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[Note: Editors changed 'Those Guys' to 'These Guys' in title at final stage ... clearly not fans of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.]

## **WHO ARE THOSE GUYS?**

### **The online challenge to the notion of journalistic professionalism**

Jane B. Singer

## **WHO ARE THOSE GUYS?**

### **The online challenge to the notion of journalistic professionalism**

The people who claim membership in a profession and delineate its attributes do so at least in part to justify inequality of status, as well as to limit and control access to that status. The key role of the professional can be fulfilled only by people with particular training, skills and judgment, and it is crucial that the distinction between practitioner and layperson be clearly recognized by all parties. This paper suggests that online news workers fundamentally challenge the already-disputed concept of journalists as professionals. It identifies and explores key aspects of that challenge across the cognitive, normative and evaluative dimensions of the sociological construct of professionalism, with the goal of laying the groundwork for empirical investigation into the issues raised.

#### **KEYWORDS:**

autonomy, ethics, Internet, journalists, online, professionalism

**WHO ARE THOSE GUYS?**  
**The online challenge to the notion of journalistic professionalism**

The World Wide Web has had a tremendous impact on traditional media outlets and the people who work for them. The `dot-com' bust and the resulting layoffs and hiring freezes have created a bleak picture recently. But the reaction within the media industry to the Web's ups and downs since the mid-1990s has roots and implications that go deeper than perceptions of cyclical economic opportunities or threats. This paper suggests the fundamental challenge that online journalists pose for journalists in traditional media is not about money or even job security. It is about the notion of professionalism.

It is possible to enumerate the attributes of a profession and to argue about whether an occupation exhibits a sufficient number and degree of those attributes to qualify. But the concept of professionalism itself is an ideological construct (Johnson, 1972). Those who claim membership in a profession do so at least in part to justify inequality of status and to limit access to that status (Larson, 1977). The key role of the professional can be fulfilled `only by people with particular talents, judgment or education' (Allison, 1986: 15), and it is crucial that both practitioners and the public they serve realize as much (McLeod and Hawley, 1964). Members of different professions may position themselves as ideally suited to a given task; clerics and medical doctors, for instance, may both claim the power to heal. But different professionals will propose meeting a particular need in different ways and will proffer different services to do so, thus avoiding direct competition to provide an identical professional service. If this were not the case, the cognitive base of a profession would be claimed by more than one occupation, posing a challenge to the legitimacy of the services and the methods used to provide them (Soloski, 1989). Particularly when the professional status of an occupation is in dispute, as it is for journalism, its

leaders typically claim certain levels of technical performance and standards of community orientation, labeling as 'charlatans' those outsiders who fall short (Barber, 1965: 24).

Almost 3,300 U.S. newspapers now have Web sites, along with 2,600 U.S. magazines and another 2,700 U.S. radio and TV stations (Online Media Directory, 2002). The number of online-only news sites changes too fast for an accurate count, even if a universally acceptable definition of what constitutes a news site could be found. If the tens of thousands of people creating and maintaining these all sites are to be admitted under the tent of 'professional journalists,' that tent is going to be crowded indeed. If they are not, then competition for the role of informing an increasingly wired nation and world promises to be intense.

This article seeks to provide a conceptual groundwork for future empirical exploration of the notion of professionalism as it relates to the emergence of a new medium for journalistic work in the United States. It begins with an overview of the vast body of literature on the nature of professionalism, followed by a summary of the idea of journalism as a profession (or not). It then examines three core dimensions of a profession, considering one key challenge that online journalists present to each. Finally, it suggests opportunities to further our understanding of just what a journalist is and does in this world of instant, ubiquitous and truly mass communication.

### **DIMENSIONS OF PROFESSIONALISM**

The examination of professionalism is a major theme in sociological literature. Social scientists begin by broadly defining professions as occupations with special power and prestige (Larson, 1977), then typically seek to enumerate the characteristics that describe and distinguish such occupations. This structural-functional approach to professionalism creates a guide against which would-be occupations measure themselves, leading to a taxonomic classification of occupations based on adherence to a set of attributes (Allison, 1986). The behavior of any

occupation can be seen as 'fully, partly, barely or not at all professional' (Barber, 1965: 17).

Professionalism is viewed as a process with an end state at which some occupations have arrived and toward which others are moving (Johnson, 1972).

Although the list of specific attributes that make up an 'ideal' profession varies, there is substantial agreement about general dimensions. A cognitive dimension centers on the body of knowledge and techniques that professionals apply in their work, as well as the training needed to master these concepts and skills. A normative dimension covers the service orientation of professionals and their distinctive ethics, which justify the privilege of self-regulation that society grants them. And an evaluative dimension 'implicitly compares professions to other occupations, underscoring the professions' singular characteristics of autonomy and prestige' (Larson, 1977: x). Each of these dimensions deserves a brief discussion.

The possession of esoteric knowledge, which gives those who possess it an expertise not shared by those whom they serve, is a core characteristic of professionalism. Physicians, for example, only came to be perceived (by themselves as well as others) as professionals when they abandoned their apprenticeship system and, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, developed an increasingly centralized system of medical education, first in hospital schools and later in universities (Waddington, 1990). In effect, professionals seek to establish a monopoly on expertise that makes them irreplaceable, giving them the ability to control entry to their ranks (Stark, 1985). Education also has a profound socializing effect, inculcating attitudes and ethics as well as skills (Freidson, 1970). Formal training institutions provide professions with 'effectively socialized average members,' who recognize the profession's hierarchy and criteria of success. The standardized body of knowledge equips soon-to-be professionals with a sense that they share a

cognitive superiority over the layperson, legitimizing the social division of labor on which their ongoing status depends (Larson, 1977: 46-47).

Codes of conduct, by which professionals claim authority to regulate themselves, have existed for thousands of years; the Hippocratic Oath, written 2,500 years ago, deals with many of the same matters as modern medical codes. Such codification of basic ideals typically revolves around devotion to a calling that is of service to the larger community (Vollmer and Mills, 1966). A profession delivers 'esoteric services,' involving advice or action or both, to 'individuals, groups of people or the public at large' (Hughes, 1965: 1). Because only professionals can fully understand what such advice or action should constitute, only they are fully qualified to assess and control their own ability to provide it. In particular, a professional code -- unlike more general moral or ethical codes -- prescribes the responsibilities of those inside the occupational group to those outside it (MacIver, 1966). To take an example from one emerging profession, the American Nurses Association recently revised its ethics code to specify that the nurse's 'primary commitment is to the patient,' whose 'health, safety and rights' the professional nurse 'promotes, advocates for, and strives to protect' ('Code of Ethics for Nurses,' 2001).

Autonomy is another crucial characteristic of a profession. The professional community -- rather than the society or the client -- defines the nature of professional service and claims to be the only legitimate arbiter of improper behavior. It does so primarily by controlling the recruitment and certification of members and by setting standards of adequate practice. Moreover, every profession has an ideology explaining that autonomy is desired not because of individual benefits but because it best serves the public interest (Daniels, 1973). The corollary claim of professional prestige also is tied to public interest rather than the pecuniary rewards important to the non-professional. Although money creates and conveys status in our society,

financial remuneration is linked to individual profit rather than to the goals of a professional, whose claim to status and self-regulation derives from an expressed commitment to public service. Thus, prestige and professionally accorded honors such as titles or prizes often are relatively more important in professional than non-professional occupations (Barber, 1965).

A few additional points about professionalism are necessary. One, this approach implicitly assumes and even explicitly describes professionalism as having value, a desirable goal to be pursued. There are alternative views, notably the conception that professionalism is a way of justifying an inherent imbalance of power between the professional and the layperson (Johnson, 1982; Allison, 1996). Exclusive knowledge gives power to its possessors, and that power is obtained and maintained by control over the recruitment, training and performance of work that involves creating, disseminating and applying knowledge (Freidson, 1973).

A second point is that no profession meets the criteria perfectly, even professions widely recognized as such. Doctors have lost the autonomy of private practice as they have become agents or employees of corporate health care providers (Freidson, 1973; Armstrong, 1990). The legal profession faces challenges from an increase in salaried employment and a relaxation on advertising constraints, among other factors (Anleu, 1992). And the authority of the clergy has been eroding for centuries, with scientific explanations for all manner of phenomena bringing us to 'an age in which the death of God is one of the basic principles of life' (Gustafson, 1965: 79).

A final point before turning to journalistic professionalism is that technological change has long been identified as promoting professionalization in modern society. Indeed, one of the earliest extensive explorations of the concept of professionalism pointed out that technical advance implied growth in the number of people engaged in specialized intellectual work

(Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933). New technologies and new social demands work together to produce new professions and specialization within existing professions; for example, medical specialties have arisen due largely to the invention of new diagnostic tools (Hughes, 1965). All professions in today's society are being dramatically affected by the pace and the extent of technological, especially computer-based, change -- and journalism is certainly no exception.

### **PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS?**

Although professionalism 'is a term journalists often use to describe the excellence to which they aspire' (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996: 125), sociological definitions of professionalism have never been a comfortable fit. Journalism has no entrance requirements, no discrete body of knowledge and no elite inner group with the ability to 'de-press' wayward members (Merrill, 1996: 210). On the other hand, journalism's commitment to public service and its demand for practitioner expertise arguably make it a profession for all practical purposes (Dennis, 1996). Some observers even propose that how journalists see themselves, what they think about their roles and why they think that way are more important than conformity with particular criteria (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Perhaps, some suggest, the mark of a professional is attitude (Kimball, 1965) rather than the fulfillment of sociological requirements.

At the same time, media analysts express ambivalence about whether being a profession is even a good thing. Some fear that professionalism, especially as it is taught in journalism programs, stifles the diversity that is a core strength of a free press, implying homogeneity and standardization rather than healthy differences among journalists (Glasser, 1992).

Professionalism also can be seen as reducing journalistic autonomy by forcing the subordination of individual ideals to those of the group or organization (Merrill, 1974). It has been described as 'an efficient and economic method by which news organizations control the behavior of



reporters and editors' (Soloski, 1989: 207), as well as a standard and a justification for that control (Birkhead, 1986).

A look at the three key dimensions of professionalism discussed above illustrates both the difficulty and the temptation of labeling U.S. journalism a profession. The cognitive dimension, involving a core body of knowledge and techniques possessed by professionals, is problematic. Journalists have never had a shared, sanctioned knowledge base in the way that doctors or lawyers have. Yet core skills are identifiable. Introductory textbooks typically include the words 'reporting' and 'writing' in their titles and define a journalist along these lines: a person who gathers (reports) and processes (writes) accurate and important information so it can be disseminated to a wider audience (see Mencher, 1999; Scanlan, 2000; Brooks et al., 2001).

Many of the people who do such tasks for a living begin forming their core self-perceptions in the college journalism programs in which these texts are used. The number of American journalists with university degrees has been rising steadily. Today, more than 100 accredited journalism programs in U.S. colleges and universities ('ACEJMC Accredited Programs,' 2001), along with hundreds of other training programs, produce a total of 35,000 to 40,000 graduates a year (Becker et al., 2000). The vast majority (82 percent) of contemporary journalists are college graduates -- but at least as of the early 1990s, barely half of those graduates (56 percent) had majored in journalism or any other communications-related area (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996). Becoming a journalist requires no post-graduation certification process similar to a bar exam nor any specialized advanced education such as medical school.

Moreover, while journalists report that their training influences subsequent decisions about newsworthiness, evidence indicates factors within the newsroom have a stronger impact on behavior (Tuchman, 1978). A generation ago, McLeod and Hawley (1964) found no connection

between education and professional orientation among journalists; in fact, those who did not decide to go into journalism until after college tended to be more professionally oriented than their colleagues. More recently, Beam (1990, 1993) outlined the importance of organizational professionalism, the degree to which an organization's expectations of behavior and performance standards reflect expectations of the occupational group. For journalists, he found, institutionalized expectations about news work are a primary agent of social control.

Journalism's strongest claim to professional status may lie on the normative dimension. Safeguarded by the First Amendment, U.S. journalists have long claimed to provide a public service -- not just to help individuals, but to help democratic society as a whole. It is generally unquestioned in journalistic circles that a central job of the press is to provide information citizens can and will use to govern themselves wisely. This 'journalistic theory of democracy' holds that more information equals better-equipped citizens and therefore better participatory democracy (Gans, 1998: 10), thus granting the journalist a fundamental social role. When asked what they considered the distinguishing feature of journalism, news workers volunteered this democratic function nearly twice as often as any other response (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001).

By way of meeting their perceived democratic obligations, journalists have sought to enumerate norms of conduct, standards of practice and ethical guidelines. Some spell out what journalists should and should not do. Others are aspirational, reflecting expectations of ideal professional behavior (Black, 1995). Probably the most widely recognized is the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) ethics code, whose service orientation reinforces the journalist's self-conception as a professional. Journalists are urged to seek and report truth fairly and honestly; to minimize harm to sources, subjects and colleagues; to act independently, without

obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know; and to be accountable to audience members and to each other (SPJ Code of Ethics, 1996).

True, all journalistic codes are voluntary; failure to abide by them does not necessarily mean a loss of professional status (Black, Steele and Barney, 1999). True, the impact of such guidelines on day-to-day newsroom practices is dubious; codes are rarely cited in arguments over controversial cases, even when they are directly relevant (Boeyink, 1995). And true, adherence to codes or even to the principles they outline are subject to many pressures. The desires of stockholders and advertisers mingle with those of audience members so that the role of serving citizens becomes confused with that of serving customers (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; Patterson and Wilkins, 2002). Indeed, some observers charge that ethics codes ignore where the real power lies: with corporate owners concerned less with public service than with maximizing shareholder returns (McManus, 1997). Nonetheless, journalists generally see themselves as abiding by ethical guidelines, in the interests of fulfilling their public service responsibilities. And most agree that journalism is distinguished because of its contributions to society, providing the information people need ('Striking the Balance,' 1999).

The American public does not see journalists the same way journalists see themselves. In a recent national survey, almost half the respondents said the First Amendment goes too far in the rights in guarantees, and 42 percent said the press has too much freedom to publish what it wants (Paulson, 2002). Such a public perception is a significant challenge to a third key attribute of professionalism: autonomy from forces that might seek to impose external controls. U.S. journalists have fought zealously for this autonomy, insisting they alone can and should determine how to fulfill their public service role. Over the years, they have ignored even mild calls for greater responsibility, such as those from the Commission on Freedom of the Press

(1947). They have established organizations such as the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press to defend journalists against any government limitations, both in trial court and in the court of public opinion. Even European-style news councils have failed to gain acceptance, on the grounds that such watchdog organizations would compromise press independence (Jenkins, 1997). Indeed, autonomy is perhaps the most fiercely defended of U.S. media practitioners' claims to professionalism.

Prestige has been harder to come by. In a poll taken just before September 11, 2001, roughly half of Americans indicated they had little or no confidence that the media would report news fully, accurately or fairly ('Media use,' 2001); in assessing coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal in the late 1990s, one-third categorized the media as unprofessional, immoral and harmful to democracy ('Big doubts,' 1999). In contrast, the prestige of other professions remains intact. In a 2000 Harris Poll, 61 percent of respondents accorded doctors 'very great prestige'; more than half accorded scientists and teachers similar status. Journalists were seen as having 'very great prestige' by only 16 percent, among the lowest of 17 professional occupations included in the survey and a figure that has remained flat since the 1970s (Taylor, 2000).

So while journalists tend to see themselves as skilled, ethical, autonomous and estimable professionals, the public is not convinced. Nor are sociologists, who are more likely to categorize journalism as an emergent profession, an occupational group that has been moving over the past half century through a series of stages identified by Wilensky (1964), Barber (1965) and others. Among those stages are pursuit of work as a full-time occupation, establishment of training schools, formation of professional associations and promulgation of a formal code of ethics.

Sociologists also would be likely to take the public misgivings seriously in evaluating the status of journalism as a profession. From a sociological perspective, a key aspect in defining an

occupation as a profession is whether society regards it as such. Johnson (1972), for example, suggests that the degree to which those who claim professional status exercise power and even control over others in their society is crucial to understanding the nature of professionalism. Similarly, Abbott proposes that while the notion of professionalism does not lend itself to firm definition, it clearly includes, among other things, 'a level of social deference' (1988: 318).

Questions certainly remain, then, as to whether journalism is a profession with an indispensable and irreplaceable role within a society that accepts its claims to status (Allison, 1996). And although the threats to traditional media practitioners' view of themselves as professionals in a changing society may not be unique, that makes them no less intense. The following sections examine the core attributes of the journalistic 'profession' by considering how they are being challenged by online journalists.

## **ONLINE JOURNALISTS**

Traditional journalists have watched the growth of computer-mediated communication warily for years. As the Web entered their consciousness in the mid-1990s, their immediate reaction was to distinguish between their skills and values and those of the people producing content online. They emphasized an increasing need for credible, contextual information -- the kind professional journalists provide -- amid a rising tide of raw and potentially rank data (Singer, 1997). The trade press has carried innumerable reassurances that journalism and journalists will not disappear, that 'as purveyors of meaning and context amidst all the noise, (journalists) could become more essential than ever' (Fulton, 2000: 30). Others outside the circled wagons have not been so sure. 'As newsgathering expert systems become available to the general public,' one observer predicted, 'the gate-keeping function of newspeople will diminish and as a group, they will probably experience deprofessionalization' (Broddason, 1994: 241).

Even defining who is a journalist in the new medium turns out to be a challenge. Staffers of traditional media outlets such as *The New York Times* or CNN share Web space with an enormous variety of producers of online-only content that can legitimately claim to be forms of journalism. These include magazines such as *Salon* or *Slate*; specialized news services from companies such as C/Net.com (technology news) or TheStreet.com (financial news); and alternative or oppositional news sites such as indymedia.org. Not only can anyone perform traditional journalistic functions of gathering and disseminating information online, but the trend toward personalizing the news -- tailoring online tools to create a 'Daily Me' -- tips the balance of power away from the professional and toward the layperson, the news consumer (Lasica, August 2001). And the recent rise of Web logs or 'blogs,' interactive personal journals that typically combine commentary, conversation and original reporting, further blurs any real or imagined line between the professional and the non-professional -- especially because growing number of bloggers also happen to work as newspaper or broadcast reporters (Outing, 2002).

But at a deeper level, the key distinctions being made through such ongoing discussions are about more than specific journalistic skills, tasks or even values. They are about what a journalist is and does as a knowledgeable, ethical and autonomous professional. This section looks at the cognitive, normative and evaluative components of professionalism and discusses fundamental ways in which each has served as grounds for traditional journalists to challenge online journalists' presumptive claim to professional status.

### **Cognitive Dimension: Knowledge, Techniques and Training**

This dimension of professionalism incorporates two main components: the body of knowledge and techniques used by professionals, and the training needed to master such concepts and skills.

As discussed above, gathering and processing information -- reporting and writing -- are seen as core components of what a journalist does. Today's reporting is increasingly done through a computer as the Internet has become 'the single largest source of information available anywhere in the world' (Callahan, 2003: 3). This reporting may involve extracting relevant facts and figures from a database (Garrison, 2001), getting background information from a Web site (Middleberg and Ross, 2001), conducting e-mail interviews (Frank, 1999) or finding sources in a discussion group (Reddick and King, 2001). But all those and more still involve something clearly recognizable as reporting, albeit with technically enhanced tools.

By and large, online journalists are not reporters in this sense, and traditional reporting skills have been downplayed by those working online. In a 1996 study, only about 25 percent of online journalists said generating story ideas was important, and a similar number assigned minimal importance to news judgment itself (Brill, 1997). More recently, online journalists have continued to rank reporting and generating story ideas as relatively unimportant. Traditional 'public service' functions such as analyzing complex problems and investigating government claims are less important to online journalists than to their print colleagues (Brill, 2001).

While journalists working online do gather information, it is used primarily in one of two ways. For those affiliated with traditional media outlets, the general goal is to enhance a story originally created for that outlet. The heart of most newspaper-affiliated Web sites, for example, is print content 'repurposed' or shoveled virtually unchanged online. The Web staffer's job is to add a discussion component, to link to another site containing supplementary information, to incorporate a spot poll (South, 1999). While there has been much talk of 'converged newsrooms' in which journalists simultaneously gather and disseminate content for multiple media formats (Hickey, 2000; Geimann, 2001), only a handful of media outlets are attempting to actually run

one. One reason has been ongoing resistance from the traditional side of the house. No less influential a personage than former *New York Times* executive editor A. M. Rosenthal has said he is 'bothered' by journalists having to deal with multimedia chores and to 'work for two or three different bosses' (Hickey, 2000). *Tampa Tribune* executive editor Gil Thelen, a spokesman for his company's widely publicized efforts to produce a newspaper, a television newscast and a Web site out of the same 'converged' newsroom, says the greatest hurdle has not been technology but rather 'cultural resistance' from traditional journalists (Thelen, 2002: 16).

For many online journalists not affiliated with a traditional media outlet, the information-gathering task consists largely of compiling stories originally written for someone else. Yahoo! News staffers, for example, provide an extensive information service, but it is made up of stories from the wires and other media sources. Even online news leader MSNBC relies heavily on synergies with NBC and *Newsweek*. The knowledge needed to keep these news services current is considerable, but it is mostly technical knowledge, along with organizational skills. Though the amount of original online reporting is slowly increasing, a traditional journalist's reportorial skills -- negotiating with and interviewing sources, witnessing and recording events, and turning what has been learned into a cogent, original story -- remain largely unthreatened.

The number of people who produce original online news content is small, and much of that content is aimed at a niche rather than general audience; examples include C/Net's technology news and TheStreet.com's financial news, mentioned above. However, these sites as well as the very few doing what could be considered general-interest reporting have struggled to stay afloat as the economy has weakened in the early 2000s. Layoffs decimated online news site staffs, and even acknowledged industry leaders such as salon.com found themselves in trouble. *Salon*, an edgy, literate online-only site that earned grudging respect from the journalistic



community for reporting that broke the story of House Judiciary Chairman Henry Hyde's sexual affair (Talbot, 1998), has been showered with awards since its debut in 1995 and hailed as a 'pacesetter' for online journalism (Lasica, 1998). Meanwhile, its stock value has plummeted and losses have skyrocketed (Kurtz, 2001; Salon Media Group, 2001). It's one thing to keep a labor of love like a "blog" going just for the fun of it; it's quite another to turn a profit from the results of what has always been the labor-intensive and thus expensive enterprise of original reporting.

If journalism is about reporting but most online journalism is not, a question about the complementary aspect of the cognitive dimension of professionalism arises: What is the requisite set of knowledge or skills, and how does a professional acquire them? Journalism programs are struggling to come up with an answer. Although online editors repeatedly say that they want their new hires to be 'good journalists' first and foremost (Gorney, 2000; Reddick and Fickess, 2001), the actual skills they seem to be seeking are tailored to the medium's demands. A recent survey of people doing the hiring for online news jobs both sums up the current nature of online journalistic work and demonstrates the problem for educators. More than 70 percent wanted employees who could update and maintain time-sensitive material, as well as edit or rewrite stories. More than half wanted employees skilled at using online search strategies, creating multimedia products and hand-coding raw HTML (Paul, 2001). Yet most journalism curriculums are structured around writing and reporting, and accreditation standards strictly limit the number of journalism courses students can take -- while requiring that those courses cover not only skills but also 'the theories, history, functions, procedures, law, ethics and effects of journalism and mass communications' ('ACEJMC Accrediting Standards,' 1996).

Professional education in all fields serves not only as a socialization process but as a marketing tool; emphasis on the kind of knowledge that each profession claims as distinctively

its own is a crucial strategic factor for any occupation aspiring to professional status (Larson, 1977). Journalism education is no exception -- yet those working in online newsrooms do not share a cognitive background. A 1998 study of the staffing of Web sites affiliated with print newspapers found that while more than 93 percent of new hires in print newsrooms were either right out of school or from another paper, only 49 percent of online hires fit one of those two categories. The majority of online newsroom employees came from other media or other fields, from computer programming to freelance illustration (Singer, Tharp and Haruta, 1999).

As increasing numbers of journalism graduates have taken online publishing jobs (Becker et al., 2000), the response among educators has varied. But one consistent reaction has been to seek to protect the journalism school's franchise (and that of the media industry) by emphasizing constants rather than change. 'In journalism and mass communication, no matter how much things change, some things should remain the same,' the AEJMC Subcommittee on Educational Strategies and Technological Change said. Among the things the group listed as those that should 'never change' were 'defining what constitutes a great story'; verifying facts; asking hard questions; behaving ethically; and 'using balance, fairness and impartiality in presenting the facts' (Pavlik, Morgan and Henderson, 2001: 16).

Most schools are adding courses in online journalism, and a few are creating new sequences. Some are finding creative ways to incorporate ideas from their own and other disciplines (Harvey, 2000). It is safe to say, however, that nothing close to a standard online journalism curriculum exists, nor are guidelines for one provided by journalism educators' accrediting body ('ACEJMC Accrediting Standards,' 1996). Both the skills needed by online journalists and the education leading to acquisition of those skills suggest as-yet-unresolved challenges to the cognitive dimension of journalistic professionalism.

**Normative Dimension: Ethics and a Commitment to Public Service**

Perhaps the most persistent criticism of online journalism, and the clearest line traditional journalists have sought to draw between themselves and those working online, has involved ethical behavior. There seems to be a generalized, unspoken notion in some newsrooms that online journalism is the gangly, misfit cousin of "real" journalism, that the Internet is a breeding ground for kooks and charlatans, and that perhaps Web journalism operates at a level below the standards of traditional news media' (Lasica, September 2001). Matt Drudge -- who says he hates journalists, brags that he is not and never will be one, and proclaims journalism to be a fraud -- has become the poster child for much that is threatening about online information delivery. Drudge, perhaps most famous for breaking the story about Monica Lewinsky's fling with Bill Clinton in his online 'Drudge Report,' flamboyantly ignores professional norms that call for a commitment to fact-checking, fairness and accuracy as paths to serving the public. He prints what he hears instantly without worrying about veracity, claiming a demand for 'unedited information' -- then thumbs his nose at journalists by declaring that his brand of free-wheeling, globally disseminated gossip is what is keeping 'a free press alive and well' (McClintick, 1998: 117, 122). In short, he is extremely annoying.

But it is not really Drudge nor his outrageous (though not infrequently on target) online report that threatens journalists' view of their profession. It is the technological possibilities he represents. He has become a convenient icon of a media environment in which 'even a lone hacker rummaging through the databases and chat rooms [of the Internet] now has the ability to shape or even dictate the flow of news' (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 128). The clear implication is that the 'lone hacker' is not operating -- or at least need not operate -- in the public interest nor according to the ethics of any profession.

Journalists involved with online news do seem to lack a 'rulebook' in an environment that changes rapidly and unpredictably and that has neither a long tradition nor an opportunity for much, if any, reflection (Lynch, 1998). Whether traditional ethical practices can or should be transplanted to online journalism is debatable. Some journalists maintain that the Web is a fundamentally different medium and merits its own set of guidelines (Deuze and Yeshua, 2000). Others argue for grafting existing professional codes onto an online environment. One author of the current version of the SPJ code proposes it as a good starting point for revisiting 'the fundamentals, retaining ones that transcend shifts in technology' (Black, 1998: 16) and perhaps even finding ways to use the online medium to extend such mandates as public accountability.

Although a number of ethical issues related to online journalism, from privacy considerations to sourcing issues, have raised concerns, two in particular seem to have become focal points for the delineation of professional from unprofessional behavior. One, the separation of commercial and editorial content, concerns autonomy and will be discussed in the next section. The other has to do with the online medium's capacity for speed.

Journalists say getting information out quickly is an integral part of the public service that they perform (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996). Yet the speed with which information is rushed onto the Web, a medium in which deadlines are perpetual and competition is intense, has been cited repeatedly as a problem (Lynch, 1998; Kansas and Gitlin, 1999; Lasica, September 2001). This 'warp speed' version of journalism creates a never-ending news cycle that results in stories appearing as piecemeal bits of evidence, accusation or speculation, to be sorted out in public as the day goes on (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999). Several related issues seem to be involved.

One is the difficulty of verifying information amid intense pressure to get it out. The SPJ code's exhortation to 'seek truth and report it' carries an implication that what is not truth is not

to be reported. Online journalists might be described as taking a more Miltonian approach: Put everything on the table and hope that truth will somehow separate itself from falsehood amid the clutter. Critics have applied the less charitable interpretation that online journalism is untrustworthy because of its emphasis on getting information fast rather than getting it right (Singer, 1997). Online journalists have made embarrassing, and embarrassingly public, mistakes as a result of this pressure. In 1998, to take the most infamous examples, the Web sites of both the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Dallas Morning News* rushed to publish bogus new 'leads' in the Clinton-Lewinsky saga (Lasica, September 2001).

The closely related issue of the journalistic gatekeeper (a.k.a. an editor) is actually a permutation of the idea of the need for internal controls on professional practice. In a traditional newsroom, a story will be read and vetted by at least one editor before being published; the more potentially controversial or problematic the story, the more editors are apt to see it. Online newsrooms are full of editors -- but as discussed above, their jobs consist mainly of adapting stories to the Web and turning them around quickly, not fact-checking. Rarely do they serve as gatekeepers in the sense of significantly narrowing down the stories to be disseminated from among those available. This is a strength of the Web -- each user has a far greater opportunity to select stories of individual interest from a vastly increased offering of options (Lasica, August 2001) -- but it is also a weakness. The gatekeeper's function has always been one of quality control, however subjective the assessment of 'quality' might be (White, 1950). Without the gatekeeper, the quantity of the news product increases, but its quality is likely to be diluted.

Of course, an argument could be made that the potential for speed makes professional judgment regarding the news more vital than ever. The new journalist is not so much deciding what people should know as helping them make sense of what is already 'out there.' Instead,

critics claim, the opposite is taking place as new media forms expand their influence on what we understand as 'news.' This third issue stems from the other two and involves what critics warn is a fundamental and fundamentally harmful shift in what passes for journalism online.

As Drudge has become the poster child for online journalism, much of what is lumped together with online journalism has become the poster child for a culture of argumentation. This culture runs directly counter to the notion of professionalism in that it specifically devalues expertise by placing a premium on newness and controversy rather than on public service (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999, 2001). A media system dominated by talk shows, Web sites and chat rooms makes 'the urge to comment replace the need to verify' (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 140). An emphasis on speed blends with an emphasis on novelty -- old news is no news -- resulting in a de-emphasis on fact-checking and a decline in trustworthiness. In this view, ability to enhance a professional public service role through new media is undermined by practitioners' inability or unwillingness to carry out this role.

### **Evaluative Dimension: Autonomy and Prestige**

In one sense, the Web allows greater autonomy for journalists than do traditional media; the independent journalist can disseminate his or her work free of any connection with a media outlet, even the tenuous connection of the free-lancer. Ironically, organizational affiliation has largely defined the professional journalist in the past: One qualifies as a professional precisely because of a loss of individual control over the publication or broadcast of one's work. Renegade online information distributors claim that greater autonomy from concentrated media power, as well as from the dominance of elite sources, is one of their key assets (McClintick, 1998).

In response, those seeking to define a 'journalist' have been forced to look more closely at what that person does rather than the bureaucratic environment in which the work takes place.

The result has been a still-unresolved debate about precisely who is a journalist. The emerging consensus seems to be that a journalist is someone who adheres to norms that the profession has established, such as a commitment to fairness, accuracy and public service, regardless of the medium in which he or she works (Gup, 1999). This is similar to how a doctor might be defined: What matters is the nature of the professional activity and the professionally determined norms under which it is conducted, not whether one works for a hospital rather than in private practice.

But the fact is that a great many, perhaps a majority, of online journalists do work for a product affiliated with a traditional media outlet, so this aspect of autonomy is not where their greatest challenge to the notion of professionalism lies. Nor is it autonomy in the classic sense of freedom from government intervention; while there have been calls for 'regulating' the Internet, the focus has been on privacy concerns and on material seen as potentially harmful to vulnerable users, not on journalistic sites. Rather, the biggest challenge to the notion of professional autonomy posed by online journalists comes from inadequate independence from commercial pressures. What journalists refer to as separation of church and state -- the 'wall' between the editorial and business sides of the media operation -- has become a significant concern.

There is plenty of evidence that online media sites are integrating content that generates revenue from advertisers and marketers with content that ostensibly is intended to fulfill the professional obligation to provide information whose sole purpose is public service (McChesney, 1999). The issues are numerous, and not all the answers are clear-cut. 'Should *The New York Times* on the Web include a link to Barnes & Noble directly below a book review?' one observer asks. 'Should Yahoo! FinanceVision pop up an advertising window when you research financial news through the Yahoo! site?' (McNamara, 2000).

Although many professional journalists would be quick to answer 'no,' this trend is hardly unique to the Web. Most print and television news executives now have management by objective incentive programs linking their pay to the degree to which their outlet meets its financial goals (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). And breaches of the wall between the editorial and commercial side of a news operation are not uncommon. The *Los Angeles Times'* partnership with the Staples Center, an arrangement that included sharing ad revenue from a special section about the center, is only one of the more egregious recent examples (Bradford and Patterson, 2002). But at least three factors draw attention to the issue online and lead to a perception that online journalists may be more closely aligned with a corporate culture than a journalistic one.

First, as described above, most online media outlets are losing money (Ledbetter, 2000); they bled red ink it even during the late 1990s boom economy. Pressure to reverse this trend is considerable. Advertising has never been a money-maker online, and most advertisers continue to allocate only a small fraction of their media budget to the Web ('Interactive Advertising Bureau,' 2001; Raney, 2001). Nor is charging subscribers to access news sites a viable option for any but those with 'brands' holding truly unique value. So a variety of commercially oriented options are being explored, notably attracting sponsors for content (Olsen, 2001). Sponsorships, however, raise red flags for many journalists concerned about autonomy because sponsors are likely to be closely involved in determining the nature of the content they are backing.

A second factor that makes journalistic autonomy from the commercial side challenging is the organizational structure of many online news operations. A study in the late 1990s found that at least among sites affiliated with U.S. newspapers, many of those in charge of the online news product reported to marketing or circulation departments rather than to an editor or publisher (Singer, Tharp and Haruta, 1999). At television stations, managers see the Web site's



key role as building audience relations, not developing content (Chan-Olmsted and Ha, 2002). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that marketing-oriented functions are seen as very important by as many as two-thirds of those working for the online arm of print newspapers (Brill, 2001). Moreover, the staffs of online newsrooms tend to be small in relation to their traditional media counterparts, and marketing and editorial staffers may work not just in close proximity but together to develop content that will benefit a sponsor. The philly.com Web site -- one of Knight-Ridder's community portal sites, developed to serve as a gateway to local and regional information, goods and services -- offers an example. Its health site, developed in a work environment in which editorial and marketing staffers work side by side, contains several 'ask the expert' sections offering extensive information ... which turns out to be sponsored by local health care providers of precisely the services described.

A third factor undermining the autonomy of online journalists from commercial pressures is the newness of the medium itself. Online journalism is an emerging subset of an occupation that is itself categorized sociologically as an emerging profession, at best. Just as requisite skills, training and ethics are still up in the air, so too is its autonomous status. One way of bringing these issues to the fore is to create visible emblems of prestige for newly emerging professionals, emblems that recognize attributes the group's leaders seek to emphasize as they push for public recognition of their status claims (Barber, 1965). Here, too, online journalism poses challenges.

The traditional journalistic community has been slow to accord online journalists the trappings of prestige that professionals working in other formats can earn -- or even those they take for granted. For example, the Pulitzer Prize board now allows submission of online materials, but only in support of a print entry for this most prestigious prize in journalism, not as independent examples of outstanding work ('Online Submissions,' 2001). At a more basic level,

online journalists continue to have difficulty obtaining the press passes that give them access to news events. In recent years, online correspondents have been barred from venues and events including the U.S. Congress, an International Monetary Fund/World Bank meeting and the 2000 European Soccer Championships (Panna, 2000; Deuze, 2001).

In response, online journalists have begun establishing their own badges of honor. The newspaper trade publication *Editor & Publisher* has sponsored the Eppy awards to recognize the work of online newspapers since 1996; the 2002 contest attracted 300 entries in 20 editorial and commercial categories ('2002 Eppy Award,' 2002). In 1999, online journalists formed their own organization, the Online News Association (ONA), now with more than 600 members 'whose principal livelihood involves gathering or producing news for digital presentation.' Its founding principles emphasize commitment to the norms of professional journalism in more traditional formats, including editorial integrity and independence, with a clear distinction between 'news and other information' ('About the Online News Association,' 2002). The ONA also sponsors awards in partnership with Columbia University (which also administers the Pulitzers, among other prizes). The ONA awards, which attracted 870 entries in 2001 and 728 in 2002, seek to provide public recognition of high-quality journalism ('Winners,' 2001; 'Finalists,' 2002).

## **CONCLUSION**

The notion of professionalism is based on the admittedly self-serving idea that certain people in our society are uniquely entitled to fill a particular prestigious occupational niche. This entitlement stems primarily from the professional's special skills, training, codes of conduct, commitment to public service and autonomy. Yet only one group of professionals can perfectly fill any one niche. Although strict sociological definitions of professionalism cannot be applied seamlessly to journalism and society tends to view journalism with something less than

admiration, most journalists do consider themselves professionals, and many of the attributes of a profession are relevant in connection with the job they do. The issue facing members of the journalism community today is how to define their professional niche as it is challenged by those who now work in a new medium. There seem to be two basic options.

If online journalism is to be seen as distinct from the professional community of traditional journalists, for the reasons described above and others, it will present a direct challenge for the same professional niche: serving the information needs of an increasingly wired society. Newspaper readership has been slipping for decades; market fragmentation has meant fewer viewers for any one television news program and fewer readers for any one magazine. Already, the Web has overtaken all forms of print media as a news source for people aged 18 to 34, and it rapidly is closing in on television (Stempel, Hargrove and Bernt, 2000). Efforts at newsroom 'convergence,' as well as the ongoing commitment to online formats that have now lost money for years, indicate media corporations -- if not necessarily the journalists within them -- have accepted the reality that online news delivery is not going away. As today's children, who have grown up in front of a keyboard and monitor, become tomorrow's media consumers, computer-based formats will become even more dominant. If a battle for professional 'turf' is to be waged, the victor is far from certain.

On the other hand, if online journalism is to be incorporated within that community, there will need to be either considerable accommodation in the self-perception of what a journalist does or considerable change in the way that online journalism is carried out. Original reporting and writing are indeed core professional skills. A commitment to truth over novelty or expediency is a core professional norm. Autonomy from commercial as well as government influences is a core professional requirement if the trust necessary to perform journalism in

service to the public is to be possible. Nonetheless, despite the challenges that currently exist, accommodation seems a less threatening route for traditional journalists than attempting to withstand a direct assault from a competing group of would-be professionals on either ideological or practical grounds.

Many of the studies needed to support or to counter the ideas raised here are waiting to be done. Additional empirical evidence of the perceptions of online journalists regarding their professional role and status is needed. All of the challenges to journalistic professionalism discussed above would benefit from more rigorous documentation than can be found in the trade press, which is where much of the investigation and discussion of online journalism currently is being conducted. Also needed is exploration of the workings of online newsrooms, including their organizational structures, work routines, staff interactions, and ethical decision-making processes. In short, a thorough exploration of the sociology of online news work would be valuable not only because it would enhance our understanding of online journalism but also because it would enhance our understanding of the profession as a whole and its changing role in our changing society.

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