# Gateway or Gatekeeper:

# The institutionalization of online news in

# creating an altered technological authority

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### *Abstract*

This pilot study analyzed the words of Web journalists to answer the question: Are the ways in which online editors at traditional newspapers employing technology altering the routines of the established political institution of news? The paper found that journalistic authority online prevails but within a new broadcast-like world in which news considerations center on both the technology involved as well as the audience. The end result is a transformation of time and place boundaries to those of speed and space respectively, and a new, negotiated sense of what we know as news.

News, scholars contend, is a political institution whereby media organizations make use of routines to standardize disseminated information. Consider that the characteristics of an institution include "taken-for-granted social patterns of behavior valued in and of themselves encompass procedures, routines, assumptions, which extend over space and endure over time, in order to preside over a societal sector" (Cook, 1998, p. 84). Resnik (1998) in *The Politics of Cyberspace* argues that the Web is only becoming "normalized" in that it is little more than a medium channeling politics in different ways from the real world, and thus hinting that a commoditization of information, or at least a reflection of information from the "real" world is occurring. In this same book, Kellner (1998) argues that cyberspace is "decommoditized;" its potential is not so much utopian as limitless, and we only have to educate ourselves enough, train ourselves in the technology to increase democratic public spheres. Which version of the Internet's power do we accept? This paper scrutinizes the stated missions and practices of online editors to consider whether the Internet is becoming institutionalized (and thus, normalized, or at least a functional part of our society in the sense of our churches, schools and law enforcement agencies), or whether it has remained something more nebulous, something more alternative, marginal or even more democratically perfect.

Until recently, traditional news organizations have largely "shoveled" their organizations' institutional product onto their Websites. This has provided the institution of the news media with a new portal for the dissemination of information that has passed through a complicated series of gatekeepers according to certain professional norms. News has been considered a political institution because of how media shape the social order with authority by controlling time and space (in the sense of how we know what we know when we know it). Now, the diffusion of new multimedia technologies has allowed new procedures and routines that are

altering our very notions of space and time within the industry, allowing audiences to take over

(parts of) control. This leads to the question: If news as a political institution helps create our

political reality through a constructed product, and online news is moving toward depicting that

reality minus the construction, then doesn't such technology undermine news as an institution in

some ways? This is a broad question that can be pared down into more manageable research

questions: How do online editors conceive of their mission? How have routines such as story

conception, format and editing changed because of the technology available to online

journalists? What role is the audience meant to play on this new platform, according to online

editors?

   If transformations in journalists' mission, routines and audience relationships are

occurring, this would necessarily have ramifications for our political reality (or at least our

perceptions of that political reality, and what we know about it). This theoretical essay and pilot

study analyzes traditional news companies' practices on the Web. In particular, it examines what

online editors contend about their Web-original features on the sites themselves, in the media,

and in interviews. Are these new features altering our concept of news as a political institution,

or rather, are they merely becoming a normalized practice that will soon enough become

standardized throughout the news industry, thus merely reinforcing the functionality of the news

institution? In the end, such questions end up tugging at the concept and construct of journalistic

authority especially, and so this paper also explores how journalistic authority continues to be

relayed online, whether such authority is altering our understanding of time and space, and if all

of this means we've got a new institution on our hands, or merely a very traditional, very "super"

institution whose technological attributes will reinforce its power. Ultimately, this analysis

discovered that a little of both seems to be occurring: Journalistic authority online prevails but

within a new broadcast-like world in which news considerations center on both the technology

involved as well as the audience. The end result is a transformation of our concepts of time and

place boundaries to those of speed and space respectively, and a new, negotiated sense of what

we know as news.

*Literature Review: News as an authoritative political institution*

There lies power in news (Schudson, 1995), which constructs the picture of reality in our

heads (Lippmann, 1922), tells us what we think about (Cohen, 1963), and provides a structure

for our communication rituals (Carey, 1989/1992). To do this, society must believe in that

power. In other words, journalists must embody the cultural and political authority to relay the

information. Putting aside that not everyone believes the press is an institution in of itself (see

Lippmann, 1922, for example, who says that the press is no substitute for our institutions or

Gans, 1998, who positions journalists more as a tool than a guide), this paper takes up those

scholars from Cater (1959) to Cook (1998) who contend instead that the press is indeed a Fourth

Estate of democracy with an entrenched organizational system. To be clear, we turn to Cook's

definition of an institution once more, noting in particular his emphasis on routines and practices,

their tendency to endure and the image of journalists as some kind of a judge issuing decrees and

"presiding over a societal sector" (Cook, 1998, p. 84). For Cook, media are not a series of

organizations, but a singular institution that has re-enforced the dominant ideology and political

power structure, wielded authoritarian influence and operated as a place – and this word is

chosen with significance – of collective guidance for society's thoughts, principles and actions.

Cook would do well to specify that he is speaking of journalism via media channels, as opposed

to the communications system as a whole. Once we isolate that we are talking about *journalism*,

we can then call upon Zelizer (1992), Schudson (1995), and others for whom journalists

represent the foundational core by which people learn and understand. But let us first take up the more philosophical connotation of Cook's definitions, the parts about time and space, and the notion of a social interchange occurring that re-enforced this news power.

Anything that contributes to the social order, controls communication messages and can be considered institutional, according to Giddens (1979). Indeed, March and Olsen (1989) suggest these institutions literally form the social order's environment by discarding some messages in favor of other more politically palpable ones. "Political institutions not only respond to their environments but create those environments at the same time" (March & Olsen, 1989, p.162). Such a structure stems from the age-old developments of media, notes Giddens (1979), who tracks the birth of writing as the impetus for our current linear way of thinking and acting: "Writing permits the contact with remote generations… but in addition its very linearity as a material form perhaps encourages the consciousness of the elapsing of time as a sequential process, leading from one point away to another point in a progressive manner" (201). Note his use of the concepts of time and space. Institutions maintain and dictate our ways of practicing time and space, which form the boundaries of the social order. Control of time and space then, suggests Giddens (1979), leads to real power: "Routine is closely linked to tradition in the sense that tradition underwrites the continuity of practice in the elapsing of time. Any influences which corrode or place in question traditional practices carry with them the likelihood of accelerated change" (220). But he cautions that typical institutions are of such an *evolutionary* nature that the traditional practices are merely replaced by other practices that also soon become traditional; this change, then, is not *revolutionary* in nature.

With this understanding, we turn to this emphasis on routines, which form the basis of the longevity inherent in institutional power for they are the news professional norms that we all rely

on to paint for us that picture of reality. March and Olsen (1989) remind us that the meaning of

life is inextricably intertwined with the centrality of rules and the construction of a constructed

ordered society. Many scholars have documented journalists' ways (from Cater, 1959, to Gans,

1979): Through the immediacy of news, the prioritization of news placement, the form of news

stories, and the sources employed, journalists construct the boundaries of our social order. By

certain "strategic rituals, they determine the who, what, when, where, and why of our lives"

(Tuchman, 1972). In addition, "They construct and reconstruct social reality by establishing the

context in which social phenomenon are perceived and defined" (Tuchman, 1973/1997, p.188).

        This is accomplished through the typification of news stories, for information is

unknowable until there is an agreed-upon meaning (Sigal, 1973). Sigal also discusses time and

space but on a more micro-level of news print space and reporter time resources. "What the news

means depends on how the news gets made" (Sigal, 1973, p. 1). Part of what makes news an

institution is the newsmaking process, which is hierarchal (in other words, a top-down approach

from officials to reporters to the audience, but also from media owner to publisher to editor to

reporter), multivocal and conventional. Labor is divided, and there is a reliance on the routines

within the institution, such as the example of pack journalism (Sigal, 1973).

        Finally, the institution believes itself to be an institution with authority and has convinced

everyone else that this is so (see Cater, 1959; Zelizer, 1992; Schudson, 1995). Media have done

this in part through their strategic rituals of objectivity described by Tuchman (1972), and their

standard of formatting described by Schudson (1995). Form matters, as does sourcing, content

and framing, though scholars differ as to whether such routines are intentional or more

subconscious, building from an ingrained learned pattern of fairytales and social role play.

Fishman (1982/1997) describes this as the "news net," a bureaucratic frame of reference.

Molotch and Lester (1974/1997) "see media as reflecting not a world out there, but the practices

of those having the power to determine the experience of others" (1974/1997, p. 206). Therefore,

the relationships of media to their publics must be nurtured in order to perpetuate traditional

sender-message-receivership model of Shannon and Weaver (1949). Certainly when journalists

break out of the accepted patterns to produce an alternative story, the result is a quick pull-back,

a critical response from the institution – a phenomenon Bennett et al. (1985) call news repair.

News repair is essential for coddling and cradling that journalistic authority and maintaining the

health of the institution.

Briefly, there is a pressing need to describe these traditional practices. Journalists choose

their story topics based on a learned understanding of what is newsworthy depending on timing,

proximity, celebrity, unusualness, impact, prominence and other qualities (see any newswriting

textbook). Still, much in news selection is determined by other institutions – the leaders who

have the power to change politics – as well as by an increasing tendency to produce individual-

centric information to be employed in the dominant institution, i.e. capitalism. Reporters are

guided in the writing of these stories by the American ideals (Gans, 1979) as well as by what

officials tell them (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003) and what their brethren are doing (Kovach &

Rosenstiel, 1999). They are the gatekeepers of what we know (see White, 1950 through

Shoemaker, 1991) and are constrained by budgets and medium resources and competition (in

other words, time and space). For example, how much a reporter can write is directly connected

to how many ads the newspaper was able to sell, which determines the size of the news "hole"

(available space) as well as by his paper's finite deadline (available time).

*Technology and the news institution*

Many scholars tout the Internet's abilities to save democracy by ridding

journalism of the bias and top-down hierarchy that are said to result from its learned

routines. Medium theorists study how new channels create new environments and thus

necessarily alter our social interactions (Meyrowitz, 1985). Democracy is substantially

changed by new technology, notes Friedland as he in 1996 heralded the savior potential

even from within the conglomerated matrix of media that exists. Abramson et al. (1988)

suggest that it was new technology that shaped the current news institution as national,

private, centralized and weak. Television, video and computers shepherded in

"unmediated news" (Abramson et al, 1988, p.292-293) and the demise of gatekeeping, at

least as we have traditionally understood it. Perhaps "unmediated news" from within

traditional media is too extreme, but the point is apropos: The type of technology matters

just as story form and routines do in building the institution, for story form and routines

cannot be implemented without conduits. This has been supported over and over in

studies of learning recall and motivations (e.g. Sundar, 2000, or any uses and gratification

research). Newhagen and Levy (1998) go even further along that soft technological

deterministic plane to argue that it is not the social order that defines the technology but

just the opposite. New media develop a "system architecture" creating another institution

in one sense (Newhagen & Levy, 1998, p.12).

Let us consider the medium in question in this paper: the Internet. Newhagen and Levy

(1998) describe multimedia (that is the ability of the technology to relay different kinds of media

from within one channel, such as both text and video) as a catalyst for information

metamorphosis, one that reverses the sender-receiver nodes. The Internet's information capacity

is diffuse and parallel, not condensed as in traditional media:

Data concentration is unnatural in distributed network architectures that facilitate

dispersed message production. Thus the application of canons or standards produced to

deal with mass media systems may be unnatural, unrealistic and practically impossible to

apply in a setting where any participant is equally likely to be a message producer as a

message receiver. Members of such a system are likely to be true peers, further eroding

social codes borne out of the need to protect against the amplification of error fostered by

power imbalances. First, the reportorial act of data collection is dispersed, with data

collection potentially taking place at any node on the Net. Second, and most importantly,

editors may lose control of the agenda. (Newhagen & Levy, 1998, p. 16)

Indeed, the individual medium characteristics take on personality (Turow, 1997) that end up

building particular social values. Turow (1997) calls this "tendencies" of technology. Scholars

like presence theorists note the ability of the Internet to connect realities with users without

mediation. Interactivity levels (Downes & McMillan, 2000) and hyperlinks (Pavlik, 2001) also

involve the audience in the construction of the message, even of data collection, and create a

more layered journalism. "New media are bringing about a realignment between and among

news organizations, journalists and their many publics, including audiences, sources,

competition, advertisers and the government" (Pavlik, 2001, p. 1).

What most of these scholars are referring to has to do specifically with the attributes of

the Internet to alter time and space – though few get at this core distinction specifically.

Computers have little regard for time or space either in the literal sense or the allegorical

meaning of the terms (Negroponte, 1996). Murray (1997) notes that, "The computer's spatial

quality is created by the interactive process of navigation. We know that we are in a particular

location because when we enter a keyboard or mouse command the (text or graphic) screen

display changes appropriately" (80). Furthermore, not only do such attributes give users more

control over space and time delineations, but the news itself can be relayed without such

mundane constraints at all. Readers can navigate an accident scene via a panoramic shot or

understand the extent of an earthquake by an interactive graphic, if desired. A new social

formation – a "cybernation" with control over access and a reversing of the hierarchal authority –

is happening (Luke, 1998). "Power shifts focus, speed overcomes space, orders become

disordered, time moves standards, community loses centers, values change denomination as the

settings of industrialized human agency are shaken completely" (Luke, 1998, p. 121). Space

fuses with society, he adds, calling the resulting "super" realm "Third Nature." Indeed, the

relationship between media and their audiences have been rearticulated because of the

interactivity and multimedia (Matheson, 2004). "The true personalization is now upon us,"

declares Negroponte (1996), describing the "place without space" phenomenon of the digital

world that "removes the limitations of geography. Digital living will include less and less

dependence upon being in a specific place at a specific time" (165). Here he is talking (in 1996)

about the ability to telecommute or to know about distant lands or the person next door in real

time. But Morse (1998) blew apart these very modern notions into new concepts: Virtual worlds

with "enduring space" and whole realms of cyberspace that allow postmodern concepts of these

same news events by experiencing them and interacting with them in a "virtual relationship."

Considering interactivity and multimedia to be the personalization attributes of the Internet,

Morse describes simultaneous material worlds, social spaces and political spheres as

contradicting physicality. This exploitation began with television convergence of our social

institutions and has taken on new dimensions with cyberspace, resulting in an automation and

personalization of cultural exchange (Morse, 1998). This is a largely symbolic world of "non-

space" (17) in which institutional authority is mediated in part by the individual. Interestingly, Morse concludes that far from being utopian, this virtual relation means less realness; it is a mirage of metaphors whose meaning comes in part from what we already know, in part from the technology itself, and in part from whoever is controlling the technology (i.e. the physical institutions). A tug of war for the Internet has begun over its institutionalization, her work implies.

Indeed, it should be noted that many scholars downplay the Internet's franchising abilities in a world entrenched in institutional media controlled by various powers-that-be. What good is hyperlinking if no editor allows it to flow off the site of the institution? Instead journalists are folding the technology into existing routines, according to some of these scholars. Golding (2000) calls this the "mediatization" of new technologies "as they follow past scenarios of commercialization, differentiated access, exclusion of the poor, privatization, deregulation, and globalization" (p.814). Resnick (1998) describes it as the "normalization" of the Web as being divided into traditional concepts of labor mirrored in the non-virtual capitalistic world; Singer (2005, in press) shows that journalists' political Weblogs tend to link to other mainstream news sites, creating "in some ways an enhancement of traditional journalistic norms."

Which vision of the Net is becoming reality within traditional journalism publications? If technology is allowing citizens to control information, then such norm alterations modify power relations and shift institutional authority. Are online editors merely sweeping up the new technology into the pole of traditional journalism practices? If this is so, then communication methods of sourcing, of story conception, of story mission should reflect traditional standards of journalism birthed from newspapers. The product should merely enhance, not transform, news meaning and purpose. This leads us to our research questions, stated again: How do online

editors conceive of their mission? How have routines such as story conception, format and

editing changed because of the technology available to online journalists? And, what role is the

audience meant to play on this new platform, according to online editors? In other words, how is

journalistic authority morphing because of technology?

*Method: A pilot study*

This study attempted to gain insight to the above question from the purveyors of the

journalism itself – the online publishers, editors and reporters. Personal interviews – email,

phone and in person – as well as what these producers have said in the media and on their Web

sites were used to shed light on their mission, their processes to achieve that mission, and the

relation between what they do and their print counterparts. Included in these discussions were

issues of sourcing, technology, story format, and audience agency and input as well as specific

questions about such features as panoramic shots, streaming audio, interactive graphics, reader-

driven blogs, polls, forums, video and real-time discussions.

In all, the comments of 14 online editors and producers from 10 publications were used in

this study. With the exception of MSNBC.com, all the publications were the Web versions of

newspapers: NYTimes.com, Washingtonpost.com, Miamiherald.com, USAToday.com, Sun-

sentinel.com, Pensacola News Journal.com, nj.com, csmoniter.com, and elmundo.es. All the

conversations were personal interviews or primary sourced from question and answers off of

CyberJournalist.net, a Website dedicated to online news happenings. See the appendix for a

complete list of the interviews. The choice of the particular publications resulted from an attempt

to get as wide a range of the large publications as possible (thus *The New York Times, The*

*Washington Post, USAToday,* and the *Christian Science Monitor*), supplemented by other

publications known for their online abilities (thus, the *Sun-Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale, Florida,

New House Company's Website in New Jersey, the *Pensacola News Journ*al in Florida, and the

Spanish *El Mundo*). MSNBC.com's Jon Dube happened to be at a conference speaking on this

very subject in Texas during April, and so some of his comments are included to provide a fuller

picture of the institutionalization of the Web. It is recognized that this sample is not rigorously

chosen; however for the purposes of the exploratory pilot study at hand, the data will do.

Ultimately a more systematic method would need to be employed for a fuller understanding of

the online news institutionalization.

This method represented a purely inductive way of thinking, arising from the notions of

news as an authoritative institution provided by Cook (1998) so that we could then tackle

whether the new environment might be shifting our social formations or reversing hierarchal

authority. Using Cook's definition of institution as a guide, the data was analyzed according to

the stated mission of the news sites (an institution's "assumptions"), its process for publication

(an institution's "procedures and routines"), and its relationships (an institution's ability to

"preside over a societal sector"). The paper will be organized according to the editors' comments

in these categories, building up to a philosophical discussion that extracts meaning from the

substance about journalism's institutional authority. Such a discussion must also consider how

time and place, speed and space are manipulated in such a new world. Are such manipulations

providing a gateway to understanding our world? Or, instead, have online editors simply become

adept at transferring print conceptions of gatekeeping into the new channel?

*Findings: "A whole new thing – eventually"*

**Mission (and story conception):**

To have authority, an institution must believe itself to be an authority and go

about its business with enduring purpose (Cook, 1998). In the beginning of each

interview, each .com editor and reporter (or producer as they are called online) reaffirmed

that the primary mission of the Web site was to perpetuate the publication journalistic

brand and authority to deliver information. Even as he was describing the "continuous

news desk," Len Apcar, the NYTimes.com editor in chief, used the term "institution" to

portray the online newsroom, emphasizing that "a scoop is a scoop is a scoop no matter

what" and the relentless pursuit of journalistic dominance for "credit" at being first with

the information (Apcar, personal communication, April 8, 2005). It seems that this

institution relies on old media: "Your success," said Jim Brady, executive editor of the

Washingtonpost.com (Brady, personal communication, April 8, 2005), "is only as good

as your relationship with the print paper since they provide 90 percent of your content."

To these editors – who hail from the print side – the newsroom is a newsroom in both

name and objective: It is meant to "supplement" the newspaper, to provide backup. Old

terminology peppered these conversations: newsroom, editing, sources, gatekeeping,

inform, community knowledge. NYTimes.com was forced to close down many of its

online message boards, which "turned out to be sewers of profanity" (Apcar, personal

communication, April 8, 2005). Here, we witness the traditional paternalistic role that

journalism has long taken it upon itself to confer onto society.

Indeed, the mission does not change so much as the delivery vessel, wrote

Suzanne Levinson, the managing editor of the Miami Herald.com:

> Our mission is to be THE source of news and information online for our local
>
> market... and that generally translates into local breaking news. We work as a
>
> team to make sure you can get your local news and info from *The Miami Herald* -
>
> - whether in print or online or on the radio or in your email or now even on your

cell phone with our new SMS feed. (Levinson, personal communication, March

28, 2005)

To Juan Ortega, a copy editor for Florida Today and the *Pensacola News Journal*, the

Web site could be a database of sorts for major events like Hurricane Ivan – which the

editors called "community journalism… made possible only by technology" on its site

(Ortega, 2004). Consider that when the NYTimes.com was considering whether to run a

blog during the 2004 presidential campaign, it settled on essentially updating a print-

concept called "Political Points." About this decision Apcar from the NYTimes.com

wrote:

> I wanted something that was reported from the news staff, not an opinion vehicle;
>
> I wanted something that was edited by the newsroom, not something that was just
>
> dashed off and published on a Web page; and I wanted something that in time I
>
> felt would give people a concise and authoritative read on campaign coverage and
>
> on campaign developments. (Dube, 2004b)

Note, please, his employ of "authoritative read" as purpose and his pointing out that

Times on the Trail, the blog, was not only produced by "news staff" but also "edited."

Indeed, the traditional mission of journalism lives online – at least in concept.

But begin talking about story conception, and it is obvious that these missions

have – if not completely shifted – expanded to make room for the technological realms

the Internet offers. As the editors talked, it became quite clear that a battle over identity

was being fought: Would this new journalism be more of a service or a product? Will it

be at the beck and call of the print newsroom or begin to take on its own dynamics, with

dare they even suggest it, its own staff with their own job description and a new purpose?

New terminology pervaded their discussions: experience, senses, total package,

flexibility, personalization, translation, richness, layers, fun, play, platform, community

building (as opposed to community knowledge). The limitations on storytelling inhibit

the mission of journalism in print, said Washingtonpost.com's Tom Kennedy (personal

communication, March 8, 2005). And even though he stated in an email interview that his

mission is "to produce content that meshes with stories being received from the

Washington Post newspaper," he expounded in a question and answer with

CyberJournalist.net: "I don't want to be bound by those strictures… For most print

products, there's such a force of institutional history that it's very difficult to allow for

new possibilities. [At washingtonpost.com] virtually everything is new and fresh so

there's more of an 'aha' moment when you start to see good stuff" (Willis, 2003). The

editors repeated this mantra over and over: They feel a certain freedom of purpose, a

breakaway from formulaic storytelling to "experiment" and "explore." The

NYTimes.com science writer, Andrew Revkin, noted that his goal was to "translate

reporters' work into richer presentations" (Dube, 2004). The online journalist's new job

is to "give readers a sense of a journey," wrote Ben Arnoldy, a news producer for *The

Christian Science Monitor*'s Web site. "It's much harder to have that kind of experience

in a newspaper or on television" (Dube, 2003). And finally, from a multimedia producer

at NYTimes.com, this statement, "I look at what I do as a whole other thing apart from

traditional journalism" (Nathaniel, personal communication, March 24, 2005).

So then are what the multimedia producers for the online sites different in practice

from what their editors are thinking conceptually? Reporters think about stories

differently, according to these editors; the purpose focuses on bringing an experience to

the audience member, an emotive experience, a holistic experience, not just news. News

online operates under a more broadcast-like objective with a 24-7 cycle (Apcar, Brady).

Some editors even likened it to television and radio (Brannon, Nathaniel); Brannon

referred to USAToday.com video as B-roll from the Associated Press, for example. But it

is also about extending the journalism institution – i.e. the brand of the publication – into

cyberspace, beyond the physical geographic boundaries as well as the time limitations of

a newspaper.

**The Process (procedures and routines of an institution):**

News media has garnered the authority of a political institution in part because of

its standardized routines and procedures that are pervasive throughout the news industry

(Cook, 1998). As discussed in the literature review, traditional routines meant reporting a

story using the age-old acknowledged officials, writing with well established formulas of

the inverted pyramid, using tried-and-true humanity themes from our culture (e.g. Gans'

pastoralism and individualism, 1979) and then editing by content editors followed by

copy editors. The result tended to set the agenda for society (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Online news desks borrow heavily from print resources, as well as from wire copy; but

more and more the process centers on the technology available. In general, text and

photos with cutlines on the Web are still edited numerous times by content editors.

Stories bound for the Web are still rewritten, and information credits still appear on

graphics.

But, the more technological the element becomes, the more technological the

process considerations: There is less content editing and more technological editing;

more often the information credited sources are the media partners; the motivation

becomes not who to source for the story conceptually, but how to get the story

technologically. Discussion forums were likened to talk radio (Feaver, personal

communication, March 8, 2005), video to broadcast news (Brannon, personal

communication, April 6, 2005) – neither one receives any content editing according to

traditional standards (with the exception of the Washingtonpost.com). Most of the sites

have developed media partners for streaming radio and video (note for example the

recent rush for media companies to buy up online news sites), or make heavy use of the

wire feeds such as the Associated Press video, and editors said they rely on these partners

to have done the necessary vetting process – an interesting point considering that such

partners are rarely traditional journalists trained to practice in institutional manners).

Even that NYTimes.com blog Times on the Trail linked to offsite competitors, with

Apcar arguing that "We knew from the beginning that it was required in this kind of a

page. We knew that there is plenty of other very good reporting out there. And we knew

that to have credibility with the reader we couldn't just say, well, here's what The Times

is reporting and ignore everybody else" (Dube, 2004b). Such a paradigm shift for an

institution like *The New York Times*, which had hitherto been loathe to acknowledge

competitors, is noteworthy and represents an opening of that institutional castle.

Multimedia produced by online staff tends to consume the resources of two to three

people, who are more technicians than journalists. All of it is continuously updated – a

key component to online content. "We're changing the trajectory of news production,"

said the New York Times on the Web executive editor. "We are 24-7 now, a continuous

news desk." This has implications for staffing (Washingtonpost.com has a team of 12

multimedia reporters alone), and also for copy procedures (as well as on budgets, but that's a subject for another paper).

The processes will continue to adapt to the new *technology*, suggested Doug Feaver, former executive editor of Washingtonpost.com: "The Gutenberg press was new technology in its time. You have to learn how to use new technology, and it always changes the way you do things and the things you can do and usually takes several years or even decades to figure out" (Feaver, personal communication, March 8, 2005). Online, the journalist must begin slipping into "nodes of thinking" that bring the "user to the next level" (Brannon, personal communication, April 6, 2005). . For example, USAToday.com's audio reporter recorded people's reactions to the pope dying in April 2005 simply because he could (Brannon, personal communication, April 6, 2005). This means learning new-world skills such as multimedia story concepts combined with software and Internet coding abilities, she added, while remembering old-world standards of accuracy. In some cases, the online reporters are subject to even higher standards: Cairo from Spain's largest newspaper, *El Mundo*, noted that in a multimedia world of graphics, producers like him need a much more detailed picture of what happened than a print reporter. For example, a reporter writing about the March 11 train bombs in Spain could say in the news article that the bombs were placed in a bag or the terrorists came to the station in a vehicle, but the online producer must know what that bag or vehicle looked like (was it a backpack or a satchel? A truck or a car?) in order to be able to draw it and still stay true to the truth (Cairo, personal communication, April 8, 2005).

Nathaniel argued that whereas before reporters filed a story and went home, today "we have asked them to do more, to think about a little different story, one that will give

them a broader audience, and it's a bit more extra work" (Nathaniel, personal

communication, March 24, 2005). Nathaniel, trained as a print journalist, spends his time

as a partner to Nicholas Kristoff, columnist for *The New York Times*, pairing all of the

columns with multimedia video, audio and interactive graphics. After one trip to

Zimbabwe, Nathaniel was charged with paring down 10 40-minutes video tapes into 2.5

minutes for the Website, "so lots of stuff gets tossed," he said. Gatekeeping – that is, the

art of deciding what is newsworthy – then, remains a central component to these routines.

And yet, Nathaniel makes it clear that Kristoff's story will now take on three or four

different directions and angles, where before it relayed merely one, textual perspective

(personal communication, March 24, 2005). This is equivalent to delivery of the basic

message – perhaps now even multiple messages – in 3-D, he said.

These editors now talk of "retrofitting" print copy to the online world, and have

redefined the "total package" to mean not just multiple stories and photos and graphics in

the traditional sense but added archiving and interactivity and multimedia into the

package (Revkin in Dube, 2004a). Instead they talk about "assets in their arsenal"

(Brannon, personal communication, April 6). "Now we are trying to make more instant

coverage and add a component of interactivity, so that you can go backwards or sideways

if you want (as a reader)" (Nathaniel, personal communication, March 24, 2005).

These changes, however, come from within the existing knowledge of media that

arrived with convergence years ago. Now media channels are sharing skills, and print

reporters are being called on to understand multiple media technologies from within the

existing journalistic paradigm. It is the limitations of the technology that is holding back

the storytelling nodes of thinking from being realized: "In an ideal world, it should be

like your heart beating; it should be there just innately," Brannon (personal

communication, April 6, 2005) said. "But there are so many tools that are interfering with

the heartbeat, and it is another level of project management just getting all the pieces to

work together." For example, she and the other online editors at USAToday.com had

argued that for the pope it would have been much more comprehensive to have

USAToday reporters from around the globe get audio and video of people reacting to his

death in April 2005 (rather than just the audio reporter in D.C.) but the reporters had

neither the equipment on hand or the skills to compose the story using such technology.

Nevertheless, the opening of what had hitherto been fixed rules and procedures is

also making room for alternative journalists, even as the traditional reporters struggle to

understand the new ways of thinking about their jobs.

**Relationships (the role of the audience in journalistic authority):**

News media retain authority because they "preside over a societal sector,"

according to Cook (1998) – evoking the image of an omniscient being looking down

upon the public below. (See Figure 1a.) Until now that sender-receiver model allowed

only limited feedback from the audience and thereby perpetuated the dominance of

journalistic authority to relate the day's happenings through its coding of source

interviews and investigative reporting.

Online, readers are being invited into this process. Editors claim gatekeeping is

diminished as they let "readers into the door more," said Nathaniel. Another said, "the

audience is becoming part of the presentation" (Dube, personal communication, April 8,

2005). Multimedia and interactivity are a chance for people to "explore their personal

spaces," said Brannon. "We're a partner with the public now," said Brady. Editors report

that they want to connect audience directly with the power elite, said Apcar: "we're a

switch connecting both sides." Let us consider the role shifts implicit in these comments

from Tom Kennedy of the Washingtonpost.com (though he is careful to clarify that he is

speaking as an individual and not a representative of the company, per se):

> Journalism is now a dialogue rather than a monologue. Readers have a much
>
> easier time participating in such a dialogue on the Internet because of the
>
> interactive nature of Internet communication and its instanteousness. I think
>
> individuals in a democracy have a right to expect that journalism is a force for
>
> social good and another check and balance on the excesses of government or
>
> other major institutions in society … To that end, I welcome the curiosity of our
>
> readers/viewers and believe we can use their questions and concerns as fuel to
>
> augment our own curiosity and instincts about the things that need to be covered
>
> as topics on an ongoing/daily basis. (Kennedy, personal communication, March 8,
>
> 2005)

He added that such communication is much harder with print entities simply because of

the lag times involved with publication, as well as the fact that most newspapers circulate

in a limited geographical area. Therefore, only those who would actually see the print

product could interact with newsroom personnel usually by letters or phone calls.

> With the Internet, communication can be instantaneous or at least very rapid with
>
> e-mail, and the whole world is potentially one's audience. This enables much
>
> more input from a variety of sources and that enriches the cultural viewpoints that
>
> potentially shape awareness in any newsroom, assuming the newsroom is inclined

to embrace a certain level of introspection in response to those inputs. (Kennedy,

personal communication, March 8, 2005)

The use of the word "dialogue" describes this illustration he later made to

CyberJournalist.net: "For example, I'm telling you a story about what I've witnessed, and

you can tell me what that means to you. Then other people can pick up on that dialogue

and get something out of that and contribute their own piece. Pretty soon, it's going back

to the culture of storytelling that existed at the dawn of time" (Willis, 2003). In other

words, journalists and audience interact on the same level, as co-communicators who

together negotiate the meaning of the news.

The story becomes personalized in several senses: one, the reporter shares his or

her personal experience; two, the audience may interact with the content enough to

customize the news for individual consumption and three, audience may influence news

production.

First, the Web's informality has created a new expectation of journalistic

personalization. For example, during the Iraq War Ben Arnoldy of csmoinitor.com

(Dube, 2003) embedded with the American troops and wrote a blog utilizing both

multimedia and interactivity. Rather than to inform people back home about the

happenings over there, his job, he told CyberJournalist.net, was to take readers with him:

"we tried to play to this strength by having me write in the first person in the beginning to

create a trusted narrator or guide. As time went on, I wrote less in the first person, but I

always tried to write descriptively about the places and people so that readers would

continue to feel like fellow travelers" (Dube, 2003). His blog contained his own dialogue

with troops, photos of himself during his voyages, as well as personal accounts about his

wife and feelings and perceptions of the events going on around him. Revkin at *The New York Times* likes how slide shows and video allow the reader to understand a little bit what it's like to be a journalist (Dube, 2004). The idea takes apart the notion that there is a rigid institution at all, for when the purveyors of the news become part of the news itself, then the loss of objectivity corresponds to a loss of  power as this anonymous, dominate institution that bestows facts. Now readers have got a friend on the inside, so to speak, and pretty soon, the inside doesn't seem so "inside" any more because the public can see its underbelly.

Two, customization is the name of the game. For USAToday.com, the lure of multimedia is to allow readers to hear "the pathos of people mourning. It is a palpable emotive experience with a story that evokes a totally different understanding," Brannon said (personal communication, April 6, 2005). She spoke of how one person is touched by the screaming of the sirens in an audio feature, while another grasps an understanding through a compelling photo, and still another can learn through an interactive graphic – perhaps all on the same news topic. Cairo from *El Mundo* (personal communication, April 8, 2005) used words like "play" and "involve" in his descriptions of reader-journalist interaction with his interactive graphics. At MSNBC.com, the audience is a part of the presentation now, said Dube (personal communication, April 8, 2005), and readers can, for example, come to the site and experience what it feels like to be a baggage claim attendant in a game designed to demonstrate the difficulty in securing the nation's airports by watching a 3-D conveyor belt with x-ray machine pass swiftly with luggage contents. Audio of complaining passengers and bossy co-workers is meant to enrich the experience, which is scored. Apcar talked about catering to special interest

audiences with specifically targeted interactive graphics or video, for those readers who

want to learn more (personal communication, April 8, 2005). Indeed, it is evident through

their concepts of these new receivership roles that there is no longer an amorphous mass

audience that they are trying to reach, but distinctive individuals with variable content

selections.

Finally, both of these two personalization trends means a new give-and-take

between press and public that did not exist in a formidable and strict sender-to-receiver

model. Brady from the Washingtonpost.com mentioned – startlingly – that he is

interesting in developing a sort of "citizen media:" "we're trying to cover 10-12 counties

and we can't be everywhere at once and so to try to get folks to go and report back in,

well, it is a culture shift but one we are willing to look at" (Brady, personal

communication, April 8, 2005). Reader feedback caused *Times* columnist Nicholas

Kristoff to go back into Sudan, for example, to report on the atrocities there, and to seek

out particular sources and people who could exemplify the story through media other

than mere text (Nathaniel, personal communication, March 24, 2005). Joe Territo of

nj.com with New House Co. acknowledged that users' clicking on a particular story will

cause the editorial staff to keep that story up longer than normal to keep interest, or

suggest to them the topic for a discussion forum: "We follow the users. What they want,

we can give them like in no other medium" (personal communication, April 8, 2005).

Finally we go back to Kennedy, whose personal communication (March 8, 2005)

demonstrated a more cautious tone to this audience role shift:

Our relevance to an audience depends on our ability to surface information that

maps to the concerns of their lives and our ability to deliver such information in

forms and with timeliness critical to their concerns… Such journalism flows from

the expertise of journalists and the commitment of news organizations to allow

such work to be done. The public has a right to expect and demand that kind of

performance. Additionally, some topics need further scrutiny on a local level and

they may only be initially surfaced as a topic for journalistic inquiry by citizen

participation and pushing. That too can be valuable to a news organization.

Kennedy is making a couple points here: 1) He is re-enforcing the sender to receiver

model of journalism by emphasizing the authoritative gatekeeping role of the journalists,

but 2) now citizens can "push" back on that traditional information model, and even

participate. He makes it clear that there remains a hierarchal understanding, that what is

happening on the audience end *depends* only on the good will of the news organization

(i.e. whether that company recognizes the value in citizen feedback). And yet he

acknowledges that more and more "users' action" can "help drive what we are doing…

People are choosing to interact with each other in a certain way that might be different

from the ways in which they would have otherwise interacted in the past. It's

personalized but not directly personal" (Willis, 2003). The very fact that there is an

audience role (as different from mere decoders) shifts the nature of gatekeeping concept

toward a gateway concept. If journalists are sharing its institutional space with the

audience, then the audience now also shares institutional authority in some capacity.

*Discussion and conclusion*

Journalism is entering a new news paradigm, contended MSNBC's Dube, but

perhaps not quite yet. Technological limitations constrict all these editors, as does the

skill set of their print reporters – who must be a part of the transformation into these new

nodes of thinking, in Brannon's words. All the editors still talk about authority and

traditional standards and gatekeeping, as they maintain that their mission priority is to

provide support for the print newspaper. But, their comments show they are already

thinking in terms of technological attributes of the Web and the possibilities that

journalism might be able to turn from a strict product – a result of Shannon & Weaver's

(1949) linear sender-receiver model of communication – to an enhanced service that

includes the branded product. These editors reported that they see that service eventually

becoming a "platform" – a much different concept than an "institution." They see their

mission as eventually providing a "switch" – one that goes back and forth – between

individuals, the journalists and the news sources; this notion implies a sharing of

authoritative space, so to speak.

See Figures 1 and 2 for a rather rudimentary illustrative model of these concepts.

In the first figure, the concept of traditional journalism as a formidable institution reigns

in a very top-down version of gatekeeping, while online, the news media are reduced to

more of a support beam for news, which is a negotiated process between sources,

journalists and audience members. In this new model, authority, like the message itself, is

shared and not dictated. Figure 2 merely details the perversion of the Shannon & Weaver

linear model (1949) in an online journalism setting. Each member of the tripartite circle

encodes and decodes based upon the others' encoding and decoding. Of course, such a

model would need much further thought and scrutiny to be useful for any kind of new

journalism institutional theory, but its implications are already reverberating in terms of

the impact such technology could mean for society's disseminated knowledge.

The significance lay in part in how the editors discuss what the technology can do for people's hitherto stagnant and fixed time and place boundaries. "Internet time" was mentioned several times as something simultaneously faster and more immediate but also as more "real" than the traditional daily cycle of newspapers whose process first entails multiple translations (encodings) before it gets to the audience interpretation (decodings). Online, time morphs into "speed," and can be compressed through user manipulation of video and audio; or, it can be suspended in a panoramic shot with streaming audio; or, it can be extended by the ability to display the trajectory of a story from a start years ago to the end today; or, it can become nonlinear with backwards and forwards interaction instruments. Furthermore, such multimedia combined with interactivity allows an omnipresent audience, suggested Territo (personal communication, April 8, 2005), allowing editors to in turn change content as a direct result of audience (individual reader) influence. Online journalism, Brady added (personal communication, April 8. 2005), is in an "evolution" that is "moving past" traditional concepts – a notion of time in a more macro sense.

"Internet space" replaces "place," which implies that something fixed occupies a specific location. Online journalism allows users to "move beyond" (Brady), "go to the next level" (Brannon), "come in the door" of the story (Nathaniel), and "get an intimate view" (Revkin). Stories are "fluid," meaning that they no longer are anchored to one formula; they do not stay still online (Brannon). In a more micro concept of the term, space refers to physical place in that the online world of a slide show brings a user to the geography of the story (Nathaniel). Yet the nature of the reality is such that it is still only space (i.e. cyberspace, a sort of "Third Nature" to use Matheson's 2004 term); the

physical "place" itself turns into something purely virtual – much different from the

tangible material world of newsprint. Public and private spheres are blurred, social arenas

"restructured", and definitions of place merged in new media, contends Meyrowitz

(1985). Apcar conceived of the NYTimes.com future as this: "We are moving to a place

where we invite readers to come to us and engage in that discussion in our space"

(personal communication, April 8, 2005).

Journalistic authority in terms of its institutional cache cannot help but become

diluted as it makes room for such expansions of time and space boundaries – boundaries

that others can now manipulate. Ultimately, these online editors and producers

understand their product as becoming something of the ultimate shared public sphere

upon which can rest democracy in a more interactive realm in the hopes that being able to

*experience* the news in various media and *interact* with it, people will *participate in* the

so-called marketplace of ideas. Yet we must listen to the echoes of similar hoped-for

results from new media in days long gone, from the telegraph to the television. Though

each medium certainly evolved society's communication system, each also failed to bring

about the utopian democracy (Marvin, 1998). Meyrowitz (1985) notes how each medium

altered traditional authority of distant leaders because of new abilities to see and hear –

and now even interact – with these leaders in the new channels, but that this has meant a

new call for local control and a desire for decentralization, which is not necessarily

conducive to a vibrant democracy either. The Internet certainly possesses the possibility

to revolutionize the existing news institution, nevertheless, and the potential to become a

gateway (as opposed to gatekeeper) for reality knowledge – but only in time.

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### *Appendix*

The following interviews were conducted on the telephone, in person, via email, or were gleaned from direct question and answer columns in CyberJournalist.net (which are more fully referenced in the bibliography):

1) NYTimes.com:

   ■ Len Apcar, executive editor of NYTimes.com (in-person interview, April 8, 2005; conference talk, International Symposium for Online Journalism, April 8, 2005; CyberJournalist.net Q&A, February 12, 2004)

   ■ Naka Nathaniel, multimedia producer (phone interview, March 24, 2005)

   ■ Andrew Revkin, multimedia science producer (CyberJournalist.net Q&A, January 23, 2004)

2) Washingtonpost.com

   ■ Jim Brady, executive editor of Washingtonpost.com (conference talk, International Symposium for Online Journalism, April 8, 2005)

   ■ Tom Kennedy, managing editor of Washingtonpost.com (e-mail interview, March 8, 2005; CyberJournalist.net Q&A, March 6, 2003)

   ■ Doug Feaver, former executive editor of Washingtonpost.com (e-mail interview, March 8, 2005)

3) USAToday.com

   ■ Jody Brannon, managing editor of USAToday.com (phone interview, April 6, 2005)

4) Miami Herald

- Suzanne Levinson, managing editor of miamiherald.com (email interview, March 28, 2005)

5) New House Company and nj.com

- Joe Territo, director of content development for nj.com (in-person interview, April 9, 2005)

6) El Mundo (Spain)

- Alberto Cairo, head of elmundo.ed Interactive Graphics Department (conference talk, International Symposium for Online Journalism, April 8, 2005)

7) Christian Science Monitor

- Ben Arnoldy, csmonitor.com news producer (CyberJournalist.net Q&A, October 17, 2002 and May 6, 2003)

8) Pensacola News and FLORIDA TODAY

- Juan Ortega, copy editor for FLORIDA TODAY (CyberJournalist.net Q&A, September 28, 2004).

9) Sun-Sentinel in Florida

- Donna Pazdera, reporter/producer (CyberJournalist.net Q&A, November 16, 2002)

10) MSNBC.com

- Jonathan Dube, managing producer of msnbc.com and editor of CyberJournalist.net (conference talk, International Symposium for Online Journalism, April 8, 2005).