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“The Reconstruction of American Journalism” and Beyond

I want to provide an overview of the report that Nick Lemann commissioned for the Columbia Journalism School and that Len Downie and I wrote. I am grateful to Nick for having the faith that I could make a contribution and I am grateful to Len for making the work on this report such a satisfying intellectual endeavor. And I want to thank David Levy and the Reuters Institute for affording us the opportunity to talk to you about our report this evening.

The report, like just about everything Americans write about American journalism, focused exclusively on the United States. But we wrote in recognition that the American situation is a part of worldwide developments. We kept in mind from the outset several lessons from beyond U.S. borders: first, the Internet has internationalized the range of media available to everyday Americans. British media scholar Jeremy Tunstall wrote a book in 1977 entitled, The Media Are American; and in 2008 came out with another book called The Media Were American. Now he could also write, The

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American Media Were American. This is not only because German and Dutch companies own major American publishers or because Carlos Slim, the Mexican multi-billionaire, loaned the New York Times \$250 million. It is also because the American audience of the BBC, the Guardian, The Economist, and the Financial Times has grown enormously through their availability online. Not very long ago decisions in board rooms of media companies were alert only to local and national competition, not to global competition. When the New York Times announced 2 weeks ago its plans for online readers to pay to use the website, Alan Rusbridger practically dared them to move ahead so that The Guardian could become “the newspaper with the largest web English-speaking readership in the world.”

In some respects, the U.S. remains either oblivious or resistant to developments and practices beyond its borders. Our report makes passing reference to European public service broadcasting, an institution that even with the growth of commercial alternatives, has a tradition, a depth, an audience size, and government sources of funding that Americans can scarcely comprehend. It will not surprise you but it seems to have entirely escaped the notice of American journalists that vibrant democracies exist that have both freedom of the press and substantial government support of news organizations. The American assumption that government funding will

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quickly destroy freedom of the press is a private American provincial fantasy. We knew this.

What we did not know is how passionately people cling to the fantasy. Our report was well received in many quarters but our critics ignored much of the report and ignored five of our six proposals, concentrating fire on the proposal that the federal government establish a fund to support innovations in local news coverage. Why?

Well, let me acknowledge immediately that government funding does open the door to government control. But I found it amusing when a senior reporter for Newsweek, asked me, “Don’t you know that government funding means government control?” What was amusing is that he asked me this question on-camera as we were taping a show for public television.

To assert that any government funding for the media is the beginning of the end of press freedom requires that you ignore that National Public Radio and PBS have operated for 40 years without turning America into a slave state. You have to ignore the federal postal subsidies to newspapers that were instrumental from 1792 on in promoting the newspaper industry.

And of course you have to ignore most other democracies in the rest of the world. Just so, according to a statement two weeks ago by Harold Furchtgott-Roth, a former FCC commissioner and one-time chief economist

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for the House Committee on Commerce. “Direct government support of journalism is a foreign concept,” he wrote. “The Soviet Union had Pravda and Izvestia, news outlets that supposedly competed with one another to add insult to the injury of the absence of a free press. Every repressive regime in the world today controls some part of its national media and censors the rest.” The question, of course, is not what repressive regimes do but what democracies do.

And what do democracies do? Many different things, including many different ways that government supports news. Since the 1960s and 1970s, the European experience includes the practice, in Norway, Denmark, Sweden, France and elsewhere, of directly subsidizing newspapers, especially to shore up newspapers in local markets that have difficulty competing with the circulation leader in those communities. Studies have found that the subsidized papers are not less – but if anything slightly more – inclined than the unsubsidized papers to write stories critical of the government.

Len Downie and I spent a few days in London last summer and talked to reporters and editors at the BBC, the FT, the Times, and the Guardian, to get an overview of how the British media were faring in the Internet age. But four days of interviews did not make us authorities on the British media.

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Moreover, to be entirely frank, the size, the reach, the quality and ambition of the BBC is so far beyond what is imaginable in the U.S. that it is as if it were public broadcasting from another planet. The BBC receives some 3.5 billion pounds from license fees and additional direct government grants – about \$6 billion. The U.S. government provides \$400 million to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to support public television and radio in the United States. So government support of the BBC is 15 times what the U.S. provides; if you put that in terms of the per capita government investment in public broadcasting, the UK outspends the US about 75 to 1. The size and reach of the BBC is not without its complications. As both the BBC and British print media have moved online, suddenly organizations that operated in different domains are competing in the same arena, one with massive government aid and the others depending as always largely on the marketplace. We heard no little grumbling about this but also no consensus on just what to do about it.

But why should our understanding of the American scene focus on comparison to the UK rather than other countries? The work of Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini convinces me that broad U.S./European comparisons oversimplify complex relationships among political institutions and media institutions. To reduce the comparisons to “Europe does this and

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America does that...” is not tenable. To tell the more complicated story of southern European political parallelism and northern European corporatism and the British version of liberalism vs. the American version was more than we could conceptually handle.

I say all of this to acknowledge the U.S.-centrism of our report but we would never have been bold enough to recommend expanding government subsidies for the news media without an awareness that this has been done in liberal democracies in ways that enhance those democracies. So thanks a lot to our European friends for getting us into such trouble with our American colleagues!

But the interesting part of the U.S. response is not that we ran into a barrage of criticism but that there have been signs of interest in and close to the government. I do not mean to imply that our report produced this response – some of these things were already underway, responses to the broad economic crisis in U.S. journalism. Notably, the Federal Trade Commission held some informational hearings. The Federal Communications Commission has started an inquiry into what it might do to help support weakened and weakening American news institutions. The crisis in American journalism is serious and so government officials and politicians, if not journalists, are looking for how they might help.

How did we arrive at the present sad state of affairs where thousands of journalists have been thrown out of work in the past few years? Here's a two-minute history of American journalism: There has been journalism in North America since Ben Franklin was a printer's apprentice in Boston, working for his big brother's paper. That paper was the second newspaper in the colonies; friends of James Franklin had tried to dissuade him from publishing it, one newspaper, in their judgment, being enough for America. The earliest American newspapers offered commentary, some humor and satire, the printing of documents the government wanted public, items reprinted from the London press, and random reports from friends or acquaintances. There was no such thing as a paid reporter, there was very little one could call reporting and there was nothing to call investigation until the early 19th century. And when reporting began, it was conveyed through highly partisan newspapers that wrote about politics to rouse people to march for and vote for a particular party or candidate, not to incite thinking.

In the late 19th century, the growth of advertising helped make possible a press more independent of party and congenial to the rise of professional reporting. This is the "happy accident", as Clay Shirky puts it, that Wal-Mart

has been willing to pay for the Baghdad bureau. The wedding of newspapers to advertisers seeking audiences produced so much profit that publishers could devote a small portion of their resources to holding government and other powerful institutions accountable to the law and to legitimate public expectations of integrity and fair play. Americans subcontracted an essential building block of democratic life to commercial newspapers and commercial broadcasting because advertisers did not object to a bit of serious public affairs reporting in the papers they supported.

Now, two facts should modify this story. First, there are still 1400 daily newspapers in the United States and only a dozen of them ever had a Baghdad bureau, or have ever sent a reporter to Baghdad, or have ever opened a foreign bureau anywhere. U.S. newspapers have been stunningly prosperous for more than a century but they have consistently and dramatically underinvested in serious news coverage.

Second, the emergence of a skeptical, critical, and aggressive accountability journalism dedicated not to partisan triumph but to a sense of public service is a product of the 1960s and after. Prosperity was a necessary condition for this to emerge but it is not a sufficient condition. Prosperity had to be supplemented by cultural changes that came with the 1960s and 1970s. The first was an increasingly widespread and fiercely defended

professionalism. Meg Greenfield, who began her career in Washington journalism in 1961, before the transformations of the sixties, recalled in her memoir that “We, especially some of us in the journalism business, were much too gullible and complaisant in the old days. Just as a matter of republican principle, the hushed, reverential behavior (Quiet! Policy is being made here!) had gotten out of hand. It encouraged public servants to believe they could get away with anything – and they did.” (88-89)

For now, I will simply let Greenfield’s recollections stand in for all the others but I can tell you that every study I know supports her observation that journalism, hardly faultless today, nonetheless became more independent of government and more committed to investigation and criticism from the Vietnam war on than ever before.

Advertising-based prosperity did not produce good journalism by itself and in too many cases did not produce good journalism at all. It required professionalism and it required something else that grew from the 1960s and 1970s on: the presumption of public-ness. Whether it was televised presidential debates that began in 1960 or the Freedom of Information Act of 1966 or the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 and the requirement that new federally funded construction projects must produce environmental impact statements or the rise in the 1970s and 1980s

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of a wide variety of advocacy and non-partisan non-governmental organizations that monitored different aspects of government activity, a demand for government transparency has grown apace. It is the combination of profits, professionalism, and the presumption of public-ness that produced the best journalism in American history from the 1970s on.

As some of us gather tomorrow to think through a comparative study of the future of news, we may be inclined to think of economic solutions to the pressing economic problems – but I do not think economics should be our exclusive focus. At any rate, Craigslist and eBay and monster.com and many others now mean that lots of individuals and corporations who once advertised in the newspapers have alternatives that are cheaper to use, more convenient to use, and better targeted to the audiences they want to reach. The result is that newspapers have slashed their budgets, closed foreign bureaus, closed statehouse bureaus, reduced the number of days a week they print the paper, and in the space of a half dozen years have laid off or bought out about a third of all newspaper reporters, editors, and news photographers, from new recruits to Pulitzer Prize winners.

Let me repeat that: in the space of a few years the number of journalists employed in newsrooms of daily papers around the country has been reduced from just over 60,000 to somewhere in the 40,000's, probably at the

low end of that. The number of reporters stationed full-time in state capitols has dropped from 524 in 2003 to 355 in 2009, a decline of a third. Major newspapers have cut their staffs in half – this include the San Francisco Chronicle, the Los Angeles Times, the Baltimore Sun. Pile on top of that the anecdotal evidence of public officials who no longer interact with reporters not because they are avoiding them but because no reporters are dropping by to see them. Especially at the state and local levels, the press is missing.

Our report presents some of this evidence and proposes a set of recommendations that can help fill the gap in democratic capacity that has opened up with the shrinking of the newspaper press. We believe that a commercial press will survive but it will do so in much reduced form. And this will be a particular problem at the state and local level.

Very quickly, we made six recommendations: 1) changes in tax laws to make it easier for news organizations to convert to non-profit status or to become low-profit limited liability corporations 2) significant new investment in local news reporting by NPR-affiliated radio stations 3) increased philanthropic support for news organizations committed to local accountability reporting 4) new initiatives by universities to produce accountability news reporting directly for general media outlets 5) the development of more accessible and comprehensive public information

databanks; and finally 6) that the federal government institute a fund for the direct support of innovations in local news.

Our emphasis on local reporting may be quite different from the focus in Europe. As I understand it, local or regional newspapers in the U.K. at least are suffering in ways not unlike what is happening in the United States, but with rare exceptions the regional press has never made a bid to national notice. In the United States, regional powerhouses like the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune, the Miami Herald, the Dallas Morning News, the Boston Globe, the Philadelphia Inquirer and others have all broken important national stories, won Pulitzer prizes, and entered into the process of setting the national public agenda. The Charlotte N.C. Observer revealed financial fraud in the PTL television ministry; the Boston Globe (2003) uncovered a history of sexual abuse by priests in the Catholic church that led to significant reforms in the church; the Chicago Tribune in 2000 unearthed prosecutor misconduct in death penalty cases that led the governor to suspend all executions in the state. And these are just instances where newspaper investigations that began as local stories led to stories of national scope. Many others revealed local corruption, mismanagement, or crime with significant impact for their own communities.

All of these newspapers today shrinking their news budgets. What happens to a community when you subtract aggressive news coverage?

A few studies suggest that government corruption increases. This is almost certainly true. We do not know, however, how much. If you had a million dollars that you wanted to invest in cutting government corruption, would you hand it over to the local newspaper to hire a crack team of political reporters (or to rehire those it had just let go) or would you give it to the city's district attorney to expand the white collar crime unit? Or would you start an independent advocacy group to sue the government for violating open records laws? Or would you give it to an energetic blogger?

Our report found much to hope for in small, online startup organizations run by professional journalists – with or without, but usually with – significant public input in a variety of professionally directed crowd-sourcing operations. Small news organizations with modest funding can do high quality, high impact accountability journalism. One estimate is that in a newspaper's budget, about 70% goes to the capital investment in the printing presses, ink and paper, and the trucks to deliver the newspapers to apartments and houses. Newspapers, it has been said, are really a part of the trucking business. Only 14% of their budget goes to producing the news content for the paper. The online operations can put 80 or 90% of their funds

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into the journalism itself. These are organizations like the prize-winning voiceofsandiego.org, practically the grand-daddy of online startups – it turns 5 years old this week with its dozen journalists; or Josh Marshall's acclaimed TalkingPointsMemo that graduated from being a blog to being a small news organization itself with a number of high-profile journalistic achievements to its credit including major work in covering the scandal over the firing of U.S. attorneys.

These small organizations and some larger ones like ProPublica in New York and the Center for Investigative Reporting in Berkeley are already, in effect, helping to subsidize the mainstream news media by working with newspapers, documentary news television, and radio, providing them well reported stories free of charge and well informed on-air commentary.

Now, why should we find all this so encouraging? Recall the big picture: newspapers still employ some 40,000 journalists; the online startups employ perhaps 500 – not including the tens of thousands of bloggers, many of them skillful commentators on the news, but only a small set of them doing actual go-out-and-get-the-documents, go-out-and-turn-over-stones reporting. So why emphasize developments that as of Feb 4 2010 provide so modest a percentage of the total news output?

First, these organizations do not have to invest in a printing press, in paper, or in delivery trucks. Newspapers take pride in their content, but what made their financial success was that they could deliver the content to your door. Newspapers, someone has said, are basically in the trucking business. The Internet is making the trucking of information less and less necessary.

Second, the productivity of an individual journalist is enormously increased by the Internet and the personal computer. Two months ago I heard the media business columnist of the New York Times, David Carr, at a conference. He went to the podium, lifted up his laptop over his head, and announced, “There are more resources in this for me as a reporter than there have been in the entire newsroom in any newspaper I have ever worked at.” The increased efficiency in news reporting arises not only because the reporters have computers but because governments, non-profits, and others compile publicly available, downloadable and useable databases. In other words, it comes from the cultural presumption of public-ness I mentioned earlier. Even if advertising dollars had not dropped, even if circulation were not in decline, newspapers would be reducing the size of their staffs because they can produce the same quality of content with fewer reporters.

Third, most of the online operations naturally take on an ethic of sharing rather than an ethic of exclusivity. Sure, they want credit for their stories.

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But they need and use other media to get the stories out. Voiceofsandiego editors appear regularly on commercial television and public radio in San Diego to disseminate their work. These days the New York Times is not above working with ProPublica. Daily newspapers in California are willing and even eager to work with reporters at the University of Southern California working for an initiative with the California Healthcare Foundation, basically a non-profit, university-based health news investigative reporting team that works with and publishes in the local press. Walter Robinson, a Pulitzer-winning investigative reporter at the Boston Globe for several decades, returned to his alma mater, Northeastern University, two years ago and began teaching an investigative reporting seminar to both graduate and undergraduate students. In two years, those students have produced twelve front-page stories in the Boston Globe.

Fourth, the online operations remind us how important is the resource of obsessive, endless, gritty enthusiasm. Yes, somehow there has to be a way for these individuals to pay their bills – ultimately. But they don't have to live in mansions. They don't have to dine on expense accounts. What they have to do is pursue work that gets their adrenalin going and makes them feel that they are doing something that matters. If they can make money doing this, that's good for them and that's good for society and that's good

for democracy. Many worthwhile pursuits have long endured without a so-called business model. Artists, musicians, dramatists have been doing it for centuries. There is no business model for a string quartet. And some journalists have long known this, too, those who set up their alternative weeklies in the sixties, those who worked for political magazines or started vegetarian newsletters or found ways to make ends meet as free-lance foreign correspondents. They lived on a combination of passion and lowered expectations for comfort. With just about everyone I talked to at the new start-ups, whether twenty-somethings at one of their first jobs or 50-somethings who had been let go or had taken buy-outs, I heard blood pulsing.

And while I emphasize that there is a vital online role for journalists – professional journalists working full-time at it, the online world makes possible entirely new dimensions of journalism for the amateurs. I was struck by an obituary in the New York Times late in 2008 for “the blogger Tanta, an influential voice on the mortgage collapse.” Tanta was Doris Dungey who wrote for a financial blog called “Calculated Risk.” Her posts analyzed what went wrong with mortgage financing and they were followed closely by insiders and were cited with approval by Paul Krugman in the New York Times. Who was she? An Ohio woman who worked in the

mortgage business. That's all. No Ph.D. No membership in any influential council anywhere. Just someone who knew a hell of a lot about mortgages. It is almost inconceivable that she would have risen to prominence without the Internet. And yet in one microfield after another, people have started to blog and the best of them get to be known. It is not that crowds have wisdom but that there are a lot of smart and knowledgeable people out there who can be tapped or who volunteer themselves to be tapped and are able to make their contributions visible as never before. It is all but miraculous.

Fifth, there are non-market ways to assure the survival of worthwhile practices that could not survive if they had to trust only in the marketplace. Whether we are talking about the delivery of social services to the ill or the indigent, or are discussing the survival of theater, opera, symphonic music, chamber music, poetry, serious fiction, museums, higher education, most K-12 education, and much more, there is no business model. There is no market solution. There are tax-supported solutions and there are philanthropic solutions and there are various blends of government support, philanthropy, and bake sales.

In the U.S. context, it seems to me that even the feared and reviled government should be considered as a resource for funding journalism if the loss of journalistic power threatens the integrity of government and the

ability to embarrass people in power. In other parts of the world where government support is not so strange a concept, this is not as much of an issue. But maintaining serious news reporting and competitive news reporting and sufficient news reporting – these are matters on which much is at stake.

There is going to be a shift in the balance of where news reporting comes from – from the “legacy” media to a variety of hybrids and mixed and collaborative and mutualized efforts of old and new media and citizens at large. Journalism of the future is going to be partly commercial, partly non-profit, partly publicly-supported, partly university-fueled. The journalism of the future is going to blur across economic sources, across styles of work, across the divide between professional and amateur.

President Lyndon Johnson in 1967 signed the Public Broadcasting Act into law and made a few surprisingly interesting remarks upon doing so. He called for not just a broadcast system but urged the country “to build a great network for knowledge...one that employs every means of sending and storing information that the individual can use.” He imagined a system in which a country doctor could get help from a distant laboratory or hospital and a scholar in Atlanta could draw instantly on a library in New York. He imagined creating an “electronic knowledge bank” and it would be not just

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national – it could involve other nations “in a partnership to share knowledge and to thus enrich all mankind.” He even remembered how skeptical Henry David Thoreau had been about the telegraph and his remark that it is all very well to be constructing a telegraph to connect Maine to Texas but it could well be that Maine and Texas have nothing to communicate to each other. Thoreau wrote, “We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic . . . but perchance the first news that will leak through the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.”

Don’t be skeptical, President Johnson counsels. This is hard advice for an academic to accept, but you cannot talk to the journalists at ProPublica very long or those at Voice of San Diego without thinking President Johnson was onto something. President Johnson said, “I do believe that we have important things to say to one another – and we have the wisdom to match our technical genius.”

I hope he was right about that wisdom. And I hope we have the confidence to find out.

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