American-style journalism: the impartial consideration of public information.

These attitudinal, demographic, and technological shifts have made the journalism landscape deeply complex, not only for audiences but

also for those in the field. Scholars and informed observers have long noted that rapid, reliable transmission of news and events and the public's comprehension of that news are essential to the survival of a free and self-governing society. An inability by the media to reach and strengthen connections with audiences—and a puzzling, even worrisome lack of interest by those audiences, especially young audiences, to reach back—could have a harmful effect on the future of American democracy itself.

What is a journalist or corporate news division to do in the face of such trends?

Can greater transparency in journalism help? The concept has gotten increasing attention in many segments of early 21st century American life, not just journalism.

This question and several related issues—especially the fragmentation of media and media audiences into niches and the effect of fragmentation on quality as journalistic products are tailored toward more individualistic and interactive audiences—drove the discussions at the Eighth Annual Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society, held July 16–18, 2004, at the Aspen Institute Aspen Meadows campus in Aspen, Colorado.

The result: Conference participants unanimously called for a “presumption of openness” in American journalism—a process through which journalists, media executives, and the public can come together to rebuild trust in the media. Participants urged the field toward *as practical a level of transparency as possible* in their news organizations, through various mechanisms:

- **Strategies for enhancing public knowledge and engagement that demystify journalistic practices and clarify journalistic values,**
- **Increased opportunities for audiences to “talk back” to journalists, and**

- **Investments to strengthen newsroom operations and professional performance.**

The goal, all participants agreed, is to increase *accountability* by the media to their various constituencies: sources and subjects of news reports, the public, employees, peers, advertisers, and shareholders.

In applying the standard to be “as transparent as practical,” participants noted that transparency applies not only to the mechanics of reporting a story but to the values that underlie journalism as well. All agreed that a good first step would be the creation of resources that explain to the public how stories are developed, reported, edited, produced, and presented.

Although all agreed on the goal, not all agreed on the degree to which it is possible for journalism to be open. With these principles and guidelines as a starting point of discussions in newsrooms across America, however, mainstream journalists can renew efforts to restore their standing with an American public that, as one participant stated, more than ever needs “a shared reference point for all segments of civil society.”

**JOURNALISM,
TRANSPARENCY
AND THE PUBLIC TRUST**

Jon Ziomek

Journalism, Transparency and the Public Trust

Introduction

For more than a generation, newspapers, news magazines, broadcast news organizations, and early cable news innovators represented successful public brands of stability, credibility, and integrity to the American public. Times have changed, however. In recent years, American audiences have become increasingly skeptical about what they've been told by the mainstream American news media. Public opinion surveys now show that trust in the mainstream American news media has been rolling down a hill for which a bottom isn't yet in view.

Demographically the picture isn't pretty, either. The average age for heavy consumers of print and broadcast news is now less than 10 years short of Social Security eligibility. Young people are turning away from mainstream journalism in all of its forms except one—the Internet. Communications technology now offers consumers so much information that news has become, for some, almost an irritant. For others, new communications technologies and applications offer a broader array of news sources, as well as the ability to take a more active role in the production, dissemination, and vetting of news and information of public interest.

Moreover, increasing numbers of consumers have begun to look for news outlets that agree with them ideologically. This trend, in particular, challenges nothing less than the core methodology for American-style journalism: the impartial consideration of public information.

These attitudinal, demographic, and technological shifts have made the journalism landscape deeply complex, not only for audiences but also for those in the field. Scholars and informed observers have long noted that rapid, reliable transmission of news and events and the public's comprehension of that news are essential to the survival of a free and self-governing society. An inability by the media to reach and strengthen connections with audiences—and a puzzling, even worrisome lack of interest by those audiences, especially young audiences, to reach back—could have a harmful effect on the future of democracy itself.

What is a journalist or corporate news division to do in the face of such trends? Can greater transparency in journalism help?

The concept of transparency has gotten increasing attention in many segments of early 21st century American life, not just journalism. To use a currently in-vogue measure, a fall 2004 Google search of the word *transparency* yielded millions of hits, including several Web sites devoted to the practice of transparency throughout society.

A corporation committed to transparency incorporates a significantly increased role for the public in its operations. It states its objectives clearly and openly and discusses and explains its methodology with those affected by its work—audiences, employees, managers, other professionals. In journalism, transparent organizations open the processes by which facts, situations, events, and opinions are sorted, sifted, made sense of, and presented. They listen closely and responsively to their audiences and acknowledge that audience perspective in their work.

If media companies engaged in the news business do this, will audiences rethink their concerns about media trust and come back?

This question and several related issues drove the discussions at the Eighth Annual Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society, held on July 16–18, 2004, at the Institute's Aspen Meadows campus in Aspen, Colorado. Participants in the conference included two-dozen leading journalists, media executives, investors, and consultants. (A complete list of conference participants appears in the Appendix to this report.) The conference examined *transparency* as a means of strengthening media credibility and helping newsrooms prepare for the future in ways that will better serve citizens and society.

From the opening discussion on transparency, the conversation progressed to a consideration of several related themes, including opportunities and accompanying risks facing the journalism profession as the news business changes. One theme was the fragmentation of media outlets and media audiences into niches and the effect of this fragmentation on profitability. Another theme was the effect on quality as journalistic products are tailored to audiences seeking more individualistic and interactive experiences. What will be the effect of these changes, as conference participant Andrew Tyndall put it, “on the role of the media as a shared reference for all segments of civil society?”

“We’re in an era of confusion about journalism practices,” according to Jon Funabiki, deputy director for Media, Arts and Culture at the Ford Foundation. “Consumers need ‘retraining’ about journalism values, and journalism must make a more concerted effort to communicate its values and practices to the public.”

“Urgency is not an overstatement,” added Steve Erlanger, Jerusalem bureau chief of the *New York Times*. “We have a crisis of trust both in and out of the newsroom.”

Robert Prichard, chief executive officer of the Canadian publishing company Torstar, agreed that perception by audiences is important. “Some of our loss of trust in the public is because people think we’ll always go for the profit motive,” he said, adding that “it doesn’t always have to be” like that.

Conference participants unanimously called for a “presumption of openness” in American journalism: a process through which journalists, media executives, and the public can come together to rebuild trust in the media. Some disagreement was expressed about the degree of openness that is possible in the ritualized work of this field—journalists ultimately are “judged by their product,” one participant cautioned. Conference participants thought that initiatives to increase transparency in journalism—especially those that more clearly communicate the standards and values that underlie the work of journalists—would strengthen the profession and make good business sense. Participants urged the field toward *as practical a level of transparency* as possible in news organizations.

This report, written from the perspective of an informed observer at the conference, tracks the discussions that took place in Aspen. It includes brief examinations of the impact of demographic shifts, changing news consumption habits, and the search for successful new business models in a profession undergoing the most significant transformation in a generation or more. It then details several proposals made by participants for increasing the level of transparency in journalism while remaining conscious of the limits of transparency. [The reader should note that, unless cited to a particular person, none of the comments or ideas contained in this report should be taken as embodying the views or carrying the endorsement of any specific participant at the conference.] Throughout, this report highlights calls for improved transparency as a

necessary element in building audience trust, improving journalistic performance, and restoring corporate credibility going forward.

Confronting Journalism's Credibility Gap

The call for greater transparency may be getting louder, but it is not new. In delivering the 2004 Ruhl Lecture on Ethics at the University of Oregon, *Los Angeles Times* editor John Carroll observed what media critics and journalism scholars have been saying for several years: Mainstream news organizations can set themselves apart from nonjournalistic information outlets and less-regarded forms of “pseudo-journalism” by showing a willingness to publicly self-examine their own methodologies.

Unfortunately, 2004 saw continuing examples of closed-door work harming journalism's public credibility. Early in the year, revelations about inflated circulation figures and advertising overcharges at several newspapers—including *Newsday*, the *Dallas Morning News*, and the *Chicago Sun-Times*—demonstrated an unhealthy lack of public accountability in non-newsroom organizational practices. During the fall 2004 election campaign (after the Aspen Institute July conference took place), the news division of CBS, Inc., and its lead evening news anchor, Dan Rather, endured blasts of criticism because they could not publicly confirm the validity of purported military documents used in a report that was critical of George W. Bush's Vietnam-era National Guard service. CBS's initial hesitation and defensiveness exacerbated the public criticism, which was driven initially by Internet bloggers (“bloggers”). The network eventually conducted an internal investigation, released the report publicly and subsequently fired four CBS employees deemed responsible for the inaccurate report and the network's initial defense of it.

In fits and starts, some media outlets displayed a noticeable increase in transparency during the year. In April 2004 *USA Today* released a memo written by an independent review panel commissioned to investigate the misdeeds of journalist Jack Kelley. This memo identified problems in the operations and culture of the newsroom that enabled the Kelley fabrications to go uncorrected for so long. *USA Today's* decision to publish this memo served as a measure of the newspaper's accountability to the public.

The *New York Times* generated much discussion in and out of the media after its May 2004 apology for its own failure to examine more

closely the validity of confidential sources who made a pro-war case to the media and to the U.S. government prior to the start of the Iraq war. The *Washington Post* followed with its own self-critical report in mid-August. Perhaps not surprisingly, the war has generated other similar self-analytical revelations that have roiled the field of journalism.

Finally, the results of the 2004 presidential election set off a flurry of media criticism and self-examinations regarding incomplete or even inaccurate reporting, following practices such as polling by media organizations.

At the conclusion of their July 2004 session, the Aspen conferees affirmed a commitment to openness throughout journalism and a pledge to continue discussing this commitment within their own news organizations. Without a more systematic approach to understanding existing media audiences and establishing a relationship with new audiences, many people in those audiences will go away. In fact, they've already started doing just that.

Newspaper circulation has declined steadily over the past 10 years, and Nielsen ratings for the three nightly network television newscasts have declined by 34 percent over the same period; cable television news viewing has remained relatively stable since 2001, according to Nielsen data reported in the nonprofit Project for Excellence in Journalism's comprehensive report, *The State of the News Media 2004: An Annual Report on American Journalism*.² The decline in newspaper readership and television news viewing and the lack of any real growth in cable audiences have occurred even as the population of the United States has continued to increase.

Why?

Barbara Cochran, president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA), said that high-profile cases of journalistic dishonesty in the past 10 years have hurt the field's general credibility. These episodes have included the accusations of fabrications against Jack Kelley and former *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair; similar charges involving reporter Stephen Glass while he wrote for *New Republic* magazine; the *Los Angeles Times*' Staples Center controversy, in which the newspaper's editor agreed to "sell" editorial coverage of the city's new sports and convention center; and the retraction by CNN of highly charged allegations concerning the U.S. military's Vietnam War-era conduct in the cable network's reporting on Operation Tailwind.

All of these incidents resulted in significant management changes, operational changes, or both at each affected news organization. Such after-the-fact actions by newsroom and corporate leaders have done little, however, to convince many members of the public that they can accept, uncritically what they are told by the news media.

An additional, as-yet unmeasured force may be having an impact on younger Americans: the cumulative effect of what some observers, including John Carroll, have called “pseudo-journalism.” In his speech at the University of Oregon, Carroll referred to “the credibility painstakingly earned by past journalists [that] lends an unearned legitimacy to the new generation of talk show hosts,” many of whom look and talk like real journalists but deliver a relentless flood of loud, factually unsupported—albeit entertaining—opinions.³ Is it so surprising, then, that young people are turning to John Stewart, Jay Leno, and David Letterman for their news headlines?

Moreover, can the public’s move away from mainstream news be questioned when the president of the United States announces publicly that he pays little attention to such news outlets?⁴ *New Yorker* media writer Ken Auletta recounted the anecdote of a reporter who, hearing President George W. Bush remark that he pays little attention to mainstream news media, asked the president, “How do you know what the public thinks?” President Bush replied: “You’re making a huge assumption—that you [mainstream news media] represent what the public thinks.” The Bush administration, Auletta has observed, regards the mainstream news media as “just another special interest group with an agenda—making money, not serving the public.”⁵

For journalists, the media environment in which traditional, public interest-style journalism mixes with other types of media content with display features resembling journalism presents serious challenges. “It’s difficult to be journalistically objective in a world of ideological mud-wrestling,” the *New York Times*’ Steve Erlanger observed wryly.

“Journalists are struggling with their relationship with the public,” observed Cochran. “The decline in public trust has been accompanied by a decline in public support for freedom of the press,” she said. Her observation is borne out by a troubling 2004 First Amendment Center/American Journalism Review study, in which 40 percent of

respondents in the general public said that the media have *too much freedom*. The criticisms were significant: A majority of those surveyed said that the media are biased, that they routinely falsify or fabricate stories, and that media outlets abuse their freedom.⁶ By contrast, a majority of newsroom personnel questioned for a recent survey led by the Pew Research Center did not express undue concern about ethical issues in their profession.⁷ In other words, professionals in the field think journalism is ethical; the general public, by and large, does not.

Technology and the Culture of Transparency

Media mistakes and public cynicism are not the only reasons for audience movement away from traditional print and broadcast sources of news. Another factor is the rise of digital media technologies, advances in which have given increasing control to consumers over the time, place, and manner of their news and information consumption. These powerful tools are assisting members of the public in challenging the agenda-setting authority of the news media.

The World Wide Web is the only news medium, aside from ethnic and alternative media outlets, that is seeing its audience grow—especially among young people.⁸ About one-fourth of all Americans say they regularly visit one or more of the major online sites of Internet service providers, network television, local television news, newspapers, and magazines. As many people as those who say they regularly read news magazines such as *Time* or *Newsweek* or watch the Sunday morning network news talk shows now log on to the news pages of one of the major Internet providers.⁹

“The decrease in time spent with the news from 1994–2004 has been driven almost entirely by the changing behavior of young people,” reports the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ).¹⁰ “The online news audience is young, affluent and well-educated.” Yet most of the United States is *not* young, affluent, and well-educated. PEJ data show that more than one in five college graduates (21 percent) say they regularly go online—a percentage that has increased steadily—whereas only 7 percent of those with a high school education or less do so. These data imply that the country—at least young people—may be splitting into two groups on access to news; this division may be economically based as much as anything else. Many people among the working class and poor have limited access to comput-

ers or Internet connections, compared to those who are financially better off, noted several Aspen conferees.

In addition, more than 50 percent of respondents in the PEJ survey said they valued “being able to get different points of view from those of traditional news and government sources.” This finding conflicts—at least conceptually—with another finding: that more than two-thirds of the most popular Web sites are owned by one of the 20 largest media companies. In other words, many members of the media audience want a nonmainstream view of the news, but they may be going to mainstream outlets on the Web to get it. This observation raises the question of whether the *process* of using the Internet, not its alternative content, is part of the attraction for the more than half of all young Americans who use the Web for some of their news each week.¹¹

New technologies, including the World Wide Web, can accelerate the news process, helping to define which events get covered and how stories are played. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal demonstrated how developments in media technology have decentralized the mainstream media’s ability to set the public agenda. Some news organizations initially were hesitant about using the Abu Ghraib information or temporarily withheld publication at the request of military officials, even though the general outline and facts of the story (including the Army’s own internal investigation into the matter) had been known for many months. Critical mass was reached when digital photographs taken by soldiers on the ground in Iraq were e-mailed to relatives back in the United States. Reporting by Seymour Hersh in *New Yorker* magazine and by CBS News’ *60 Minutes* reporters generated more coverage by other media.

In this case, individual citizens with their own distribution technology—digital photographs emailed around the world via the Internet—scooped traditional media outlets and influenced the direction of mainstream media coverage. Similarly, bloggers helped stir up concern about the accuracy of documents used by CBS News to substantiate its fall 2004 reporting on George W. Bush’s National Guard service (events that took place after the Aspen Institute conference). Such events could be a harbinger of more battles between the personal journalism of the Internet versus mainstream journalism, warned Esther Dyson, editor of the technology newsletter *Release 1.0* and editor-at-large for CNET Networks.

Jeff Jarvis, president and creative director of Advance.net and himself a blogger with a popular blog, www.BuzzMachine.com, is not surprised at the Web's influence on mainstream journalism. In the conference's lead-off presentation, Jarvis discussed the influence of media technology devices on media content. Historically, he noted, the television remote control device represents one of the most important developments in modern communications technology because it began the process of reversing control of the flow of information from producers to consumers. The prospect of fickle viewers using that remote control to change channels or turn off the television is an example of technology influencing content.

Since the remote control device a long line of technological developments—videocassette recorders, cable television, mobile telephones, personal computers, wireless devices, TiVo—have moved information delivery control from providers to consumers, culminating in the current popularity of weblogs, or blogs, as they are commonly known. “Audiences now have a voice,” Jarvis said during the conference. “Are we listening?”

Barbara Cochran noted that the fear of impulsive audience rejection via the remote control has created a more intense style of television news presentation on local stations. “Audience-grabbing” techniques, as they are known, in recent years have included more live coverage to generate drama, ranging from news helicopters following the progress of police chases to up-to-the-minute weather reports on approaching storms; the addition of music to some news reports; and even reenactments. Broadcast anchor Kathleen Matthews of WJLA-TV, the ABC network affiliate in Washington, D.C., said her station has doubled its news program story count in recent years because a faster change of topics presumably is more compelling.

These shifts have pushed newscasts into becoming “a stream of raw newsgathering,” Cochran said. The editing process gets weaker, and it is more difficult to put developments into context—all of which may hold audience eyes but generate less audience comprehension of larger truths and perhaps more long-term dissatisfaction with the news media.

The Rise of the Blogosphere

The proliferation of blogs is the most dramatic manifestation of the impact of media technology on news distribution. Becoming a “journalist”—and potentially a prominent one—has become as easy as start-

ing a Web site and uploading one's opinions, as Matt Drudge does in posting his daily *Drudge Report*. Thousands of new blogs go online every day, with millions now available. The range of topics is enormous. Many are personal, others address particular hobbies and interests, and still others are written by amateur or part-time journalists. In the summer of 2004, for the first time, several dozen bloggers were accredited to cover the conventions of both major political parties alongside representatives of the largest mainstream news media.

Jeff Jarvis called blogs "citizens' media"; he was enthusiastic about the phenomenon. Other conferees did not offer the same unqualified support. The personal nature of blogs surely is an important part of their growing audience appeal, but several conferees expressed concern about the lack of standardized quality control mechanisms. Larry Grossman, former president of NBC News and PBS, expressed deep concern about the ease with which inaccuracies and even outright fraud can be presented publicly on the Web, particularly on a site that lacks the institutional checks and balances of traditional news organizations.

Andrew Tyndall, a media consultant and publisher of the *Tyndall Report*, a weekly publication that tracks network television news content, echoed John Carroll's observations about pseudo-journalism: "Technology makes fake journalism look like real journalism." John Oliver, publisher and chief executive officer of Baltimore-based Afro-American Newspapers, added, "Technology doesn't have rules"—except for those brought to it by the users.

"This is a world without gatekeepers," cautioned Kathleen Matthews.

Conferees extensively discussed, and disagreed about, the ability of blogging to provide a voice for society's voiceless. Blogs can create communities of interest, linking people in ways beyond the geographical, which is an exciting prospect, said Jarvis. Other conferees were troubled, however, by survey statistics showing the correlation of computer use and economic status. The working class and the poor, already underrepresented in newsrooms, may once again be left outside the mainstream as increased Internet use in general, and blog use in particular, further fragment audiences. "Economics is a major factor," noted Esther Dyson.

Good content would address that criticism, Jeff Jarvis responded. "Blogs can be a key way to invite in the public." Other Aspen conferees did not see the advent of blogs in such revolutionary dimensions, however.

Echoing concerns raised over the past decade about a “digital divide” separating technologically literate “haves” from “have nots,” Frank Blethen, publisher and chief executive of the *Seattle Times*, warned that from his perspective, many journalism organizations are becoming increasingly irrelevant to poor Americans and those with less formal education. “They [the working class and the poor] don’t have a stake [in mainstream journalism],” Blethen said. “Increased blogging will further that divide,” he argued, because “people on blogs haven’t a clue what’s going on in the inner cities, [or] in the farm communities.”

John Cochran of ABC News agreed that there is room for mainstream news organizations to improve their relevance to poor and working class Americans. He noted that during his career as a journalist there has been a noticeable shift in which issues get covered and how those issues are contextualized. Highlighting one of these changes, Cochran added, “We don’t cover the working class in journalism.”

Representatives of the ethnic press at the Aspen conference were cautious about exaggerating the potential impact of blogs on the concept and practice of developing a community. Many professionals in the ethnic media already are doing well in reaching their own specialized audiences through traditional media, as ethnic groups in America grow larger and increase their buying power. “Blogs are the same as editors listening to their communities,” said José Ignacio Lozano, vice chairman of ImpreMedia Inc., which publishes *La Opinion*, the largest Spanish language daily newspaper in Los Angeles, and *El Diario-La Prensa* in New York City. “A good letters-to-the-editor page is a primitive, slow blog,” he said, because it enables the newspaper to facilitate a discussion between the newspaper and members of its community.

Journalism, Technology and Values

Despite the downsides associated with blogs, including a general lack of formal checks that might catch inaccurate information before it is published and a perceived tendency to further the fragmentation of audiences, the Aspen conferees recognized the need to use communications technology to reach out to new or lost audiences, especially young Americans.

“We have to reach our younger audiences through technology,” said media consultant Merrill Brown, former editor-in-chief of

MSNBC.com. “They’re not engaged as we are with public affairs, and it’s deluded to think that they’ll get more connected as they settle down.”

Indeed, research by the Northwestern University Media Management Center’s Readership Institute confirms this assessment: Young people who aren’t committed to news consumption by their mid-20s may never develop the habit.¹² Journalism professionals must think about how young people communicate with each other and within their workplaces and engage them on their own terms.

Several conference participants noted, for example, that wireless phones are more common than computers and could offer an avenue for such connecting. Indeed, Japan’s largest newspaper, *Asahi Shimbun*, has more than 1 million subscribers who receive information from the newspaper only on their wireless phones.¹³

Ultimately, Brown said, the future of news and information will be determined by the values of the people using the technologies of the field.

William Dean Singleton, vice chairman and chief executive of MediaNews Group, echoed this point. “We are competing with increasing numbers of competitors who don’t have the same training or ethical background” as the journalists in our own newsrooms. This is especially true of new Web-based competition, where the traditional values of journalism—such as fairness, accuracy, balance, independence, and contextualization—are sometimes redefined, if they are observed at all. Singleton emphasized, “We must continue to [demonstrate] these characteristics ourselves.”

Futurist Howard Rheingold has written that the current era is “a pivotal moment... between the deskbound regime of the PC era and the necessarily more fluid and untethered mobile-and-pervasive era.” In this new age, Rheingold writes in the *USC Online Journalism Review*, it is important not to “mistake the tool for the task. The right tools for global, instantaneous, multimedia production and distribution are necessary, but not sufficient, to achieve the goal of democratizing journalism.”¹⁴

Journalism, Rheingold continued, “is not about the quality of the [technology], but about the journalist’s intuition, integrity, courage, inquisitiveness, analytical and expressive capabilities, and above all, the trust the journalist has earned among readers.”¹⁵

“The younger audience is more demanding,” observed John Oliver, “and specifically in the area of transparency.” In other words, they expect their media to reach out and to listen to them.

The Search for New Business Models

To keep pace with the evolving media landscape—particularly changing consumer habits and emerging technologies that increase the imperative for more flexible, transparent news media—companies will have to develop new audiences and new business models. Transparency may be increasingly necessary, but it is not sufficient to retain audiences in such a competitive media environment.

Andrew Tyndall, a media consultant and publisher of the *Tyndall Report*, a weekly publication that tracks network television news content, added that television industry investments throughout the 1990s were made largely in distribution, not in reporting. Tyndall noted that network television remains better at in-depth reporting than cable television, with what he called its “endless” repetition of the same group of stories all day long. Perhaps the biggest journalistic success story in recent years has come, ironically, in radio—in the form of National Public Radio. As Larry Grossman, former president of NBC News and PBS, noted, commercial radio is a medium that has seen a “near total collapse” in independent newsgathering.

News on the Internet may offer the best potential for in-depth reports because there are fewer time or space limitations, Tyndall indicated. Yet there is little investigative work now done solely for the Web. Even without such enterprise work, Walter Isaacson, president and chief executive officer of the Aspen Institute, former *Time* magazine managing editor and CNN chairman, suggested that cable television’s successful branding may enable it to establish itself successfully on the Internet if cable companies can exploit the strong association that consumers now have with cable brand names such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC.

“We *must* build audiences,” emphasized Robert Woodworth, chief executive of Pulitzer Inc., which publishes the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* and other newspapers. “Revenue streams are getting uncertain and are at risk. But we don’t yet have a successful economic model for investing in good journalism”—although Woodworth, and others, cited the importance of finding

“community niches” to serve. “Quality journalism is very difficult to define and somewhat elusive, but we have to figure it out. Whatever your target audience is, we’ve got to deliver that audience,” Woodworth said.

“We are going to need to make major changes to preserve our revenue streams,” agreed William Dean Singleton. Journalists should begin to make those changes by listening more closely to audiences. Too much of journalism is what journalists tell each other it should be, he said, rather than what audiences say they want. “We have to quit listening to our peers and listen more to the audience we are serving,” he said, adding: Change, but don’t forget our roots. “We don’t leave [our] core mission; we expand that core mission.”

“Our audience probably isn’t anything like us,” agreed Michael Reed of Community Newspaper Holdings, Inc., whose daily, weekly, and semiweekly newspapers serve smaller communities in the eastern half of the United States. “[If] they work at Wal-Mart... what is their quality journalism?”

“Consumers want ubiquity,” Merrill Brown said. In many ways, because of the Web and new wireless technologies, consumers are getting it: Television stations are on the Web, newspapers are shooting video and posting it on the Web, “local” radio stations and personalities are now available on the Web or via satellite.

Regardless of the delivery mechanism, “consumers want local news,” Reed observed. “That’s a constant.” Frank Blethen of the *Seattle Times* agreed: “Community,” he emphasized, “is key.” This theme was echoed by others at the conference.

“Consumers are increasingly indifferent to the way or ways they get information,” added Christopher Dixon, managing director of Gabelli Group Capital Partners, Inc. In analyzing investment options, he said, he looks for examples of good multimedia cross-fertilization, such as *Marketwatch*—a media property that is a Web site, a radio show, and a weekly television show. To illustrate one approach to considering viable new business models, Dixon outlined four key components in the “value chain” of the news business and commented on where the greatest potential for revenue generation in the future may lie.

The value chain consists of, first, the process of gathering and compiling news content; second, assembling the news into an identifiable “brand,” such as the *New York Times*, Fox News, or *U.S. News & World*

Report; third, distributing the news through the airwaves, news stands, postal service, trucks, and other means; and fourth, connecting the distributed product to audiences through a particular device—a newspaper, television, computer, or telephone. With shifts and declines in traditional audiences, media companies have been focusing on the earlier stages of this four-step process to maintain their revenue streams.

Dixon suggested that consolidation of media outlets by the field's conglomerates has been a “circle the wagons” response to audience declines of recent years. Consider NBC Television as one example. About 25 years ago, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) was one of only three national broadcast networks. It claimed about 40 percent of the American television viewing audience. In succeeding years, with increased competition from several new over-the-air networks, cable television, and the Internet, audiences began to fragment. The larger corporation of which the original NBC Television unit is now a part and which includes the cable channels CNBC, MSNBC, Bravo, Telemundo, the Science Fiction channel and USA Network has about the same percentage of the viewing public as NBC alone did a generation ago.

“The [ownership] consolidation offset the [audience] fragmentation,” Dixon said.

Dixon went on to suggest that creative thinking about the fourth category in the value chain—distribution devices—could increase revenue possibilities if a media outlet repackages its content for different outlets. Headlines that are appropriate for a PDA-based (e.g., Palm Pilot or Blackberry) news service obviously are not appropriate for a lengthier magazine piece, although both journalistic “products” could be produced by the same media outlet. Tomorrow’s journalists must be able to adapt stories to multiple distribution platforms, Dixon said. Doing so would effectively increase productivity and boost corporate efficiency.

One reason for rethinking the delivery process, Dixon continued, is that advertising as a percentage of the nation’s gross domestic product is not expected to increase much in the near future. Greater revenue growth will come through subscription-based revenues, such as cable or satellite television, where some revenue possibilities have developed in recent years. Dixon noted that the average household now spends about \$175 a month for its electronic information—cable television, movies, telephone, and

Internet access. Media companies and journalism enterprises are going to have to figure out how to increase their piece of that particular pie.

The flatness of projected advertising expenditures and the condition of the economy overall may put pressure on profit margins for electronic media in particular, which traditionally have had higher margins than American business in general. Some investors may be satisfied with returns of 10–15 percent—half of what they’ve been in the past but still higher than American businesses generally. The key, Dixon suggested, is “stable cash flows.” At least one other conferee seemed to agree. “Why do I have to earn 30 percent?” José Lozano of ImpreMedia asked rhetorically. Others at the conference were skeptical, however—some highly so—that the market would adjust to such projected return on investment.

William Dean Singleton took issue with Dixon’s scenario. “We’re in the business of gathering and selling information to someone who wants it, and selling advertising” to those who want to reach that group of people, said Singleton. “Our core business is not dead. Is it stagnant? Yes, and declining, even. So we’re creating niche products. We can’t sell our base product [a mainstream, general interest publication] to the Hispanic market or to a youth-based audience,” so his company has created niche publications to reach those audiences, and those niche products have a very strong gross profit margin of 30–35 percent. “If our core is declining, we have to find new business.”

“Niche publications are the way to go,” agreed Jeff Jarvis of Advance Publications publisher of a large number of general and special interest magazines.

Time Inc. editor in chief Norman Pearlstine offered evidence of the success that can be found in the creation of new, niche-oriented products. Although Pearlstine said that Time Inc. had not realized major gains in online publishing, he noted that the corporation’s operating income had more than doubled in the past decade and that more than one-third of its revenues in 2004 came from titles that were started or acquired during the past decade. *In Style* magazine, a monthly, will be the division’s third biggest income producer, he said, following *People* and *Sports Illustrated*, and *Real Simple*, another women’s monthly founded in 2000, went into the black in 2004.

Representatives of the ethnic press at the Aspen conference said that

this focused approach has always been their successful formula.

“The black press has done this for years,” said John Oliver of Afro-American Newspapers. Many publications among the black press are weeklies that concede a certain amount of news and audience attention to the nightly television news broadcasts and the big city daily newspapers. The ethnic media’s stronger community roots have helped them maintain a dedicated readership, however, and have helped new papers emerge in cities across the country over the past decade. “Listening to your community keeps you honest,” added José Lozano.

Efforts by the big media companies to reach ethnic audiences will surely continue, however, for several reasons. First, ethnic audiences are becoming a larger part of the U.S. population; thus, they represent an expanding niche. The most assimilated Hispanics are already following mainstream media, Pearlstine said. As a result niche publications have more value in reaching newer and less assimilated minorities.

Another reason is increased purchasing power: The 38 million non-English-speaking Latinos in the United States will have a buying power of \$1 trillion by 2010. “The big media companies have gone after this money,” Lozano said. This trend is especially evident in areas where the Hispanic population has increased. Large media companies have been entering this segment of the market by starting Spanish-language inserts or stand-alone newspapers.

Has mainstream journalism really changed much, however, in the face of the emergence of these new, more diverse audiences? Lozano’s answer to his own question was no. Instead of listening to their communities, the large companies are listening to their own shareholders, who want some of that purchasing power. Big company resources, Lozano said, too often go into research and marketing, not into the parts of the business that directly affect and benefit the community.

Lozano offered his company’s flagship West Coast newspaper, *La Opinión*, as an example of a focused newspaper with successful community connections. Several times a year, *La Opinión*’s editors travel into the community to meet with community members to discuss matters of local interest, over a dinner paid for by the newspaper. Then they turn the dinner and discussion into an article for the newspaper or use the information learned from the discussions to help refocus the paper.

“We already try to be transparent and close to our community,” Lozano said. “We bring the editors out into the public; we don’t bring the public to us.”

Research has confirmed the worthiness of this personal approach beyond the high trust ratings that Lozano said *La Opinión* enjoys in its community. “Ethnic Californians are more likely to pay attention to advertising in the ethnic media than those in general market media,” according to a study conducted in that state.¹⁶ Sixty-six percent of ethnic Californians agreed with the statement that advertisers in the ethnic media “seem to understand my needs and desires better than other companies,” and 63 percent agreed that they are “more likely to buy a product or service advertised” in an ethnically oriented publication or television or radio program.

Newsroom Investment

Research by Northwestern University’s Readership Institute suggests that market fragmentation can be an opportunity for media companies. “Readers are attracted to specific types of content, such as local news, health, politics, and home, that are offered in a reader-friendly format,” the Institute has reported.¹⁷ Studies by researchers at Michigan State University (MSU) suggest that the best way for a newspaper to build circulation is by diversifying content to appeal to more elements of the community.”¹⁸ Data from the Inland Press Association, analyzed by MSU and the University of Missouri, suggest that new advertising will follow such an investment.

Canadian publishing executive Robert Prichard indicated that his firm, Torstar, has not cut its newsroom investments because the other parts of the multimedia company he heads have contributed to the editorial side of the operations. “The more you invest, the more you get out, both in money and energy and commitment to the newsroom,” Prichard said.

The “proper” level of newsroom investment was a point of disagreement among conference participants. William Dean Singleton said that the newspapers in his company—Media NewsGroup, which owns the *Denver Post* and *Salt Lake Tribune*, among other newspapers—continue to invest in newsroom operations, although profits are increasingly coming from niche publications. This trend suggests that creation of niche products, if successful, could provide a new source of revenue to help sustain the core journalistic mission and operations of a news organization.

One way to maintain a healthy level of newsroom investment is to keep the focus of the news operation on the community, serving the local niche. Although this focus can be difficult to maintain in the current climate of consolidation and growth, Frank Blethen of the *Seattle Times* agreed that staying on the micro level is worth the effort. His newsroom guidelines for potential stories are, “Does this connect to our community or connect the community to itself?”

This hyper-local approach to news, as Kathleen Matthews of ABC affiliate WJLA-TV in Washington, D.C., called it, isn’t easy. Very small operations raise quality questions. Moreover, Blethen pointed out, many small newspapers are serving their shareholders, not their communities. John Oliver cautioned that when large media companies have tried to reach for part of the audience of the black weeklies, too many of them “have been perceived as simply being white papers in black areas,” unable to focus on the local issues that are most relevant to the community. Similarly, Christopher Dixon said that efforts by some big metropolitan papers to go after specialized segments of their audiences can result in distorting the editorial product.

Michael Reed of Community Newspaper Group raised another issue for smaller newspapers that offer a more relevant, community-focused product to their audiences: the decline in the number of local advertisers across small-town America. Reed highlighted what can happen to the advertising base in a community where a large retailer such as Wal-Mart moves in and many small, “mom and pop” businesses close because they cannot compete. When Wal-Mart and other national retail chains move in and advertise only in the larger media outlets, the lack of advertising may kill the good journalism in the smaller newspapers, he said. “Quality journalism won’t help a paper with no advertising,” Reed observed.

Many journalists working in newsrooms believe that business pressures have affected the final product. In this year’s PEJ survey of journalists, about half of the newsroom employees surveyed said that business pressures are hurting the quality of news coverage more than ever before. Executives weren’t as sure. “Within national organizations, 57 percent of news executives think the profession is going the right way, whereas only 39 percent of reporters think that’s the case,” according to the survey.¹⁹

Newsroom journalists themselves single out training as being of primary importance to their job satisfaction. In another recent survey, done for the Poynter Institute and released in August 2004, a whopping 95 percent of print journalists and 96 percent of broadcast journalists seek more advanced skills training. In other words, the poll summary stated, “Journalists want to learn to do their jobs better and smarter.”²⁰

Yet as Barbara Cochran of the RTNDA noted, the opposite is happening in journalism. “The news business spends less than half of what other businesses spend on professional development,” she said. One result is a heightened level of dissatisfaction among newsroom personnel that can add to an already disaffected newsroom culture. “Whatever happens, the costs for community outreach should not be done at the expense of newsroom journalists,” such as in cutting back on salaries and training, Cochran said. “The industry should invest in its journalists.”

Conferee Steve Isenberg, former publisher of *New York Newsday* and at the time of the conference a professor of humanities at the University of Texas at Austin, suggested that all the models—for non-profit companies, family-owned media, community- and niche-based media, and big media companies—need to reemphasize the core values of journalism that have traditionally strengthened the bonds of trust between journalists and the public.

As Transparent as Practical

With the cautionary thought that transparency “in the extreme” was neither realistic nor desirable, participants spent nearly half of the conference debating the merits of various measures to increase transparency, heighten accountability, and strengthen stakeholder trust in journalism. These discussions yielded a series of strategies and proposals for newsroom investments intended to promote a greater culture of transparency—mainly for the newsroom but also for the front office.

A culture of transparency in news organizations, participants felt, will create a heightened sense of accountability by the media to their various audiences: sources and subjects of news reports, the public, employees, peers, advertisers, and shareholders. The tools: a combination of airtime, newspaper space, Web site space, and, most of all, a newly energized way of thinking. The result: a more personal and interactive approach to news pre-

sentation and more connections to communities and audiences. “With the changes in communications technology, can you afford *not* to be transparent?” moderator Charles Firestone asked.

“Let’s pull back the curtain and take some of the mystique out of the process,” Kathleen Matthews said.

Many proposals were put forward in working groups and discussed extensively, including several initiatives that some news organizations already are using. The proposals, many of which would cost money and all of which will require new organizational energy, broke into three main categories:

- **Strategies for enhancing public knowledge and engagement that demystify journalistic practices and clarify journalistic values,**
- **Increased opportunities for audiences to “talk back” to journalists, and**
- **Investments to strengthen newsroom operations and professional performance.**

The goal is to increase *accountability* by the media to their various constituencies: sources and subjects of news reports, the public, employees, peers, advertisers, and shareholders.

Strategies for Enhancing Public Knowledge and Engagement

In applying the standard to be “as transparent as practical,” participants noted that transparency applies to the mechanics of reporting a story and to the values that underlie the journalism as well.

Enhanced public outreach efforts should be designed to increase audience understanding of the newsgathering process and provide greater insight and clarity for the public regarding editorial decisions that go into reporting the news of the day. A good first step would be creation of resources that explain to the public how stories are developed, reported, edited, produced, and presented. News organizations should explore ways to add more explanatory content within the news report or overall journalistic package (newspaper, Web site, radio or television newscast).

These proposals go beyond the widely accepted standard of transparency in labeling opinion and advertising as such. News organizations also should admit when they have made errors, no matter how great or small, and act to correct those mistakes as quickly and as fully as possible.

Conference participants highlighted the need for news organizations to engage in more constructive efforts at self-criticism. Communications technologies such as the World Wide Web can be used to expand education, correction, and outreach efforts and may be increasingly important as news consumption continues to evolve toward an on-demand model enabled by technology. The conferees made the following specific proposals:

1. **Virtual Newsroom Tours.** In an easily located place on the company's Web site, devote space to an overview of newsroom methodology. This overview could take the form of a virtual tour of the newsroom, with an explanation of how stories are developed, reported, edited, produced, and presented. Some news organizations are already doing this, with great potential for a user experience that is both educational and fun. Include a mission statement that explains why and how the media outlet does its work—for example, when it intends to advocate and when it will strive to be balanced.
2. **Weekly Editor's Review.** Begin and maintain a regular editor's or anchor's review of the news, with explanations or discussion of how the week's events (or more frequently, if possible) were seen in the newsroom. These "From the Editor's Desk" columns could also include periodic "audit" reports on media performance.
3. **Retooled Corrections Process.** Retool and improve the corrections process so that it becomes much more than the institutionalized box at the bottom of page 2. Minimally, set a standard that *every correction should mitigate every error*. At most, an organization could hire or reassign a person to do postpublication/postbroadcast review.
4. **Transparency in Sourcing.** With the caveat of avoiding anonymous sources whenever possible, journalists should explain, within the news report itself, why a source is *not* being quoted by name. This standard of transparency ought to apply for all media of news reporting, print or broadcast. Journalists should also redouble their efforts to provide more descriptive information about unnamed sources, to the extent practicable.

Another area where anonymity came in for discussion was in the process of writing newspaper editorials. Some participants suggested that newspapers could offer more background information about the process of preparing newspaper editorials because the editorial writing process is just as mysterious to the public as regular newsgathering and reporting—perhaps more so. The conferees debated just how much more could be told to audiences about editorials. Here, too, no unanimity was reached. Because editorial writers (as opposed to opinion columnists) speak for the entire news organization, several participants felt that more identifying information about them would work against the goal of speaking with a single authoritative institutional voice. At a minimum, some participants suggested, more information could be offered to readers about who is on the editorial board.

Increased Opportunities for Audiences to “Talk Back”

Any of the foregoing strategies could incorporate an interactive component, encouraging greater feedback from members of the community. Conference participants offered additional recommendations, drawn from their own professional experiences, for increasing the flow of information and feedback from the public. Participants generally agreed that recent missteps and scandals within the field of journalism have highlighted the need for news organizations to be more proactive in soliciting constructive criticism and to listen more attentively to what the public has to say. Specific recommendations included the following:

1. **Survey Journalism’s Stakeholders: Audiences and Sources.** Robert Woodworth of Pulitzer Inc. noted that his newspaper, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, conducted a survey of sources who had been quoted in the newspaper and then published the results of that survey. Sources were asked to provide feedback on how the newspaper handled the reporting in which they were quoted. This strategy offers an opportunity both to demonstrate to skeptical audiences that the newspaper’s reporters have been careful and professional in their work and to correct errors that were missed earlier in the process. Moreover, participants recommended that news organizations listen more closely to bloggers, Weblog “watchdogs,” and critics and consider quoting them when their criticism merits wider recognition.

2. **Publish E-mail Addresses.** Publish, either online or in the newspaper, e-mail addresses for reporters, editors, and producers. Participants cautioned, however, that this action should be taken only if the reporters, editors, and producers are given enough time by their employers to respond properly to the e-mails they receive.
3. **Hold Community Forums.** News organizations can create additional opportunities for public feedback by holding public forums on matters of community interest. Similarly, news organizations could send editors into the community to meet with local citizen organizations and listen to their concerns, giving residents a chance to connect faces with the news organization.

Internal Investments to Strengthen the Newsroom

Beyond the very visible strategies recommended above for enhancing public knowledge and engagement in journalism, the conference participants debated additional steps that could be taken by news organizations to strengthen newsroom operations and the quality of journalism produced. Among the most significant measures that could be taken to boost public trust and transform the culture of the newsroom into one that values transparency are the following:

1. **Internal Audits in a Climate of Cooperation.** Participants suggested that news organizations conduct periodic internal audits of operations as a way of identifying problems within the organization or newsroom culture before they explode in crisis. Conferees emphasized that such audits must engage the newsroom staff in the process, and management must establish a climate of cooperation without fear.
2. **Increase Professional and Mid-Career Training.** Many participants echoed the need for news organizations to do a better job of investing in their journalism by increasing professional and mid-career training for newsroom personnel. Frank Blethen of the *Seattle Times* noted that the August 2004 UNITY convention of minority journalists, which drew more than 8,000 journalists to Washington, D.C., for professional development opportunities, was to be attended mainly by journalists who would pay their own way. The RTNDA's Barbara Cochran suggested that newsroom employees perceive this arrange-

ment (whereby UNITY attendees pay their own way) as a significant lack of support from management. Moreover, a major study has shown that media companies significantly lag behind most other major U.S. industries in investments in training and development for their employees.

- 3. Hire Enlightened Newsroom Managers.** It almost goes without saying that news organizations should want to hire “enlightened” managers. In this case, the conference participants were emphasizing the need for managers who support stronger connections to their media organization’s audiences, renewed energy in efforts relating to neutrality of content, and attention to detail. As conferee Elliot Stein, managing director of Commonwealth Capital Partners, put it, “Rules are good, but they must be supported by management.”

Participants also discussed the benefits to transparency of employing an audience representative or ombudsman or hiring of a “standards editor” as an internal watchdog on journalistic standards and integrity. Many news organizations have considered these options in evaluating how to ensure the integrity of their news product and operations; notably, the *New York Times* created just such a position to address issues raised by the Jayson Blair incident in 2003. Participants also raised the need to create stronger institutional connections between editors and their corporate colleagues in the circulation and advertising departments—both areas in which newspapers have faced credibility challenges during the past year—although this issue was not covered in depth during the conference.

The Limits of Transparency

Aspen conferees debated extensively just how far the concept of transparency can be carried. Specific concerns centered on the practical and financial consequences of redirecting newsroom energy into this process. Small newspapers and other media organizations may not have the resources for many of these suggestions. Yet even smaller media organizations could use some of the simpler outreach suggestions, such as community meetings and the editor’s letter. Most significantly, participants cautioned, too much navel-gazing and looking backward might very well divert an organization from what it should be doing most: concentrating on explaining the world.

“We’re not absolutists,” said Andrew Tyndall. “Transparency in the extreme is not a virtue—you can be too revelatory.”

Look for the proper balance, Jeff Jarvis suggested: “Everything should be transparent unless it compromises our ability to function as journalists and do our jobs.”

Ultimately, noted Larry Grossman, whatever the delivery system and level of transparency, audiences judge journalists by their product.

Conclusion

Twenty-first-century consumers have dramatically increased options for getting the personal and community information they want and need to get them through their day and week. In this expanding information marketplace, journalism plays an important role owing to its sense of public mission, commitment to community, and the strong professional norms and values that have guided generations of journalists. Journalists and media executives must adapt themselves and their news organizations to a world that demands greater transparency and accountability or risk diminishing the special trust they hold—or, worse, becoming irrelevant to a vast segment of the public.

Journalists, Steve Isenberg of the University of Texas at Austin summarized, “are serious people doing serious work, all of which has a public consequence to it. Adaptability, agility, and imagination will be prized as we go forward.”

The serious challenge for journalism in forging a new relationship with the American public requires renewed energy and creativity and a long-term commitment—not easy in any field, certainly, but perhaps especially difficult in a field as dependent on structure, time, and procedure and as culturally resistant to change as journalism.

Meeting this challenge will require a proactive cultural shift in newsrooms and boardrooms. A newsroom that creates an environment in which its employees can fearlessly listen to its own audiences and in which its employees, with equal fearlessness, can help its managers engage those audiences may have the best chance of succeeding in the evolving world of journalism.

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APPENDIX

*The Eighth Annual Aspen Institute
Conference on Journalism and Society*

Aspen, Colorado
July 16–18, 2004

Conference Participants

Frank Blethen

Publisher and Chief Executive
Officer
Seattle Times

Merrill Brown

Founder and Principal
MMB Media LLC

Barbara Cochran

President
Radio-Television News
Directors Association

John Cochran

Correspondent
ABC News

Christopher Dixon

Managing Director
Gabelli Group Capital
Partners, Inc.

Esther Dyson

Editor
Release 1.0
and
Editor-at-Large
CNET Networks

Steven Erlanger

Jerusalem Bureau Chief
New York Times

Charles M. Firestone

Executive Director
Communications and Society
Program
The Aspen Institute

Jon Funabiki

Deputy Director
Media, Arts and Culture
The Ford Foundation

Lawrence K. Grossman

Former President
NBC News and PBS

Walter Isaacson

President and Chief Executive
Officer
The Aspen Institute

Steven Isenberg

Visiting Professor of Humanities
University of Texas at Austin

Note: Titles and affiliations are as of the date of the conference.

Jeff Jarvis

President and Creative Director
Advance.net

Kevin Klose

President and Chief Executive
Officer
National Public Radio

José Ignacio Lozano

Vice Chairman
ImpreMedia, LLC

Kathleen Matthews

News Anchor/Host
WJLA-TV, Washington, DC

John J. Oliver, Jr.

Publisher and Chief Executive
Officer
Afro-American Newspapers

Norman Pearlstine

Editor-in-Chief
Time Inc.

J. Robert S. Prichard

President and Chief Executive
Officer
Torstar Corporation

Michael E. Reed

President and Chief Executive
Officer
Community Newspaper
Holdings, Inc.

William Dean Singleton

Vice Chairman and Chief
Executive Officer
MediaNews Group, Inc.

Elliot Stein

Managing Director
Commonwealth Capital Partners

Andrew Tyndall

Publisher
Tyndall Report

Robert C. Woodworth

President and Chief Executive
Officer
Pulitzer, Inc.

Jon Ziomek

Assistant Dean and Associate
Professor
Medill School of Journalism
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Director of Journalism Projects
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Note: Titles and affiliations are as of the date of the conference.

About the Author

Jon Ziomek is an associate professor at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. Since joining the Medill faculty, he has taught urban issues reporting, business news reporting, science news reporting, and the history and ethics of journalism. He also has served as assistant dean and director of Medill's master's degree journalism programs. Prior to his academic appointment, Professor Ziomek spent nearly a decade at the *Chicago Sun-Times* as a reporter for several sections of the newspaper. He has been a freelance writer for newspapers and magazines, as well as in corporate communications, and he has served as a consultant to the U.S. Information Agency.

Observations on Journalism

The Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society has been fortunate to include the participation of many of the media industry's most thoughtful CEOs, journalists, business executives and critics. Over the past eight years, through their participation in this conference series as well as in other venues, they have made significant contributions to the ongoing public conversation about the changing character of American journalism. We have compiled a collection of their insightful comments, candid assessments and informed judgments about the past, present and future of the news business and quality journalism. Attribution information includes the year of participation and the participant's professional affiliation at that time.

On public trust in the news media

"Some of our loss of trust in the public is because people think we'll always go for the profit motive. It doesn't always have to be [like that]."

Robert Prichard, Torstar (2004)

"Listening to your community keeps you honest."

José Ignacio Lozano, ImpreMedia (2004)

"Urgency is not an overstatement. We have a crisis of trust both in and out of the newsroom."

Steve Erlanger, *New York Times* (2004)

"I don't think we should be dismissive about the question of trust. Our relationship with readers, viewers and online users is our single greatest asset.... The confidence and relationship with viewers, readers and users is something that we should not take for granted."

Robert Decherd, Belo Corp. (2001)

“Because one of the greatest strengths of our society is our freedom to debate, criticize, vote, and reform our government, our nation depends on our free press to be accurate and to uphold the highest standards for the integrity of information flowing to voters.”

John Ashcroft, U.S. Attorney General (2003)

“The public wants to trust us, but sometimes we make it difficult... I think we make it harder to trust us when we promote news as entertainment, and entertainment as news, and mix the blood ourselves.”

Lou Boccardi, Associated Press (2001)

“The credibility factor for journalism is greatly diminished when *Hard Copy* can get thrown in the same bin with *60 Minutes* and still be considered journalism.”

Leslie Moonves, CBS Television (1999)

“You say what your character is every night—in what you cover and, frequently, in what you don’t cover and don’t discuss.”

Sandra Mims Rowe, *The Oregonian* (1999)

“I think we should be in the business of putting the news out there, and trust the discretion of the reader to have some judgment.”

Juan Williams, *Washington Post* (1998)

“The collectivity of our judgments within any particular news organization *defines* that news organization over a period of years, and contributes directly to the trust the public has in it—or doesn’t have in it.”

Robert MacNeil, author and journalist (1997)

“I think there’s such a thing as a trust market, with the stock market in mind. The trust market rises and falls each day...based on our performance.”

Bernard Shaw, journalist (2001)

“What you need is someone in the trenches, day to day, getting feedback from readers and making sure ethical and other issues are being brought up internally.”

David Talbot, *Salon Internet* (2000)

Investing in Journalism

“The more you invest, the more you get out, both in money and energy and commitment to the newsroom.”

Robert Prichard, Torstar (2004)

“Quality journalism is very difficult to define and somewhat elusive, but we have to figure it out. Whatever your target audience is, we’ve got to deliver that audience.”

Robert Woodworth, Pulitzer Inc. (2004)

“The foundation of all our franchises is journalism integrity and credibility. We’re pragmatic about this alignment between journalistic quality and long-term value. Anything we might do to diminish the quality of that journalism would diminish the value of assets.”

Dennis FitzSimons, Tribune Company (2002)

“In a diverging market, it makes good business sense to keep investing in your core product. That makes the audience trust you and regard you as authoritative. That’s what drives your brand.”

Boisfeuillet Jones, Jr., *Washington Post* (2002)

“The news business spends less than half of what other businesses spend on professional development.... The industry should invest in its journalists.”

Barbara Cochran, Radio Television News Directors Association (2004)

“We have a consistent record that if we start a product because of perceived opportunity in an advertising category, the failure rate is close to 100 percent. If we start because viewers or readers want it, the success factor is much higher. If it’s not about the reader, it doesn’t matter—you can have 200 pages of advertising in the launch edition and a year later you’re lucky to have 12.”

Frank A. Bennack, Jr., Hearst Corporation (2002)

“Attention should be paid to succession planning on both the news and the business sides of our business with an emphasis on developing executives and editors who focus on great journalism and great business results.”

Janet L. Robinson, New York Times Company (2002)

Bringing journalism and business into balance

“We are going to need to make major changes to preserve our revenue streams. We have to quit listening to our peers and listen more to the audience we are serving.... We don’t leave [our] core mission; we expand that core mission.”

William Dean Singleton, MediaNews Group (2004)

“Quality journalism won’t help a paper with no advertising.”

Michael Reed, Community Newspaper Holdings, Inc. (2004)

“Some of the great media companies around the world make greater returns than U.S. companies and still do great journalism. I don’t think rate of return is the question, it’s what you do with it.”

Gerald M. Levin, Time Warner (2002)

“Forget the old excuses about media competition, demographic changes and ‘no time to read.’ It’s content, service, brand and culture that drive newspaper readership.”

John Lavine, Northwestern University
Media Management Center (2002)

“There is a connection between the availability of information and the health of civic culture. What the press can do that nobody else can do is ferment and promote the health of the community.”

Katherine Fulton, Global Business Network (2002)

On the impact of technology on journalism

“Consumers are increasingly indifferent to the way or ways they get information.”

Christopher Dixon, Gabelli Group Capital Partners, Inc. (2004)

“We have to reach our younger audiences through technology. They’re not as engaged as we are with public affairs, and it’s deluded to think that they’ll get more connected as they settle down.”

Merrill Brown, MMB Media LLC (2004)

“Blogs are the same as editors listening to their communities. A good letters-to-the-editor page is a primitive, slow blog.”

José Ignacio Lozano, *ImpreMedia Inc.* (2004)

“Audiences now have a voice. Are we listening?”

Jeff Jarvis, *Advance.com* (2004)

“They [the working class and the poor] don’t have a stake [in mainstream journalism]. Increased blogging will further that divide.... People on blogs haven’t a clue what’s going on in the inner cities, in the farm communities.”

Frank Blethen, *Seattle Times* (2004)

On the business and financial pressures facing news organizations

“Wall Street’s got to be told, ‘Guess what? The margin may go from 40 to 30 to 25—what’s wrong with that?... The expectations of Wall Street, I think, have to be managed. The question is how to do this.’”

Ken Lowe, *E. W. Scripps Company* (2001)

“I think it’s important not only to try to give readers information we think they *should* read, but that they actually *will* read, so it connects with what they’re interested in. So is that marketing? Or is that just being a smart editor?”

Anthony Ridder, *Knight-Ridder* (1999)

“In terms of journalism, I put more faith in corporate leadership that understands that they have an equally solemn fiduciary obligation arising from their ownership of a news organization; that they hold a public trust that is a vital component of a free society. I put more faith in that than I do in whether the corporation is big or small.”

Peter C. Goldmark, *International Herald Tribune* (2000)

“We have a mission in our heads that, in my opinion, is still driven by a Cold War mentality of what our audience is and what our audience wants. We’re here and all around us we’re seeing audience fragmentation; it is the

reality. Everyone is going for a smaller and smaller piece of the pie.... How do you judge success in that environment? How do you judge quality?"

Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., *New York Times* (2001)

"One measure of quality journalism is a thoughtful consideration of its effect."

Geneva Overholser, *Washington Post* (2000)

Journalism and national security

"If you want to exercise patriotism as a journalist, you cover the hell out of the news, you do probing coverage."

Caesar L. Andrews, Gannett News Service (2003)

"I don't think you can cover this war objectively. I think you can raise questions about it, which we all did. [Ultimately,] it's not the Super Bowl. It's not the Cowboys and somebody."

Neal Shapiro, NBC News (2003)

"It's healthier to admit to opinions than to pretend that you don't have them."

Lachlan Murdoch, News Corp, Ltd. (2003)

"I think it's very dangerous for the press ever to make deals with the government."

William Dean Singleton, MediaNews Group, Inc. (2003)

"No company was impacted by 9-11 more than Disney. It cost us a lot to cover; tourism dropped off the face of the earth, cutting revenue at our parks; and our television advertising revenue came to a standstill as the market was in shambles, but it never stopped us. We never wavered in terms of covering the story."

Robert Iger, Walt Disney Company (2002)

"We were trying to educate people in the intelligence community [to the fact that] it is the responsibility of the government to be responsive."

Scott Armstrong, Information Trust (2003)

News and the changing media context

“[Journalists] are serious people doing serious work, all of which has a public consequence to it. Adaptability, agility, and imagination will be prized as we go forward.”

Steven Isenberg, University of Texas at Austin (2004)

“What troubles me about trying to balance the considerations of economics and journalism is that we’re falling back into the same trap as before 9-11. We’re defining news by what consumers say they want, which is a package that looks like entertainment. Rather than leading our audience, we are responding to them. We’re letting them stupefy themselves.”

Pat Mitchell, Public Broadcasting Service (2002)

“I’m heartily amused by this notion that Fox News Channel is a conservative news channel or a right-wing news channel.”

Col Allan, *New York Post* (2003)

“When people have choices, good sources drive out bad; bad sources don’t drive out good.”

Walter Isaacson, *Time* (2000)

On transparency in journalism

“Everything should be transparent unless it compromises our ability to function as journalists and do our jobs.”

Jeff Jarvis, *Advance.com* (2004)

“Transparency in the extreme is not a virtue—you can be too revelatory.”

Andrew Tyndall, *Tyndall Report* (2004)

“Journalism must make a more concerted effort to communicate its values and practices to the public.”

Jon Funabiki, Ford Foundation (2004)

“Transparency is the key, I believe. That means transparency to the public, so it can understand what journalism is all about and why it is important

to them. Transparency is also about news organizations showing journalists that they value the hard work and ethical standards of journalism.”

Bill Kovach, Committee of Concerned Journalists (2000)

“With the changes in communications technology, can you afford *not* to be transparent?”

Charles Firestone, The Aspen Institute (2004)

“The younger audience is more demanding, and specifically in the area of transparency.”

John Oliver, Afro-American Newspapers (2004)

“As companies become more global and supersede national boundaries, the question of trust and accountability grows in importance because a lot of the ways that we had for making these companies accountable don’t apply. And if corporations don’t come up with new forms of accountability, of creating trust, they are highly vulnerable.”

Jay Rosen, New York University (2000)

“Let’s pull back the curtain and take some of the mystique out of the process.”

Kathleen Matthews, WJLA-TV, Washington, DC (2004)

Previous Publications from the Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society

Journalism, Security and the Public Interest (2003)

Adam Clymer

The delicate balance between national security and the public's right to know in the context of the international war on terrorism was the subject of the seventh annual Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society. The discussion yielded a set of best practices for journalists, editors, and media executives to consider when they report stories with national security implications. These best practices, and the discussion that led to them, are included in this report by former *New York Times* national affairs reporter Adam Clymer. Attorney General John Ashcroft addressed the conference on the importance of the USA PATRIOT Act and the press's role in keeping America safe. His remarks to the conference are included in this publication. 64 pages, ISBN Paper: 0-89843-387-8

Journalism and Commercial Success: Expanding the Business Case for Quality News and Information (2002)

Neil Shister

Is great journalism compatible with great business in the context of the current media marketplace? This report of the sixth annual Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society offers a starting point in the search for understanding how to realize both goals in the face of market trends and pressures that have roiled the journalism profession in recent years. This publication also includes a proposal by Charles M. Firestone, "Inform America"—a collaborative project on citizen responsibilities among media entities, journalists, educators, and the public at large. 72 pages, ISBN Paper: 0-89843-365-7

American Journalism in Transition: A View at the Top (2001)

Amy Korzick Garmer

This report summarizes the discussion at the 2001 Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society and includes sections on "Journalism's Market for Trust," "Prisoner of Wall Street," "Fighting the

Last War,” “Expanding Missions, Core Values,” and “Recommendations for Investing in the Long-term Value of Journalism.” 53 pages, ISBN Paper: 0-89843-327-4

Old Values, New World: Harnessing the Legacy of Independent Journalism for the Future (2001)

Peter C. Goldmark, Jr., and David Bollier

This report features the keynote address to the 2000 conference, “Setting the Testbed for Journalistic Values,” by Peter C. Goldmark, chairman and chief executive officer of the *International Herald Tribune*, and the conference report, “The Evolution of Journalism in a Changing Market Ecology,” by David Bollier. 57 pages, ISBN Paper: 0-89843-315

Values For the Digital Age: The Legacy of Henry Luce (2000)

Gerald M. Levin and David Bollier

This report features the keynote address to the 1999 conference, “Values for the Digital Age,” by Gerald Levin, chief executive officer of AOL Time Warner Inc., and the conference report, “Disruption and Disorientation: American Journalism in Transition,” by David Bollier. 63 pages, ISBN Paper: 0-89843-284-7

Media Madness: The Revolution So Far (1999)

Max Frankel and David Bollier

This report features the keynote address to the 1998 conference, “Media Madness: The Revolution So Far,” by Max Frankel, former executive editor of the *New York Times*, and the report of the second annual Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society, “Can Serious Journalism Survive in the New Media Marketplace?” by David Bollier. 55 pages, ISBN Paper: 0-89843-260-X

Market Journalism: New Highs, New Lows (1997)

Robert MacNeil and David Bollier

This report features the keynote address to the 1997 conference, “Market Journalism: New Highs, New Lows,” by Robert MacNeil, former PBS news anchor, and the report of the first Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society, “News Values in the New Multimedia Environment: The Case of Privacy,” by David Bollier. 74 pages, ISBN Paper: 0-89843-222-7

The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program

www.aspeninstitute.org/c&s

The Communications and Society Program is a global forum for leveraging the power of leaders and experts from business, government, and the nonprofit sector in the communications and information fields for the benefit of society. Its roundtable forums and other projects aim to improve democratic societies and diverse organizations through innovative, multidisciplinary, values-based policymaking. They promote constructive inquiry and dialogue and the development and dissemination of new models and options for informed and wise policy decisions.

In particular, the Program provides an active venue for global leaders and experts from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds to exchange and gain new knowledge and insights on the societal impact of advances in digital technology and network communications. The Program also creates a multidisciplinary space in the communications policymaking world where veteran and emerging decision makers can explore new concepts, find personal growth and insight, and develop new networks for the betterment of the policymaking process and society.

The Program's projects fall into one or more of three categories: communications and media policy, communications technology and the democratic process, and information technology and social change. Ongoing activities of the Communications and Society Program include annual roundtables on journalism and society, international journalism, telecommunications policy, Internet policy, information technology, and diversity and the media. The Program also convenes the Aspen Institute Forum on Communications and Society, in which chief executive-level leaders in the business, government, and the nonprofit sector examine issues relating to the changing media and technology environment.

Conference reports and other materials are distributed to key policymakers and opinion leaders within the United States and around the world. They also are available to the public at large through the World Wide Web.

