



Learning to Love the (Shallow, Divisive, Unreliable) New Media

EVERYONE FROM PRESIDENT OBAMA TO TED KOPPEL IS BEMOANING A DECLINE IN JOURNALISTIC SUBSTANCE, SERIOUSNESS, AND SENSE OF PROPORTION. BUT THE AUTHOR, A LONGTIME ADVOCATE OF THESE VALUES, TAKES A JOURNEY THROUGH THE DIGITAL-MEDIA WORLD AND CONCLUDES THERE ISN'T ANY POINT IN DEFENDING THE OLD WAYS. CONSUMER-OBSSESSED, SENSATIONALIST, AND PASSIONATE ABOUT THEIR WORK, DIGITAL UPSTARTS ARE UNDERMINING THE OLD MEDIA—AND THEY MAY ALSO BE POINTING THE WAY TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE.

By James Fallows



IMAGE CREDIT: JESSE LENZ

JUST AFTER LAST fall's midterm elections, Ted Koppel, for 25 years the face of *Nightline* on ABC,

wrote in *The Washington Post* about journalism's modern decline. "Much of the American public used to gather before the electronic hearth every evening," Koppel wrote, referring to an era that ran through roughly the 1980s,

while Walter Cronkite, Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, Frank Reynolds and Howard K. Smith offered relatively unbiased accounts of information that their respective news organizations believed the public needed to know ... It was an imperfect, untidy little Eden of journalism where reporters were motivated to gather facts about important issues. We didn't know that we could become profit centers. No one had bitten into that apple yet.

The column was called "The Case Against News We Can Choose," and it said that the shift toward a more market-minded, profit-driven journalism was both irreversible and destructive. "The need for clear, objective reporting in a world of rising religious fundamentalism, economic interdependence and global ecological problems is probably greater than it has ever been," Koppel said. But we were less likely than before to get the fair, steady view we need, because "we are no longer a national audience receiving news from a handful of trusted gatekeepers; we're now a million or more clusters of consumers, harvesting information from like-minded providers."

Anyone who has read, watched, or listened to the news has an idea of what Koppel is worried about. The election cycle just behind us was dominated by very bitter views and accusations, on issues likely to matter very little in the long run. Candidates denounced "the deficit" without seriously proposing to do anything about it. "The question of how the US should tackle its mounting national debt has been relegated to a bunch of Punch and Judy bumper stickers that bear as little relation to its fiscal reality as astrology does to astronomy," a *Financial Times* analyst wrote on the day before the election. "The same applies to infrastructure, education, immigration—pretty much anything that touches on America's future competitiveness." The same as well for the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; nuclear threats from North Korea or Iran; world trends in food and energy. Elections are how we face big issues, except when we can't.

Just before the midterm elections, Barack Obama answered questions from students at George Washington University and made a point like Koppel's. After a young man asked Obama what had surprised him about the actual work of being president, Obama said wryly, "Where do I start?" Then he started with the dysfunction of the modern press.

I've been surprised by how the news cycle here in Washington is focused on what happens *this minute*. Sometimes it's difficult to keep everybody focused on the long term. The things that are really going to matter in terms of America's success 20 years from now, when we look back, are not the things that are being talked about on television on any given day.

Embedded in complaints like these is a series of related concerns: that the media are doing a worse job than they used to, that their failures make it harder for the country as a whole and for individuals trying to understand the world to do business and make sensible decisions—and that all these trends are only going to get worse.

Also see:

Why Americans Hate the Media

(February 1996)

Why has the media establishment become so unpopular? Perhaps the public has good reason to think that the media's self-aggrandizement gets in the way of solving the country's real problems. By James Fallows

Massless Media

(January/February 2005)

With the mass media losing their audience to smaller, more targeted outlets, we may be headed for an era of noisy, contentious press reminiscent of the 1800s. By William Powers

End Times

(January/February 2009)

Can America's paper of record survive the death of newsprint? Can journalism? By Michael Hirschorn

Journalism and Morality

(September 1926)

Confessions of a yellow journalist: "Not defensively, but that the record may be straight, let me say that I did very little faking, although there was no special prejudice against it, so long as the fake wasn't libelous." By Silas Bent

I am an easy target for this sort of message. Fifteen years ago, I published a book, *Breaking the News*, which argued that a relentless focus on scandal, spectacle, and the "game" of politics was driving citizens away from public affairs, making it harder for even the least cynical politicians to do an effective job, and at the same time steadily eroding our public ability to assess what is happening and decide how to respond. And this was in an era that in retrospect seems innocent. The big, fatherly anchor figures—Brokaw, Jennings, Rather—were still on the evening news shows. Newspapers were mildly concerned about falling circulation rather than in an all-out panic about imminent collapse. Fox News Channel had yet to begin operations, and Craigslist had just started up. To serve the public and to remain in operation, I argued, the news industry had to re-embrace its special role as a business that was not just about business. Journalists should commit themselves to the challenge of making what matters interesting, and resist the slide into the infotainment age. How quaint it all looks now!

But, as I was reminded when I recently talked to people in the news business, historians, political scientists, and others about the current predicament of the news, every previous era looks innocent. Those talks changed my mind about what the press should do next. I haven't changed my mind about the dysfunction of American public life; as I argued a year ago in these pages ("[How America Can Rise Again](#)," January/February 2010), most things look promising for America—except our ability to face and solve big problems through our political system. But I no longer think it's worth arguing whether journalism is getting "worse." The fond retrospective view offered by Koppel and others is highly selective, as Koppel himself admits in his article. I now think it's worth facing the inevitability of the shift to infotainment and seeing how we can make the best of it. To show why, let's visit Gawker.

NICK DENTON, THE FOUNDER, owner, and CEO of the dozen or so Web sites that make up Gawker Media, revels in his role as the unembarrassable and highly publicized bad boy of today's New York

media scene. Twice in less than four years, *New York* magazine has run lengthy features about him and his latest offense against good taste. During last fall's midterm election campaign, Gawker paid a 25-year-old man from Philadelphia, whom it left unnamed, for 15 photos from a one-night stand (unconsummated) he had had three years earlier with Christine O'Donnell, who was running for the U.S. Senate in Delaware and was best known for her "I'm Not a Witch" ad campaign. Gawker posted the pictures with the headline "I Had a One-Night Stand With Christine O'Donnell." Everything about Gawker's choices in that case violated normal journalistic ethics, from paying a source to spotlighting material with a lot of titillation value and only the faintest possible claim to being "relevant" in public-interest terms. But Denton told me that his only regret was bothering to justify the decision. A follow-up post, signed by "The Staff of Gawker.com," said that O'Donnell's pro-abstinence, anti-masturbation campaign made her fair game:

She lies about who she is; she tells that lie in service of an attempt to impose her private sexual values on her fellow citizens; and she's running for Senate. We thought information documenting that lie—that O'Donnell does *not* live a chaste life as she defines the word, and in fact hops into bed, naked and drunk, with men that she's just met—was of interest to our readers.

"I don't believe we should have done that defense," Denton told me when I spoke with him at Gawker HQ on Elizabeth Street in Lower Manhattan early this year. "It's helpful when someone is a hypocrite, but we should have just said that our interest is voyeuristic. 'We did this story because we thought you would like it. We thought it was funny, so we thought you'd think it was funny, too.' And there was a tidal wave of traffic and attention."

In his mid-40s, tall and louche, Denton was unshaven and wearing jeans and an untucked shirt when I visited him in an open-plan office filled with people half his age (I in corduroys and blue blazer over a V-neck sweater and Jos. A. Bank shirt, personification of Mr. Square). I had known and liked him in an earlier incarnation, when we were both based in San Francisco and he had started an early news aggregator called Moreover Technologies. And I am interested in him as a pure type. He combines a familiar figure, the Fleet Street rogue (he grew up in London and went to Oxford) willing to tart up and shake up stuffy American newsrooms, with something entirely new: the most refined tools ever created for knowing exactly what an audience wants to see and read, as opposed to someone's opinion of what it should want or "needs" to know. Denton's shtick is to be outrageously impolitic. ("What annoys me about the U.S. media? Generally the pompous liberals. I suppose they're useful, but they're such losers, with their endless hand-wringing. They don't know how to fight.") His enterprises, and his rationale for them, present a distillation of the model toward which the news business is trending.

Gawker Headquarters



Landon Nordeman

Full Screen





A Gawker employee watches the board that displays every site's homepage.

SLIDESHOW: Inside the nerve center of Nick Denton's media empire.

Giving people what they want as opposed to what they should want is a conflict as old as journalism, certainly as it has been practiced in this country. My capsule history of journalism is that for more than a century after the Civil War, American readers and viewers were in various ways buffered from getting exactly what they *wanted* from newspapers and, later, radio and TV news shows. News, like education, aspired to be as interesting as possible but to have an uplifting civic intent.

Regulations, from the “fairness doctrine” to a requirement for “public service” programming, affected radio and TV coverage. And technological and geographic constraints had already played a crucial role in the evolution of newspapers, many of which could operate as regional monopolies or duopolies. You couldn’t get the New York papers if you lived in Dallas, so the *Morning News* and *Times Herald* had the whole of Dallas as their audience. Like their counterparts in Atlanta, Los Angeles, or Minneapolis, the families who owned these newspapers valued them not just as (good) businesses but also for their cultural and political roles. When there were only three nationwide broadcast networks, they could have a statesmanlike agreement on covering worthy events, like presidential press conferences, and treating their nightly news shows as prestige loss-leaders aimed at telling a broad Middle American audience what it needed to know. “I grew up when broadcast news was a duopoly,” the longtime anchor Tom Brokaw told me, referring to the relative dominance of CBS and his own NBC over ABC news until at least the early 1980s. “I figured I would be one of the people with the hands on the lever in deciding what mattered. It worked for me!”

That’s all gone, as Brokaw and everyone else knows. One by one, the buffers between what people want and what the media can afford to deliver have been stripped away. Broadcast TV was deregulated, and cable and satellite TV arose in a wholly post-regulation era. As newspapers fell during the rise of the Internet, and fell faster because of the 2008 recession, the regional papers fell hardest. The survivors, from *The New York Times* to the *National Enquirer*, will be what British newspapers have long been: nationwide in distribution, and differentiated by politics and class. The destruction of the “bundled” business model for newspapers, which allowed ads in the Auto section to underwrite a bureau in Baghdad; the rise of increasingly targeted and niche-ified information sources and advertising vehicles; and the consequent pressure on almost any mass offering except for sports—all of these are steps toward a perfected market for information of all sorts, including news. With each passing month, people can get more of what they want and less of what someone else thinks they should have.

Every news organization recognizes this shift. For instance, a strategy document leaked from AOL just before its acquisition of the Huffington Post said that its route toward survival was to drive the average cost per unit of content down to \$84 (from the current \$99) and use “search engine optimization” and other techniques to attract an average of 7,000 page views per item, up from the current 1,500. *The Atlantic* is now profitable in part because traffic on our Web site is so strong. Everyone involved in the

site understands the tricks and trade-offs that can increase clicks and raise the chances of a breakout “viral” Web success. Kittens, slide shows, videos, Sarah Palin—these are a few. For us and for other publications, they are complications. For Gawker, they’re all that is.

The first thing you see on entering Gawker’s loft-size open work area is a huge screen that looks like a nicer, higher-def version of what you might see in a brokerage house. The top part of the screen shows live views of the home pages of the main Gawker properties—Gizmodo, Jezebel, Lifehacker, Deadspin, Gawker itself, and others (excluding Gawker’s sex-oriented site, Fleshbot, which accounts for about 5 percent of the company’s total traffic). Together, according to Denton, the sites bring in some 32 million unique visitors worldwide a month, about the same as *The New York Times* and twice as many as *The Washington Post*. Meters display the second-by-second traffic to each site. As users log on to a site, and leave, the needles on the meters go up and down to register its popularity. The bottom part of the screen lists specific stories from each of the Gawker Media sites and across the company as a whole, ranked by how many people are viewing them at each moment—and those numbers are listed. As you watch, the stories switch places on the screen, each with a green arrow if it’s trending up or a red arrow if it’s heading down. When I arrived, “Your Horoscope May Have Changed” still led the chart for all sites but was heading down, while “The Horrible Life of a Disney Employee” was in second place and on the way up. “Loose Rat in New York City Subway Car Crawls on Man’s Face,” with a 26-second amateur video of exactly that, was the lead item on Gawker.tv, and “The Greatest Scam in Tech,” from Gizmodo, was the most popular technology item. (It was about a “free” mobile-phone service called PeepApp.) “The Hilarious Agony of Watching a Computer Illiterate” was in second place among tech items. Two weeks after my visit, as I write this story, “How Good Is Charlie Sheen for a Porn Star’s Career?” is No. 1.

I saw more screens as I walked into the central work space, where more than 50 young writers sat side by side at their computers, as if in a coffee shop, at three big tables that ran the length of the room. “How much do the writers think about the rankings?” I asked Denton after saying hello. “Let’s ask them!” he said, and we went to the back corner of the room where Gawker.com’s writers worked.

“I usually just check the board when I walk by,” Brian Moylan said. “You have an idea of what’s going to be big and what’s not.” He and his colleagues agreed that a story’s popularity could be predicted—but only to a certain degree. “You can’t get a big one every day,” he added. His strategy: “I just try to figure out, if I were to go to a party, what would everyone want to talk about? And that is what I’d want to write about.”

Across the table from him, Maureen O’Connor emphasized that every item was a crapshoot. “I feel like the biggest breakaway hits are always surprising,” she said. The day’s surprise hit was hers, about the rearranged dates for zodiac signs. “That was a smallish thing that nobody had picked up from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*,” she said. “I threw it up at the end of the day because I wanted to put up one more post.” It took off instantly. (The “reporting” that staff writers do is almost all online.) In February, O’Connor had a predictably huge hit with her article, including a shirtless picture, that led to the resignation of the “Craigslist Congressman,” Christopher Lee. “Serendipity is an important part of the operation,” Denton added. “The job of journalism is to provide surprise.”

That afternoon, Denton and his associates talked me through the other refinements they had learned in what people want—not what they say they want, nor what they “should” want, but what they choose

when they have a chance. Some might seem obvious—video everywhere, a Web site with what Denton called a “rounded personality,” meaning one that gives visitors the option of being outraged, amused, diverted, even inspired, as their moods dictate. Others were more surprising.

In the first *New York* profile, in 2007, Denton had said that an active “commenter” community was an important way to build an audience for a site. Now, he told me, he has concluded that courting commenters is a dead end. A site has to keep attracting new users—the omnipresent screens were recording the “new uniques” each story brought to the Gawker world—and an in-group of commenters might scare new visitors off. “People say it’s all about ‘engagement’ and ‘interaction,’ but that’s wrong,” he said. “New visitors are a better indicator and predictor of future growth.” A little more than one-third of Gawker’s traffic is new visitors; writers get bonuses based on how many new viewers they attract.

As for the science of Web-site headlines: “I’m against verbs,” Denton told me, even though that day’s greatest-hits list included several exceptions (“Rat Crawls ...”). “It’s almost as if you’ve got to get the whole story into the headline,” Brian Moylan said, “but leave out enough that people will want to click.” “You can kill a story by using a too-clever headline,” Maureen O’Connor said. “The public is not very forgiving of wit in headlines,” Denton added. “Or irony. You can get away with one opinionated word, if the rest is literal and clear.” O’Connor said she had a further rule: “It can’t be more than two lines on the home page. Your eyes can’t take it in. You want the dumbest headline possible!” That said, one of the most popular headlines of the previous year had been anything but obvious. It was “Эй, вы можете прочитать запрещенную статью *GQ* про Путина здесь, or, “Hey, You Can Read the Banned *GQ* Story About Putin Here,” for an item on a story about Vladimir Putin not included in *GQ* magazine’s Russian edition. John Cook, the Gawker writer who showed it to me, was emphasizing that headline writing was still as much guesswork as science.

Denton said that other journalists would compliment him on snarky items, but those didn’t bring in enough new readers. Neither did print-industry gossip, which had been Gawker’s original staple. “We put scoop ahead of satire,” by which he meant things like the O’Donnell story, photos they had just acquired that day of Mark Zuckerberg’s new house in California, and “Favregate.”

“If I were running *The New York Times*,” Denton said, “the first thing I would do is put numbers next to every story,” as Gawker does on its home page—not just include a most-e-mailed list but fully embrace the concept of giving readers more of what they want. If he felt compelled to do “good” for the world, Denton said, he would set up “offshore Gawkers” serving capitals where speech is limited, like Riyadh, Beijing, Tehran. “Zero political content—you don’t want to be seen as a ‘democracy advocate’ at all,” he said. “Just good, juicy, scurrilous gossip stories about nepotism and corruption and mistresses and Swiss bank accounts. Pictures of their houses! You would want to be seen as having wicked fun. And if you did that for 20 years ...”

Of course, Denton was omitting good-for-you, public-service-style stories for outrageous effect. In my first “interview” with him for this story, conducted over the course of nearly an hour through an instant-message exchange, he said that a market-minded approach like his would solve the business problem of journalism—but only for “a certain kind of journalism.” It worked perfectly, he said, for topics like those his sites covered: gossip, technology, sex talk, and so on. And then, as an aside: “But not the worthy topics. Nobody wants to eat the boring vegetables. Nor does anyone want to pay [via

advertising] to encourage people to eat their vegetables.” He continued:

Nick: But, anyway, look at me. I used to cover political reform in post-communist Eastern Europe, which had been my subject at Oxford.

And now I tell writers that the numbers (i.e. the audience) won't support any worthiness. We can't even write stories about moguls like Rupert Murdoch or Barry Diller unless it involves photographs of them cavorting with young flesh.

(I used to enjoy [doing] those stories in the old days, before web metrics.)

But naturally even he admits that the “worthy topics” have their necessary place, and when pressed, he had a surprisingly earnest list of ways to make sure they were covered, from local volunteer efforts to donations by philanthropists.

“I know this is scary for the high-end American journalist,” he said when I was about to leave, with as little condescension as he could manage. “If you come from the U.K., it doesn't seem alien.”

SCARY OR NOT, is this in fact worse than journalism as we have previously known it? It is tempting to conclude that the cacophony we hear now must represent a descent from previous standards. “I am sad at what feels like a decline in our public culture,” I was told by Jill Lepore, a professor of American history at Harvard and the author of the recent *The Whites of Their Eyes*, which compares today's Tea Party activists with the original Revolutionary War activists. “It feels like a personally abusive and textually violent time.” But she went on to say that it is hard to demonstrate that today's media and resulting public discussion are, in their totality, worse than before.

For instance: Ted Koppel, a direct descendant of the golden-age greats, illustrates the complexities of even journalism's “best” periods. To Jimmy Carter and senior members of his administration, Koppel's famous *Nightline* program on ABC was a dramatic example of the way media sensationalism could distort, or at least affect, public life. On November 4, 1979, exactly one year before Carter would stand for reelection, Iranian radicals seized 66 American hostages at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Within a few days, ABC had launched a nightly 11:30 p.m. special report on the crisis, which soon was called “America Held Hostage: Day 15.” Then it was “America Held Hostage: Day 100,” and the night before Americans went to the polls, “America Held Hostage: Day 365,” with Koppel anchoring the news each night.

There are many reasons Carter lost that election to Ronald Reagan; a prime interest rate of 20 percent during the spring symbolized economic problems that might have been sufficient to do him in. But “America Held Hostage” surely played a part. It was an early illustration of the way in which a choice about news coverage—namely, to offer a daily countdown of America's humiliation—converted a problem into an emergency. Koppel told me that years after the hostages were released, he met Jimmy Carter at a ceremony in Washington. “President Carter said there were two people who were better off because of the hostage situation,” Koppel told me. “The ayatollah. And me.” And all of this notwithstanding Koppel's role as one of the most serious and sophisticated broadcast journalists of his day.

The point is not to debunk the greats but to say that the noble parts of golden-age journalism were not

its only parts. The most famous play about American journalism, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *The Front Page*, is set in a courthouse press room in the 1920s, when reporters swaggered rather than cowered. But its ethics are straight from what many think of as the Gawker playbook: reporters bribe sources, editors hype whatever lurid story will draw a crowd, no one gets too haughty about the "responsibility" of the press. Richard Hofstadter's seminal works about unreason and misinformation in American public affairs, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* and *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, appeared in the early 1960s and were hardly respectful of the journalism of that time.

"From the standpoint of policy explanation, as opposed to battlefield coverage, the press did a lousy job on the two biggest foreign-policy stories of my adult life—Vietnam and Iraq—and it's doing a poor job now on Afghanistan," I was told by William Whitworth, for 20 years the editor of this magazine. As a young *New Yorker* writer in 1970, Whitworth did a celebrated 20,000-word interview with Eugene Rostow, a Johnson-administration veteran and prominent supporter of the Vietnam War, consisting of repeated requests for him to explain why, exactly, it would matter if the United States "lost" Vietnam. I had asked Whitworth whether he thought that throughout his career the media had gotten better or worse in their ability to examine, as he had done in his Rostow article, the "why" of major policy decisions, beyond the operational "how." He said it was hard to argue that newspapers and TV were overall doing a worse job than during the Korean and Vietnam wars. "What mixes the picture, obviously," he said, "is the advent of the Internet. It provides us with an unprecedented amount of poor and even fake information, but it also give us access to a wider array of good news sources and to very useful public-policy discussions you wouldn't find in newspapers or on television."

"It's not so much that American public life is more idiotic," Jill Lepore said, referring to both press coverage and the public discussion it spawns. "It's that so much more of American life is public. I think that goes a long way to explaining what seems to be a 'decline.' Everything is documented, and little of it is edited. Editing is one of the great inventions of civilization."

She added that since the 1940s, political scientists had tried to measure how well American citizens understood the basic facts and concepts of the nation and world they live in. "It actually is a constant," she said. "There is a somewhat intractable low level of basic political knowledge." When I asked Samuel Popkin, a political scientist at UC San Diego, whether changes in the media had made public discussion less rational than before, he sent back a long list of irrationalities of yesteryear. One I remembered from my youth: the taken-for-granted certainty among some far-right and far-left groups in the 1960s (including in my very conservative hometown) that Lyndon Johnson had ordered the killing of John Kennedy. One I had forgotten: Representative John Anderson of Illinois, who received nearly 6 million votes as an Independent presidential candidate against Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter in 1980, three times introduced legislation to amend the Constitution so as to recognize the "law and authority" of Jesus Christ over the United States.

While it's interesting and even useful to know whether today's journalism marks a descent from past standards, what matters more is how it suits today's needs. This depends on how media of the Gawker age, which deliver what the customers want rather than what they "should" have, handle the task of explaining the world. Of course, there will for a long time be a range of publications, all of them subject to the new market pressures but each having its own conception of its culture and the "brand," the reputation and audience it can deliver to advertisers. But existing American media operations must

become slightly if steadily more like the Gawkers of the business—we're doing it right here, at the magazine Ralph Waldo Emerson and company founded before the Civil War—and new operations will grow up knowing no other environment. Is this a change to fight?

THE NEWS BUSINESS has never been stable. Like everything else in American society, it has kept changing, often in dramatic and unforeseen ways. For instance, *Time* and *Newsweek* now seem like legacies practically from the age of the Founders, but they were the result of sudden, market-driven experimentation by young Henry Luce and his imitators in the late 1920s through the Depression years. (The market opportunity identified by Luce and his partner, Briton Haddon, as entrepreneurs fresh out of Yale: people who lived far from the big East Coast cities wanted to know more about national and world affairs than they could learn from their local papers.) National Public Radio seems just as venerable, but when Lyndon Johnson was in the White House, it did not exist. Indeed, the relative stability of big media in the golden-age decades after World War II left a misleading impression of how tumultuous the news business had been through most of America's past. The mid-1940s to the late 1970s was a time when newspapers were fat, national magazines were widely read, and TV news reports were sober and "responsible." Like the idealized sitcoms of the same era—*Father Knows Best*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *Happy Days*—they presented as normal and traditional what was in fact an exceptional moment in American existence.

As technological, commercial, and cultural changes have repeatedly transformed journalism, they have always caused problems that didn't exist before, as well as creating opportunities that often took years to be fully recognized. When I was coming into journalism, straight from graduate school, in the 1970s, one of the central complaints from media veterans was precisely that the "college boys" were taking over the business. In the generation before mine, reporters had thought of themselves as kindred to policemen and factory workers; the college grads in the business stood out, from Walter Lippmann (Harvard 1910) on down. A large-scale class shift was under way by the time of Watergate, nicely illustrated by the team of Bob Woodward (Yale '65) and Carl Bernstein (no college degree). The change was bad, in shifting journalists' social sights upward, so they identified more with the doctors and executives who were their college classmates, and less with the non-college, blue-collar Americans whose prospects were diminishing through those years. And it was good, in equipping newspapers and TV channels with writers and analysts who had studied science or economics, knew the history of Russia or the Middle East, had learned a language they could use in the field.

Similarly, the rise of TV changed all of journalism, even for those who worked in print or on the radio. It had effects that were bad, like the disproportionate emphasis on spectacles like car chases or tornadoes. And mixed, like the new importance of physical attractiveness in opening or closing career possibilities for newsmen and (especially) newswomen. And it had effects that were revolutionarily positive. For the first time in human history, people could see events taking place beyond their immediate line of sight. They could therefore envision and, perhaps, understand the world with a richness never possible before. How different would the psychic effect of the first moon landing have been if people had only read about it the next day? Or of the battlefield conditions and relentless casualties of the Vietnam War?

Unless they are different from anything the news business has yet undergone, the technological and market changes now disrupting journalism will have effects that are both good and bad. The reason to

point this out is not so we will shrug and say, “Whatever!” It is to identify the likely problems so that we can try to buffer them—and remember that we will be slow to recognize the most beneficial possible effects.

If we accept that the media will probably become more and more market-minded, and that an imposed conscience in the form of legal requirements or traditional publishing norms will probably have less and less effect, what are the results we most fear? I think there are four:

- *that this will become an age of lies, idiocy, and a complete Babel of “truthiness,” in which no trusted arbiter can establish reality or facts;*
- *that the media will fail to cover too much of what really matters, as they are drawn toward the sparkle of entertainment and away from the depressing realities of the statehouse, the African capital, the urban school system, the corporate office when corners are being cut;*
- *that the forces already pulverizing American society into component granules will grow all the stronger, as people withdraw into their own separate information spheres;*
- *and that our very ability to think, concentrate, and decide will deteriorate, as a media system optimized for attracting quick hits turns into a continual-distraction machine for society as a whole, making every individual and collective problem harder to assess and respond to.*

Our protection against these trends is partly defensive, or conservative. Economic history is working against “legacy” news organizations like the BBC, *The New York Times*, NPR, and most magazines you could name. But historical forces don’t play out on a set schedule, and can be delayed for a very long time. Economic history is also working against museums, small private colleges, and the farm-dappled French countryside, but none of them has to disappear next week. Even as it necessarily evolves, our news system will be better the longer it includes institutions whose culture and ambitions reach back to the pre-Gawker era, and it would be harder and costlier to try to re-create them after they have failed than to keep them on life support until their owners find a way to fit their values and standards into the imperatives of the new systems.

But the new culture also creates positive opportunities—as, it’s worth saying again, every previous disruption has. An odd symbol of the new possibilities is Roger Ailes, the guiding force behind Fox News since its start.

To people who are worried about journalism’s future, Ailes would seem a perverse symbol of anything positive. The “news” system he has created is correctly understood to be a political rather than a journalistic operation, and to be free of inner conflict about “getting it right” or “going too far.” (Here’s the thought-experiment test: What assertion from Glenn Beck on his broadcasts would finally lead Ailes or his producers to say, “Glenn, are you *sure*?” “Real” news operations don’t always get the right answer to that question, but asking it is how they can think of themselves as journalists rather than propagandists.) But to me, Ailes is an instructive example because of what he shows about the way discourse will be conducted in the coming journalistic era. Ailes flatly denied my request for an interview on this story, which surprised me. I have interviewed him before, with no harm to either side.

As it happens, what I wanted to ask him about was covered by Tom Junod, of *Esquire*, in a recent

profile. The core of Ailes's success, Junod says, has been not simply that Fox was more entertaining to watch than pallid CNN. It has been, in the words of Richard Wald, the former president of NBC News: "You can't beat Roger fighting on territory he's left behind." That is, Fox is doing something different from the other networks. If you say that Glenn Beck got a fact wrong, or if you point out how many of Fox's female on-air broadcasters are babes in very short skirts, Ailes's answer will be "So?" He's doing something new—as Henry Luce did with the power of photographs at *Life* in the 1930s, as Ted Koppel did when satellite connections made *Nightline* the first regular TV show to have live interviews with prominent guests from around the world.

No one knows exactly what forms the next Ailes, Luce, or Koppel will invent. But here, again, are some of the risks of whatever those forms are, along with some possibilities of heading them off in advance:

Lies and truthiness. The regular journalistic reflex is to correct error by applying fact and logic. In moot-court competition, this pays off. In much of the rest of life, it does not. On being told "You're wrong," some people will say "Thanks for the correction!" Most will say "Go to hell."

"There is actually a lot of energy released by opposing 'settled facts,'" I was told by Jay Rosen, of the journalism school at NYU. "The more 'settled' it is, the more furious the energy. When someone points out an error in what Sarah Palin has said, that becomes another example of the liberal media, and it becomes another tool for organizing."

"Liberals love to talk about the erosion of logic and the scientific method," Nick Denton said. One example he discussed: Al Gore's book about irrationality in public life, called *The Assault on Reason*, with passages like this: "The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas describes what has happened as the 'refeudalization of the public sphere.'"

"But what if the answer to a false narrative isn't fact?," Denton says. "Or Habermas? Maybe the answer to a flawed narrative is a different narrative. You change the story." Which is what, he said, Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert have done. They don't "fact-check" Fox News, or try to rebut it directly, or fight on its own terms. They change the story not by distorting reality—their strength is their reliance on fact—or creating a fictitious narrative, but by presenting the facts in a way that makes them register in a way they hadn't before.

Jaron Lanier, author of *Digital Maoism*, was blunt when I asked him about Fox's ability to assert a "truth" and have it echo through digital media. "We have created a technology that has wonderful potential, but that enormously increases our ability to lie to ourselves and forget it is a lie," he told me. "We are going to need to develop new conventions and formalities to cut through the lies." Stewart and Colbert have developed one such set of new conventions; others will emerge.

Undercovered stories. This will be a problem, as it has always been. "In a lot of different ways, the new journalism will be better than the old," Steven Waldman, a co-founder of Beliefnet who is now doing a report on the information needs of communities for the Federal Communications Commission, told me. "But there are a few important areas where that is not the case. Especially local, labor-intensive, full-time 'accountability' journalism"—what used to be called "covering City Hall."

Or, as the writer Steven Berlin Johnson, among others, has contended, local coverage could in some ways become much better, as systems arise to match "hyper-local" news—the burglary down the street, the test scores at the neighborhood school—with the audience directly affected by it. "I think in the

long run, we're going to look back at many facets of old media and realize that we were living in a desert disguised as a rain forest," Johnson said in 2009 in a speech at the South by Southwest (SXSW) festival in Austin. "There is going to be more content, not less; more information, more analysis, more precision, a wider range of niches covered." Rather than worry about a general collapse of the press, perhaps we should watch carefully for specific failures of local, statehouse, or investigative coverage, and start experimenting now with ways to correct them—through nonprofit coverage or other means that new technologies make possible.

Disconnection. American life is becoming more polarized, and this is a phenomenon bigger than whatever is happening in the media. But the separate spheres of political discussion—Hannity for some people, Maddow for others—may be less of an emergency than is often assumed. "Government is not life," Jeff Jarvis, a Time Inc. veteran and the founder of *Entertainment Weekly*, who now teaches journalism at the City University of New York, told me. "The fact that people want to ignore it is okay." In this view, the political class, fascinated by the process of campaigning and strategizing, dominates the media, imposes its obsession on the public at large, and worries when citizens don't share its passion.

"The people who are mainly interested in politics are crazy in a way," Denton told me. "Maybe I'd rather reach people whose first passion is video games, or fashion, or are retirees or young professional women. Their interest in politics is the normal interest in politics, not as the main source of rage and resentment in their lives or to the exclusion of everything else." The targeting of such communities, ever easier with social media, is not an answer to America's polarization. But it does suggest the possibility of new, complex connections that offset a stark right/left divide.

Distractedness. "If young people are awake, they are connected," Eric Schmidt, the CEO of Google, told me early this year. "When they're walking, when they're in a car, if they wake up at night, when they're in class. This is probably doing something to their brains, but we don't know what." He said that a friend who flies regularly between California and Israel deliberately changes planes in New York, even though there is a nonstop between L.A. and Tel Aviv, so he can use WiFi on the U.S. leg of the trip.

At an individual level, I think the "distracted Americans" scare will pass. Either people who manage to unplug, focus, and fully direct their attention will have an advantage over those constantly checking Facebook and their smart phone, in which case they'll earn more money, get into better colleges, start more successful companies, and win more Nobel Prizes. Or they won't, in which case distraction will be a trait of modern life but not necessarily a defect. At the level of national politics, America is badly distracted, but that problem long predates Facebook and requires more than a media solution.

IN THIS TURBULENT media environment, let's remember something we saw early this year. Television networks have been closing bureaus all around the world. Only a handful of U.S. news organizations even pretend to operate a global network of correspondents. Americans are famous for their ineptness in foreign languages. Ten years of military engagement in the Middle East has done little to increase U.S. sophistication about Islam or the Middle East.

Yet with all these reasons why the media should have failed, in fact they succeeded. A major event in world history was covered more quickly, with more nuance, involving a greater range of voices and critical perspectives, than would have been conceivable even a few years ago. Within hours of the first

protests in Egypt, American and world audiences read dispatches from professional correspondents—on Web sites, rather than waiting until the next day, as they had to during the fall of the Berlin Wall. They saw TV news footage—including Al Jazeera’s, which was carried by few U.S. broadcasters but was available on computers or mobile apps. Then the Twitter feeds from and about Egypt, the amateur YouTube videos from the streets, the commentary of contending analysts—all of it available as the story took place. We take this for granted, yet there has been nothing like it before. Even a year ago it would have been hard to imagine how thoroughly, and with what combination of media, voices, and judgments, an event in an Arab capital could have been witnessed around the world.

It is hard now to imagine the possibilities of the new media landscape, or the further problems it will create. “All these possibilities are fantasy until someone actually builds them,” Jeff Jarvis said. “We don’t know what we are building. But from a position of optimism and respect for the public, we have to invent tools and see what they become.” This message is unsurprising, coming from Jarvis; for years he has scolded the old media for being too slow to adapt to the new.

It was more striking, then, to hear something similar from Tom Brokaw, who was born in 1940 and was 15 years old when his family first got a TV. “We’re creating a whole new universe,” he told me. “All those planets that are out there, colliding with each other, we don’t know which ones will support life and which will burn up.”

At no stage in the evolution of our press could anyone be sure which approaches would support life, and which would flicker out. Through my own career I have seen enough publications and programs start—and succeed, and fail—to know how hard it is to foresee their course in advance. Therefore I am biased in favor of almost any new project, since it might prove to be the next *New York Review of Books*, *Rolling Stone*, NPR, or *Wired* that helps us understand our world. Perhaps we have finally exhausted the viable possibilities for a journalism that offers a useful and accurate perspective. If so, then America’s problems of public life can only grow worse, since we will lack the means to understand and discuss them.

But perhaps this apparently late stage is actually an early stage, in the collective drive and willingness to devise new means of explaining the world and in the individual ability to investigate, weigh, and interpret the ever richer supply of information available to us. Recall the uprisings in Iran and Egypt. Recall the response to the tsunami in Indonesia and the earthquake in Haiti. My understanding of technological and political history makes me think it is still early. Also, there is no point in thinking anything else.

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/04/learning-to-love-the-shallow-divisive-unreliable-new-media/8415/>

Copyright © 2011 by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.