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The Ethical Implications of an Elite Press

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ABSTRACT:
Newspaper publishers are well into the process of bifurcating what once was a single mass-market product. Particularly for larger papers, website versions are taking over the mass-market role, while remaining print products are moving toward targeting a much smaller and more elite readership. This article explores theoretical and ethical issues raised by such a two-tiered newspaper structure and suggests directions for empirical study. Broadly, concerns center on the widening knowledge gap between print and online newspaper readers and its implications for civic discourse and democratic vitality. More narrowly, issues encompass a potential bifurcation of normative standards, including diverging markers of credibility, accuracy, and privacy.

The Ethical Implications of an Elite Press

Less than two decades after the first U.S. newspaper launched a regularly published website – the *Palo Alto Weekly*, in early 1994 (Carlson, 2009) – the future appears clear.

Weaker general-interest papers, particularly those that compete for market dominance, will fold (the *Rocky Mountain News*) or go online-only, continuing to serve the overall market (the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*) or scaling back to a subset (the *Cincinnati Post*). Remaining regional papers, especially in markets with large low-income / low-education populations, will abandon print publication and/or delivery on all but the most lucrative advertising days. Examples include the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, along with three Alabama dailies also owned by Advance, and the *Detroit News* (Haughney, 2012). The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* recently joined the list by cutting home delivery to just three days a week (Smith, 2013).

Among papers still publishing daily print editions, news holes will continue to shrink as audiences, advertising and subscription revenue, and newsroom resources accelerate the migration to a proliferating range of digital platforms that is already well under way.

Analysis of these shifts in the newspaper industry has focused on economics (Olmstead et al., 2012), with additional attention to newsroom staffing levels, roles, routines, and outputs. The ethical implications have been largely overlooked. This article posits that what we are seeing is a cultural transition that will significantly affect the newspaper's normative public service role in our democratic society.

In effect, companies that publish newspapers are well into the process of bifurcating what through most of the 20th century had been a single mass-market product. Website versions are to some extent taking over the mass-market role – though of course much of the audience has migrated to other online options, including social media plus a vast range of narrowly focused

websites – while remaining print products have begun targeting a much smaller and more elite readership (Meyer, 2004; 2008). "Sending everything to everybody was a response to the Industrial Revolution, which rewarded economics of scale," Meyer writes (2008). Specialized publication, which as described below has been extended through successive waves of newer media technologies, makes such a model less efficient and less appealing. The bifurcation of traditional newspapers, particularly those serving larger markets, looks something like this:

* *Populist*: Whether ad-based, subscription-based or (as paywalls rise) a combination of the two, the online newspaper business model depends on large audiences. Although loyal repeat visitors are ideal customers for any news outlet, they make up less than 10 percent of the traffic to free news websites (Edmonds et al., 2012). Volume is crucial for economic survival online, and the ubiquity of precise and instantaneous "traffic" data increases pressure on news staffs to generate that volume (Boczkowski, 2010). Doing so regularly requires producing lots of timely, brief, visual, interactive, opinionated, and otherwise attention-arresting content. Breaking news, crime news, quirky items, weather updates, and sports have always had mass appeal, and they still do (Singer, 2011) – just the sort of content that, not incidentally, is relatively easy for scaled-back newsrooms to produce. Particularly for local news outlets, online content is becoming shorter, less analytical, and more tied to the latest occurrences (Barnhurst, 2013).

* *Elitist*: That the printed newspaper reaches a steadily dwindling audience is hardly news; by 2010, barely a quarter of U.S. adults reported reading a print paper "yesterday" (Pew People, 2010) and two years later, just 8 percent named newspapers as the most helpful source for learning about the 2012 election and candidates (Pew, 2012). Less widely noted are shifts in the nature of readers and content. Among college graduates, 84 percent read a printed newspaper at least once a week; among adults with household incomes topping $100,000, 82 percent are

print readers (NielsenWire, 2009). These advertiser-appealing readers also are likely to get news online (Pew Project, 2010), which suggests they turn to print for particular reasons. Indeed, regular readers say they like the in-depth reporting provided by top-tier papers; no other media outlet comes close (Pew People, 2010). Growing numbers of print newspapers are foregrounding analytical, interpretive, and even investigative reports (some of them generated by, or in conjunction with, non-profit initiatives such as ProPublica.org) that build on the relatively basic updates given prominence online.

This article explores the theoretical implications and ethical issues raised by such a two-tiered newspaper structure and suggests directions for empirical study. Broadly, concerns center on the widening knowledge gap between print and online newspaper readers and its implications for civic discourse and democratic vitality. Narrower issues encompass a potential bifurcation of normative standards, including diverging markers of credibility, accuracy, and privacy.

Of course, our nation has had a tiered media system from its earliest days. So we need to consider the role of elite media in the past in order to understand how our present experience is new and newly challenging.

Historical Perspectives: Earlier Elites

Early U.S. newspaper history is well-known and can be quickly summarized here. From the revolutionaries roused by a spirited populist press, through the next generation's reliance on highly charged partisan newspapers in addressing the growing country's issues and needs, to the marketing-driven rise of a "penny press" that took root as an accessible alternative to the more high-brow (and costly) offerings, American democracy came of age in a time of shifting media options. Moreover, the backers of each emerging form presented and pitched it as an alternative

to other offerings. The revolutionary press was a counterforce to the loyalist British press, the partisan newspapers to the publications of opposing government factions, and the penny press (as well as the "yellow press" that followed) to its more staid competitors seeking custom among those in business and government who ran the city, county, or country.

The contrast between the U.S. populist and elite press of the 19th century is especially relevant here. Normative media histories of this period are rare, but the work of Michael Schudson addresses a number of key issues. While politically affiliated newspapers explicitly sought to create associations among their readers, the penny press that emerged in the first half of the century "ostentatiously sought *not* to form a community," thus ostensibly maintaining its editorial independence from readers (Schudson, 1998, p. 123; *emphasis in original*). (Independence from sources was another matter; in Washington, for example, it was common practice for reporters to refashion for politicians "what they had said or wished they had said" [p. 126] or even to double as political speechwriters.)

Yet the actual effect of the newspaper ultimately was to strengthen, not repress, local community. The transition to a penny press meant an increased emphasis on aggressive local reporting, and that emphasis in turn meant news itself "became a kind of knowledge with a new standing and currency, an intimate part of citizenship and politics," Schudson writes. "It also became a public good, a collective and visible good. … Reading the newspaper became a part of what it meant to be civilized in America" (1995, pp. 47-48).

By the latter part of the century, however, the surge in literacy rates meant more people *could* read – making *what* they read an increasingly prominent indicator of differences among them. The New York market provides a prototypical example. In the late 19th century, while Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst were running up circulation with juicy stories and

eye-popping headlines, *The New York Times* was marketing itself by stressing its "decency," accuracy – and conservatism. Both approaches served the needs of readers, but those needs were not the same. Newspapers such as Pulitzer's *New York World* served the needs of the working class, including commuters from the outer boroughs, providing insights into city life and a daily compendium of tips for urban survival. Newspapers such as the *Times* and the rival *Wall Street Journal*, on the other hand, deliberately sought an audience among the wealthy, beefing up financial news and advertising to meet the information demands of the commercial class (Schudson, 1978). Who you were indicated what you read – and vice versa.

At the same time, journalists were coming to think of themselves as some rough manner of professional, meaning they (and their bosses) also were interested in establishing markers of differentiation, largely because they were so helpful as marketing tools. Many of those differentiation strategies can be understood in normative terms, notably the concept of "objective" reporting (Schudson, 1978; Mindich, 1998) as a key component to the broader positioning of journalism as a public service enabled by a commercial enterprise. Commercial newspapers of the time needed to rebut criticism that they were abusing their power by legitimating their surveillance of the public good, and an emphasis on the "positively verifiable and theoretically pristine world" of objective fact (Schiller, 1979, p. 48) neatly served this need.

In the early years of the 20th century, journalists also formed professional organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists in 1909 and the American Society of Newspaper (now "News") Editors in 1922. Among the first thing ASNE did was create a code of ethics, the "Canons of Journalism" which offered as its first premise "The right of a newspaper to attract and hold readers is restricted by nothing but consideration of public welfare."

In short, the notion of a subset of the press predicating its business model on an appeal to an elite audience is an old and enduring one; through successive iterations of the American newspaper industry dating to colonial days, elite audiences have always constituted a market niche begging to be filled. What is new, and ethically significant to us today, is the environment in which that niche being reconfigured and served.

Of course, the public itself has always wanted more from its media than the rather boring maintenance of its own "welfare," and publishers have always been more than happy to satisfy this desire as long as they could profit from doing so. At the turn of the 20th century, their only option was to tailor their print publication for different broad segments of the population. The steady expansion in media options throughout the century – from radio to broadcast television to cable television to the Internet – provided successively greater room to maneuver. Broadcast media enabled differentiation by both time block and signal frequency. Cable television made it economically viable to craft niche programming aimed at far smaller audience segments. And the Internet has generated a global market of more than a billion people, every one of them creating an individualized, dynamically generated media diet. As civic society fragments into minimally intersecting nodes, the ability to provide and sustain a common information base on any given aspect of public affairs becomes both more difficult and, arguably, more crucial.

Theoretical Perspectives and Their Ethical Implications

The 20th century was marked by the emergence not only of professional journalists but also of scholars who sought to understand the nature and effects of the mediated communication these journalists produced. Beginning as early as the disagreement between Walter Lippmann – whose publication of *Public Opinion* in 1922 has been called the foundation of American media

studies (Carey, 1989) – and John Dewey over the respective merits of elite and populist discourse, these communication theorists incorporated a strong and occasionally explicit normative component in their investigations of which people were receiving what information, to what effect on democratic society.

This section of the article considers three 20th century theories relevant to a consideration of the ethical concerns raised by the emerging 21st century iteration of an elite press. All three – the "two-step flow" concept, agenda-setting theory, and the knowledge gap hypothesis – deal, in varying ways, with information salient to members of the public that newspapers claim to serve. And all three raise normative concerns about civic society in a bifurcated newspaper world.

The "two-step flow" of information

When Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues set out to study how voters in the 1940 election made their ballot choices, they saw as their primary task the identification of just how the news media shaped those voting decisions. Earlier investigation of the techniques and effects of propaganda and other forms of persuasive media messages (Lasswell, 1927; Lee & Lee, 1939) had suggested strong and direct effects of those messages on people's attitudes. So applying the ideas to messages generated through media coverage of a political campaign seemed a natural.

What they found, of course, was a much more complicated process. Especially for undecided voters, political discussions with personal contacts turned out to be more influential than the media in helping people make up their minds. "A special role in the network of personal relationships is played by the 'opinion leader,'" they wrote (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1968, p. 151). "This suggests that ideas often flow *from* radio and print *to* the opinion leaders and *from* them to the less active sections of the population" (*emphasis in original*). In fact, these

intermediary opinion leaders – people within voters' social groups who were influential because of their values, competencies, and strategic social location (Katz, 1957) – were crucial information sources. They functioned as gatekeepers, linking interpersonal networks to ideas in the outside world, including the world portrayed in media reports (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

How (or even if) the function of the opinion leader holds up in a media environment of messages not only selected by but also, importantly, targeted to the individual is a matter of open debate. Bennett and Manheim, for instance, suggest we are moving rapidly toward a "one-step flow of communication," a process in which the "mapping of content into mind-set" looks "much less like a Texas two-step than it does dancing in front of the mirror" (2006, p. 225). It is an environment marked, they say, by "the decline of a social membership society and the rise of a lifestyle-network society in which information is less likely to be cued by proximate authoritative opinion leaders" (p. 216).

Other researchers offer a more optimistic perspective of the ongoing importance of opinion leaders in a networked environment. For example, Shah and Scheufele (2006) report that opinion leaders actively seek information through various media, including both newspapers and the Internet, as a way to maintain their structural influence. Nisbet and Kotcher (2009) explored the nature of that influence in relation to a specific issue, climate change. They concluded that in an environment in which personal interaction is characterized primarily by weak rather than strong ties, the influence of digital opinion leaders is heavily dependent on the context and nature of a communication campaign; they also raised ethical concerns related to the privacy of individuals targeted in such campaigns.

Although more empirical work on digital opinion leaders is necessary, the work to date would suggest that as print newspapers become increasingly elitist, dissemination of the

information they contain becomes even more contingent on the reach, efficacy, and ethical standards of the opinion leaders who read them – because they are less and less likely to reach non-opinion leaders directly. In other words, while opinion leaders likely will continue to consult print information sources because of their desire to retain the authority that their surveillance role provides (Shah & Scheufele, 2006), the majority of citizens will never see these sources at all.

That in turn leaves the majority vulnerable to manipulation by those with their own stake in the issue at hand. The skillful use of social media, microtargeting, and other online techniques enables today's propagandists to engage in a 21st century version of card stacking (Lee & Lee, 1939), and those not motivated to do their own surveillance will be none the wiser. The rise of paywalls almost certainly will pose a further deterrent to those less motivated to find the counter-information; moreover, paywalls make the information less readily accessible even to those who might stumble upon it through a visit to the newspaper website in search of something else.

Agenda-setting theory

One of a cluster of media effects theories that emerged during the heyday of commercial media in the United States, agenda setting offers an alternative to the limited-effects perspective suggested by the earlier work on opinion leaders. In its simplest iteration, the theory proposes that although the media may not succeed in telling people what to think – for instance, how to vote – they are quite good at telling us what to think about and how to think about it (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs & Shaw, 1993). The media set our agenda about issues and ideas that matter and, as later explorations have suggested, about the specific attributes of those issues and ideas that matter most (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

In our more complicated, interconnected, and personalized media environment, that ability is more dubious than it was 40 years ago. The agendas to which people are exposed online are highly divergent in comparison with the generally redundant agendas of traditional news outlets (McCombs, 2005). In a relatively early test of differences in agenda-setting effects between users of traditional print and online newspaper, Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) found that readers of the print *New York Times* were exposed to a broader range of public affairs coverage than were readers of the online version and, more importantly, the print readers had systematically different perceptions of the most important problems facing the country.

More recent research has produced diverse results about the impact of the Internet, but much of it has continued to document the weakening influence of elite, traditional media on issue interpretation, along with the growing power of such sources as partisan political blogs (Meraz, 2011). Boczkowski and Peer (2011), for example, found that journalists' "penchant" for public affairs news does not correlate with users' choices, as reflected in lists of popular items based on usage data, and that "consumers' preference for nonpublic affairs news might be less dependent on journalists' choices" (p. 867). Meanwhile, ongoing research into intermedia agenda setting effects among print and online sources remains inconclusive but continues to refine our understanding of their respective agendas (see Messner & Garrison, 2011; Maier, 2010; Weeks & Southwell, 2010; Messner & Distaso, 2008). These and other research findings along the same lines suggest that online and print agendas continue to overlap but, particularly with the advent of social media, are becoming less cohesive.

Not only will most people not see the elite media sources that opinion leaders will continue to desire, they are increasingly unlikely to see secondary "mass media" sources that take their lead from elites such as *The New York Times* (Golan, 2006; Reese & Danielian, 1989).

In the past, that information was passed on to the public primarily through other media that picked up story ideas or, through wire service distribution, even the specific story itself. There is evidence that that still happens (Maier, 2010) – but the agenda in print is far easier to discern than the agenda online. Widely recognized cues – placement, headline size, story length – are less salient online. Most home pages offer mixes of items from diverse topic areas, hoping to attract the attention of as many different types of information seekers as possible. Besides, decreasing numbers of people see the home page at all – they come in through search engines, social media links, and other pathways that lead directly to a particular story, not to the equivalent of a newspaper front page or section front. Around 40 percent of American online users report "very often" accessing news through keyword searches or social media recommendations (Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Christian, 2012).

For print readers, of course, those cues remain, as does at least incidental exposure to other items deemed newsworthy by journalists that readers might not have considered or even known about. One hypothesis in need of further empirical testing is that while the Internet has the potential to facilitate breadth, its use is actually more conducive to providing depth – that is, while the medium theoretically can expose people to more information, the reality may be that such information is also more narrowly focused. We become very well-informed about things we already think interest us. We become increasingly uninformed (or misinformed) about everything else – international concerns, diverse domestic populations, broad social trends not captured by a daily news net increasingly focused on breaking news (Tuchman, 1973; Barnhurst, 2013) – with knowledge gap implications explored in the next section.

The ethical implications of this shift in major newspapers' agenda setting role are similar to those considered above in relation to opinion leadership. The agenda set by elite newspapers

once was widely reflected through the rest of the media ecosystem and thus was a widely shared agenda among diverse media consumers. Today, those who continue to read newspapers in general, and elite newspapers such as the *Times* in particular, continue to share the broad assessment of issue salience communicated by these publications. But that assessment is less likely to be shared with non-readers – and non-readers are an inexorably growing majority.

A plurality of viewpoints is of course a strength in democratic society; without it, we would stagnate. An open question, however, is the point at which healthy plurality crosses the line into dysfunction. If the issues that newspaper readers believe are important bear only minimal resemblance to the issues of a majority of citizens – each one of whom is constructing an agenda at least somewhat tailored to individual needs, which are then met by sources holding narrow rather than wide appeal – focused civic discourse and the compromise necessary to create cohesive social policy become less likely to emerge.

Knowledge gap hypothesis

Of the three theories considered here, the "knowledge-gap hypothesis" first put forth by a trio of Minnesota researchers more than 40 years ago (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970) is perhaps the most directly relevant – and troubling. The hypothesis posits that "as the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socioeconomic status tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than the lower status segments, so that the gap in knowledge between these segments tends to increase" (pp. 159-160). The gap matters, of course, because of the importance of knowledge as a basis for social power; inequality in one generally means inequality in the other (Viswanath & Finnegan, 1996).

Support for the premise has been extensive over time and across cultures. It is the nature of the media content – rather than any inherent qualities of media format – that seems to be crucial. Media with a strong commitment to public affairs journalism generate the widest gains in overall knowledge and the smallest knowledge gaps among segments of the population. Thus while U.S. studies have generally found newspapers to have the greatest impact on the knowledge gap, studies in countries with a strong public-service television news tradition have found broadcast coverage to be crucial. A few recent examples:

* In a comparison of public service-oriented television systems in two Scandinavian countries with more market-driven models in the United States and United Kingdom, Curran et al. (2009) found that the former contributed to smaller within-nation knowledge gaps between the advantaged and disadvantaged.

* Iyengar and his co-authors (2009) compared coverage of international affairs by Swiss and U.S. news media and awareness of international affairs among citizens of the two countries. They found a greater reduction in the knowledge gap between more and less attentive citizens in Switzerland, where the media provide more international news, than in the United States.

* Norris and Sanders found that the typical contents of political news carried by different media within a society were more predictive of knowledge gap reduction than any inherent "print superiority." They suggested that the public service tradition of British television as opposed to the general popularity of the more sensationalist tabloids was significant in explaining their finding that people learned as much from television news as from newspapers (2003, p. 253).

In the United States, however, newspapers have been the most important media in explaining knowledge gaps because of their relatively greater focus on public affairs topics. "Newspapers contain more 'hard news' and coverage of political campaigns, and are sought out

for that purpose by readers. Together with the other print media they require more focused attention for message processing, which enhances learning" (Jeffres, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 2012, p. 62). The perpetuation of a knowledge gap stems in large part from the relatively high newspaper readership among citizens of high socioeconomic status –which correlates with high levels of educational attainment and income, in particular (Hwang & Jeong, 2009). High socioeconomic status is linked to reading a newspaper, and reading a newspaper is linked to public affairs knowledge (McLeod & Perse, 1994). Since well before the Internet, greater proportions of social elites in the United States have gotten their information from printed newspapers compared with their less-privileged fellow citizens.

The theory has been connected to the Internet primarily through the framework of a "digital divide," both within and between societies. In a prescient essay published more than a decade ago, the late Everett Rogers foresaw that although the economically rooted gap in U.S. citizens' access to online information would become less of an issue over time, it was likely to be replaced by "a learning-divide, a content-divide, and by other types of divides through which the internet will continue to advantage certain individuals, and disadvantage others" (2001, p. 96).

By now, the Internet is pervasive, though not universal, in American society. Roughly 80 percent of adults are online users (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012), and more people get their national and international news online than in print. But that does not mean the knowledge gap between online and print readers has been erased. On the contrary, recent studies have suggested that online users are simply less likely than newspaper readers to seek out public affairs content and, not surprisingly, less likely to understand public affairs, as well (Yang & Grabe, 2011). Indeed, dozens of studies from numerous theoretical perspectives have supported the premise that access

to the Internet supports civic engagement by those who are already engaged but does not boost such engagement by those who are not.

Moreover, the selectivity inherent in Internet use may decrease exposure to alternative views, as Brundidge and Rice (2009) warn, resulting in:

> polarized enclaves, each knowledgeable and politically active but at best unaware and at worse hostile to any difference. When political knowledge gaps increase but exposure to disagreement decreases, ideological domination may arise, whereby minority and less educated groups are not even aware of alternative perspectives. Finally, when political knowledge gaps continue to increase, but exposure to disagreement also increases, elite demagoguery may arise, whereby knowledgeable political elites can manipulate meanings and salience of alternative perspectives (p. 154).

The ethical implications of this gap have been clearly implied but rarely addressed directly. The concerns will by now be familiar. Those continuing to get information from the newspaper are likely to also be getting it online. But what they bring to their online use and, crucially, their online interactions will be substantively different from what non-newspaper readers bring. The signs point to an increase in power for this already empowered group relative to other online users. They know more, and they are more skillful in processing what they know in ways likely to enhance their influence.

For the newspaper industry, then, appeal to an elite readership may well be a survival strategy for print (Meyer, 2008) and a way to generate revenue from the well-heeled that can in turn support an online product designed to attract larger numbers with more easily accessible content. As the knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor et al., 1970) reminds us, everyone gains as information increases – but some gain in both knowledge and its attendant power considerably more than others. For civic society, the effects may be less salubrious.

The Elite Newspaper of the 21st Century

For the nation's newspapers, the 20th century was characterized by growth – slow at the start of the century, exponential at its end – in the scale and scope of competition for the part of their lives that audience members are willing and able to devote to the media. The trajectory is well-documented, from general-interest magazines through film, radio, broadcast and then cable television, and finally the Internet.

As each competitive form emerged and proliferated over the past 100 years and more, the newspaper industry scrambled for ways to redefine and reposition itself. Particularly since the era of information abundance that began with cable television and has come to fruition with the Internet, the newspaper share of the mass audience has shrunk – making the strategy of increasing its appeal to a more specialized audience more attractive.

Along with the oversupply of available content, cable television simultaneously refined the strategy of narrowcasting – hosting a proliferation of channels devoted to people with an abiding interest in history or cooking or golf. The concept has been perfected online, enabling message senders (and who among us is not?) to reach smaller and smaller audience clusters.

By this second decade of the 21st century, narrowcasting has become nanocasting. Technology now permits message senders to tailor messages for each individual, a process called microtargeting. The 2012 presidential campaigns put it to widespread use (Issenberg, 2012), and so do online marketers. Social media already have adopted it; though many readers of this article likely overlap in our narrowcast clusters, we almost certainly each see different Facebook advertisements based on a far more refined profile of our online activities and therefore our presumed interests. Other media companies may be less nimble, but they also are more

desperate. It seems likely that tossing privacy concerns aside in order to avoid falling further behind their myriad online competitors will appeal to many.

But in their printed forms, such a strategy is impossible for newspapers, inescapably limited by the constraints and the costs of ink on paper, as well as the costs of paying at least some people to gather and produce the information that is their stock in trade. They have no other choice but to remain, in some form, a *mass* medium rather than a personal one. The question they face is how to reconstitute, reward, and retain that mass.

They cannot go the populist route, at least in the long term. That audience has already gone online. Newspapers can try to serve them there by offering the water cooler fodder; my friends, family, and I may share more specialized interests, but my co-workers, neighbors, and casual acquaintances still need the social lubrication that interesting or entertaining or novel or even just up-to-the-minute information provides. This is an audience that wants to know what others are reading, emailing, commenting on; the function that newspaper content provides for them is a social one, and the online format can help them navigate the social terrain.

What then, is left for the print newspaper? Well, there are the 20 percent of Americans who are not online at all – generally older, poorer, less-educated, and less likely to be native English speakers (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012), all unappealing characteristics for publishers and advertisers with products to sell – and those who are online but also continue to want news offline. This latter is a far more desirable demographic: relatively educated, relatively younger, relatively more likely to be employed. And, importantly, relatively more likely to be civically or at least socially engaged: These are people who want information that is important to the collective as well as the individual largely because of their own high stake within that collective.

This elite audience may also want the online news for the same reasons as everyone else. But they want the print newspaper to deliver something different: analysis, interpretation, and investigative reporting, Meyer (2008) predicts:

> Not all readers demand such quality, but the educated, opinion-leading, news-junkie core of the audience always will. They will insist on it as a defense against "persuasive communication," the euphemism for advertising, public relations and spin that exploits the confusion of information overload. Readers need and want to be equipped with truth-based defenses.

Christians et al. (2009) characterize journalism on the Internet as encompassing "a highly relativistic notion of truth as expressed opinion," along with principles of equality that recognize no hierarchy among sources of news and views (p. 235). If so, journalism in elite print newspapers offers essentially the opposite. It offers validation of certain information from certain sources and invalidation of the rest. It offers, in a word, gatekeepers and the cues they provide, a guide to selectivity in a world of unlimited options. In a traditional media environment, such normative professional judgments arguably limit discourse. As one option in a cacophonous networked world, they may instead focus it – but only for the privileged and influential subset who continue to read. That is a reasonable approximation of how democracy worked in the 18th century. As a proposition for the far larger and far more diverse civic society in the 21st, it seems decidedly more problematic.

A word about content

This article has focused primarily on the audience for an elite newspaper, a perspective most clearly suggested by nearly a century of empirical evidence and theory-building. A shift to a product explicitly intended to appeal to a relatively small but influential segment of society has

obvious ethical implications for the way our democracy will function in the 21st century, as outlined above.

Less clearly signposted by the literature and awaiting stronger empirical documentation are ethical implications of content decisions made for the online medium, the one increasingly seen as serving the unwashed masses. There is fruitful ground for inquiry along a variety of lines here, including issues more directly addressed by professional ethics codes than the relatively nebulous concepts of public service or disparities in civic knowledge. They include issues for which there is a growing amount of anecdotal evidence in the trade press that awaits more rigorous testing:

* A reduced attention to pre-publication verification of online content, under the premise that the fluid nature of the medium will enable ongoing correction as warranted, raising concerns about accuracy and credibility for information providers.

* An increased emphasis on short, timely information snippets rather than in-depth reports. Emerging research already suggests the prominence of such material (Boczkowski & Peer, 2011; Barnhurst, 2013). Although the meatier stories published in print are likely to also appear online, they may or may not be foregrounded in the same way as the latest breaking news items that attract search engines, elicit user comment and drive traffic. And because such large numbers of users now enter a website through search or social media (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012), those stories may never be seen by significant numbers who still "read" the online paper.

* Increased attention to items attracting relatively large number of hits, comments or social network mentions, with better "play" given to those items than to potentially more substantive ones. Indeed, journalists have expressed fears about this sort of "traffic whoring" for some time now (Singer & Ashman, 2009).

* Increased prominence for attention- and engagement-generating commentary and opinion, as well as an increase in the levels of polarizing discourse reflected in that content.

* Increased use of microtargeting techniques already in widespread use by marketing (including political marketing) interests, raising significant issues related to user privacy as well as broad-based information exposure.

In short, in addition to the civic considerations discussed in the bulk of this article, it seems possible if not probable that the more concrete ethical standards of the print and online products will diverge. Here, too, the elite audience seems likely to benefit from the change because of its ability to pay for access to context, verification, and other earmarks of what has long been seen as quality journalism – earmarks that online content may lack.

Conclusion

The notion of a subset of the press predicating its business model on an appeal to an elite audience is an old and enduring one; through successive iterations of the newspaper dating to colonial days, elite audiences have always represented a market niche begging to be filled. What is new, and ethically significant to us today, is the media environment in which that niche is being reconfigured and served.

Major newspapers in the early 21st century are increasingly seeking to appeal to two different audiences, a relatively elite one through their print product and a relatively populist one through their websites. In essence, they are splitting themselves into two different products, and either deliberately or inadvertently opting to provide a more civically valuable product for print readers than for online ones. Ironically, a medium that ostensibly is the embodiment of Dewey's view of democracy may turn out to have the effect of lending more support to Lippmann.

Each of the three theories summarized above were developed during a period of relatively limited media channels, over roughly a 30-year period from the 1940s to the 1970s. Obviously, today's media environment looks very different. In response, the oldest of our media forms – the newspaper – appears poised to pursue a strategy of bifurcation, creating increasingly disparate versions for an elite print audience and a mass online one. This article has suggested avenues for exploration of the ethical implications of that shift, which to date has attracted little scholarly attention.

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