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The Socially Responsible Existentialist:
A Normative Emphasis for Journalists
in a New Media Environment

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ABSTRACT

In an open and virtually boundless media environment, old responses to the question of who is a journalist, based primarily on roles associated with the process of gathering and disseminating information, no longer apply. This article suggests a reconceptualization of the journalist based instead on normative constructs. Specifically, it advocates a blend of two competing philosophical approaches, existentialism and social responsibility theory, as well as two roughly corresponding professional norms, independence and accountability. The combination produces a "socially responsible existentialist," a journalist who chooses to act as a trustworthy source of information that serves the public interest. That framework is applied at both a concrete level, through consideration of Weblogs and the proliferation of partisan information sources, and a conceptual level, through consideration of gatekeeping and agenda-setting functions.

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Changes in the media over the past decade have created many pressures for journalists. New forms of news, a global 24/7 online and cable news environment, an increasing bottom-line emphasis and the resulting squeeze on resources have repositioned news as one of many corporate product lines and far from the most profitable one at that (Bennett 2005). Amid these and other changes, it has become increasingly difficult to define who is, and is not, a journalist.

Historically, journalists have been defined mainly by professional practices and associated norms, and those in turn have been tied to the media environments in which journalists work. The journalist was the person who wrote that first rough draft of history. The journalist was a community's "gatekeeper", deciding what information was worth knowing (White 1950). The journalist reconstituted the everyday world by filtering it through a set of institutional routines and structures (Tuchman 1973), got information to the public quickly, investigated government claims (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996), and offered society a current, reasoned reflection on the day's events, values and needs (Ranly 1995). In short, the journalist was someone who engaged in a particular process: of gathering, organizing and disseminating timely information in a way that drew its credibility from such ethical precepts as balance and fairness (Gup 1999).

Yet in our networked world, millions of people gather, organize and disseminate timely information every hour of every day. There is no "gate", and the idea that anyone can guard one becomes absurd (Williams and Delli Carpini 2000); virtually any bit of information, misinformation or disinformation is just a google search away for the online user. Institutional routines and structures are in a state of flux as news organizations reorganize beats, experiment

with convergence and revisit notions of what constitutes news in a scramble to keep audiences from shrinking further. Anyone with a Weblog can get information to the public quickly – often, as coverage of both the South Asian tsunami and the New Orleans hurricane demonstrated, much more quickly and efficiently than traditional journalists can. And claims made by officials anywhere in the world are immediately subject to scrutiny by a horde of self-appointed online fact checkers. Surely, in this environment, while all journalists still publish information, not all publishers of information are journalists.

If definitions grounded in process are no longer valid, we must look for other grounds. This article suggests the answer to "who is a journalist" in a democratic society today is a normative one, and its purpose is to explore the nature of contemporary journalism at this fundamental level. To do so, it builds on the notion of "mutualism" (Merrill 1997), drawing primarily on the seemingly contradictory ethical precepts of independence and accountability. It suggests that journalistic independence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for journalism in the current media environment and is contingent on the notion of individual commitment to social responsibility. The emphasis thus is on a journalist's personal choice to uphold the public trust. Such a definition connects and updates two broader conceptualizations based on earlier competing claims about the central norms of journalism: the existential journalist (Merrill 1996) and the socially responsible journalist (Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947).

This article calls renewed attention to the need for a dialectical approach not only to the practice of journalism (Merrill 1989) but also to the core definition of the journalist. Such a definition avoids attempts to get a handle on the current state of journalism by delineating what processes do or do not constitute journalism, what content is or is not journalistic in nature, what media entities do or do not produce news, and what evolving technologies are or are not

platforms for journalism. Instead, it connects production to the individual producer, an existential approach appropriate in a media environment open to all contributors and all sorts of ways to provide information. At the same time, it connects that producer to the erstwhile audience, a socially responsible approach essential in a media environment that also is both interactive and information-rich. In doing so, it draws on constructs of professionalism, which sociologists define as involving both autonomy and public service. Such a definition may be important to the journalist who has an individual need to preserve his or her occupational identity, but it is even more important to members of the public who have a compelling social need to differentiate between information that can be trusted and information that cannot.

Philosophical Grounds: Existentialism and Social Responsibility Theory

The relationship between autonomy and accountability, or between freedom and responsibility, is a long-standing subject of debate within the field of journalism studies. Most theorists seek ways to reconcile the two, claiming that both are vital to the proper functioning of media in a democratic society (Gordon and Kittross 1999) and that synthesis is needed to avoid an "either-or way of thinking" that leads to anarchy on the one hand and authoritarianism on the other (Merrill 1997: 214). Nonetheless, different observers have tended to lean toward one or the other. Their ethical arguments have been associated with potential polarities contained in two core ideas, existentialism and social responsibility theory (SRT). Although it is simplistic to say that existentialism is concerned with the individual and SRT with the larger public, it nonetheless is true that the two approaches bring to the fore different aspects of the journalist's dual responsibilities to the self and to the audience. An overview of each philosophy in the context of journalism studies may be helpful.

Existentialism

Although its incorporation of a range of diverse positions makes existentialism difficult to define precisely, its central emphasis is on concrete individual existence and, by extension, the ideas of moral individualism, subjectivity, personal choice and commitment (Dreyfus 2004a). Expression of this philosophy dates to nineteenth century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, but it was twentieth century Frenchman Jean-Paul Sartre who emphasized the individual's freedom to choose and the need to take personal responsibility for those choices. "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself", and the "full responsibility of his existence" rests on him, Sartre wrote (2001: 36). Existentialists maintain that because there is no predefined or predestined human nature, people are defined and, ultimately, evaluated solely by their own freely taken choices and actions (*Wikipedia* 2004). However, although existentialism emphasizes individual autonomy, it differs from egoism in the weight it puts on how personal choices may affect others; many noted existentialists, including Kierkegaard, have been Christian thinkers, and others, including Sartre (1973), have stressed the humanism in their philosophy.

Sartre said a journalist should choose to use freedom to disclose social patterns and weaknesses, thus actively promoting change; his colleague, Albert Camus, thought journalists can change society only indirectly through changes within themselves (Bree 1972; Merrill 1996). But although Sartre was a sometime-political editor and Camus was a magazine and newspaper reporter, neither existentialist focused primarily on the journalist. (Kierkegaard, for his part, was extremely critical of the press of his day and arguably would have hated the Internet even more, seeing it as combining the worst features of a newspaper and a coffeehouse [Dreyfus 2004b].)

Within journalism studies, the leading advocate of an existentialist approach has been US scholar John C. Merrill. In *The Imperative of Freedom* (1974) and *Existential Journalism* (1996),

among other works, Merrill argues that journalistic autonomy is a paramount concept, integral to a commitment to seeking truth. He emphasizes that existentialism incorporates the idea of responsibility but that such responsibility is personal rather than social: A journalist is responsible *for* a choice or action rather than *to* others in making that choice or taking that action. Freedom implies self-determination of what is right and good (Merrill 1989), and the existential journalist would seek autonomy not just from control by outside forces but also from internal controls imposed by employers, ethics codes or traditional newsroom practices (Breed 1955). In his more recent writings, Merrill has moderated his views, stressing the need for a more Aristotelian ethical approach that combines respect for both the individual and for society, though he continues to distinguish between personal and social responsibility (Merrill 1997).

Social Responsibility Theory

While existentialism evolved primarily on the European continent, SRT is an Anglo-American concept (Siebert *et al*. 1956), and unlike existentialism, it has always had journalism specifically in mind. In the United States, it was first clearly articulated in the post-war 1940s by the Commission for Freedom of the Press, popularly known as the Hutchins Commission, in its report titled *A Free and Responsible Press*. The commission provided five performance standards for journalism, charging it with the responsibility of being, among other things, truthful, comprehensive and fair (Commission for Freedom of the Press 1947). Moreover, the commission urged journalists to move beyond their interpretation of independence as requiring strict objectivity and to instead seek to provide "the truth about the fact", accepting responsibility for helping readers evaluate the trustworthiness of conflicting sources and gain perspective about complex issues (Siebert *et al*. 1956: 88). Although the commission chose the term "responsible" rather than "accountable", apparently believing it was reasonable to expect responsible behavior

but not to demand it, its members clearly stressed the importance of the public's "moral right" to

be served by its press (Hocking 1947: 168):

> Since the citizen's *political duty* is at stake, the right to have an adequate service
> of news becomes a *public responsibility* as well. The phrase "freedom of the press"
> must now cover two sets of rights and not one only. With the rights of editors and
> publishers to express themselves there must be associated a right of the public to be
> served with a substantial and honest basis of fact for its judgments of public affairs.
> Of these two, it is the latter which today tends to take precedence in importance
> (Hocking 1947: 169, *emphasis in original*).

Contemporary scholars have extended these ideas in various ways. For example, the

notion of stewardship proposes that journalists "manage their resources of communication with

due regard for the rights of others, the rights of the public and the moral health of their own

occupation" (Lambeth 1992: 32). The communitarian movement within journalism studies,

which has had a professional iteration through civic journalism projects, has gone further.

Communitarians see the notion of individual autonomy as inherently problematic. They instead

posit a "master norm of universal solidarity" and say journalists should actively work to bring

about nothing less than civic transformation through personal and professional commitment to

"justice, covenant and empowerment" (Christians *et al*. 1993: 14-15).

These two quite different approaches to identifying a core journalistic norm have left

journalists seeking ways to resolve the apparent conflict between freedom and responsibility.

One approach has been to emphasize the ethical decision to use freedom in responsible ways.

That is, constraints on freedom must stem from within the individual. That individual will choose

to exercise freedom in a way that benefits not just himself or herself but also the larger society;

those seeking complete autonomy should not engage in the socially oriented activity of

journalism at all (Merrill 1989). Another approach has been to qualify the notion of freedom as

independence from political or social faction rather than from a commitment to the public at

large (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). Yet problems remain in determining precisely whom the journalist should be responsible to; once any individual or entity, even one as nebulous as "the public", is defined, the scale tips away from journalistic freedom. Journalists as an occupational group have turned toward ideas about professionalism, particularly professional norms, to help resolve this conflict.

Professional Grounds: Autonomy and Accountability

Aside from a few dictatorships, most nations now possess at least one code of press ethics, delineating the nature of journalists' accountability both to themselves and to a range of others, including peers, sources, subjects and audience members (Bertrand 2000). In Europe, more than thirty national journalism codes of ethics stress, among other things, press accountability and protection of professional integrity from external influence (Laitila 1995).

In the United States, although numerous media organizations and outlets have their own codes, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) offers a set of overarching guidelines. In 1996, SPJ, the nation's largest journalist organization, revised its code of ethics, which had been drafted in the post-Watergate 1970s and amended several times since then. The 1996 version, two years in the making, was based on three guiding principles: to seek truth, to minimize harm and to remain independent. But following myriad discussions about journalists' responsibilities to the public, a controversial fourth principle was added: to be accountable (Black *et al*. 1999). Journalists, the code's authors said, "are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other". Among their responsibilities under this principle are clarifying and explaining news coverage; inviting dialogue with the public about journalistic conduct; encouraging the public to voice grievances about the news media; and admitting and promptly correcting mistakes (Society of Professional Journalists 1996).

The addition was controversial for a variety of reasons, not least its apparent conflict with the notion of independence. As Dutch scholars Bardoel and d'Haenens (2004) point out, despite a desire to work for "the people," journalists tend to see accountability to the public and to society as no less threatening than the forces of the state or market. Freedom from faction is a premise to which US journalists have clung fiercely since the demise of the penny press in the nineteenth century, when the virtues of independence were used simultaneously by newspaper owners as a marketing ploy and by editors as the basis of a claim of professionalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). Indeed, autonomy is a central concept in the sociological definition of professionalism. The professional community itself -- not any institution or individual external to it -- defines what its members do and how they do it. A key mechanism for the community to do so comes by establishing standards of adequate professional practice – for instance, by creating ethics codes. For journalists worldwide, codes have been especially useful as a weapon in demonstrating a willingness to engage in self-reform and thus in fending off the threat of state intervention in the media (Bertrand 2000).

And yet every profession also has an ideology explaining that autonomy is desired not because it serves the professional's own interests but because it serves the public interest (Daniels 1973). Moreover, public service is itself another central concept of professionalism. A professional is someone who provides some service to "individuals, groups of people or the public at large" (Hughes 1965: 1), and professional codes often explicitly outline the responsibilities of those inside the occupational group to those outside it (MacIver 1966). The notions of independence and accountability, then, are not mutually exclusive to any professional community, and journalists are no exception. "It is perfectly reasonable", the authors of the revised SPJ code say, "for journalists to maintain enough independence to remain free from

external and internal pressures that dilute the truthtelling enterprise, while simultaneously

recognizing that as professionals we are accountable" to the public as well as other journalists

(Black *et al*. 1999: 29).

Much of the impetus for the addition of external accountability to the profession's

definition of its own core ethical precepts (as well as the controversy surrounding that addition)

stemmed from the civic or public journalism movement of the early 1990s, briefly mentioned

above in connection with communitarianism. Some journalists loved it; many hated it, or at least

thought they did (Voakes 1999; Rosen 2001). But the principle arguably has become central to

the definition of journalism itself for another reason entirely. The addition of accountability to

the US code also coincided with the early phases of a decade of exponential growth in the

Internet, with a corresponding growth in use by both media and non-media contributors.

Challenges and Demands of the Current Media Environment

The new online medium inherently changes the notion of an information provider's

responsibility to the audience in two potentially opposite ways, one accommodating an absence

of accountability and the other accommodating much greater accountability than ever before. On

one hand, anyone can publish anything on the Internet, the ultimate free speech zone, with virtual

impunity; moreover, the publisher can choose to remain anonymous (Singer 1996), to ignore

challenge or criticism, and to never acknowledge error or inaccuracy. On the other hand, the two-

way nature of the medium encourages those reading online content to respond to it, making

information production an iterative and readily accessible process in democratic societies.

Journalists and media organizations have responded to this fundamental change in access

to the means of disseminating information by drawing on notions of both independence and

accountability, often framing their own role in terms of responsibility to try to convince

audiences of their trustworthiness and credibility. First, journalists have sought to distinguish themselves from other information sources by emphasizing their commitment to fairness and balance. This emphasis sometimes translates into a too-rigid notion of objectivity that has come under attack for allowing even-handedness to get in the way of communicating the merits of competing claims (Cunningham 2003). Nonetheless, independence or at least non-partisanship has been a useful concept in distinguishing most mainstream journalists from blatantly biased sources of information, particularly in an environment in which argument threatens to overwhelm reporting and in which cable programming billed as "news" is increasingly built around the chatter of partisan pundits (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999).

Second, commitments to accountability have become more visible. For example, following revelations in 2003 about reporters fabricating stories, top editors at major US newspapers including *USA Today* and *The New York Times* resigned; the *Times* also hired its first "public editor", or ombudsman, and charged him with "publicly evaluating, criticizing and otherwise commenting on the paper's integrity" (Okrent 2003: 2). In fall 2004, when CBS News failed to adequately verify documents relating to President George W. Bush's service in the National Guard, the network (eventually) apologized and set up an independent panel to investigate its own journalism, in a explicit attempt to address charges of partisan motivation in its reporting (cbsnews.com 2004). Several months later, four CBS News employees, including a senior vice president, were fired for what the panel called "myopic zeal" to break a story that failed to meet "the organization's internal standards" for news (cbsnews.com 2005). Other media outlets have become more proactive about using their Web sites for a variety of functions related to accountability, including detailed explanations and dialogue with audience members. For example, in response to the controversy over its publication and subsequent retraction of a brief

item about Guantanamo Bay guards flushing the Koran down a toilet, *Newsweek*'s site offered

explanations and apologies by two top editors, an online forum for reader comments, and a

podcast of journalists discussing the magazine's actions (Smith 2005).

 Journalists and media organizations also have begun to use the Internet as a vehicle for

establishing accountability and distinguishing themselves from non-journalist in this open media

environment. One of the hallmarks of online credibility, for example, has become the provision

of information about who is behind a Web site and how to contact that person (Reddick and King

2001; Barker 2005). More individual journalists are providing e-mail addresses in a staff list,

with their stories or both; indeed, journalists now consider e-mail their most important online

tool, particularly for communication with sources (Garrison 2004).

Evidence abounds that the US public is dubious, at best, about journalistic professions of

independence, accountability and trustworthiness, online or off. More than half of Americans say

they do not trust journalists to tell the truth (Taylor 2002); almost as many believe the press has

too much freedom to do whatever it likes (McMasters 2004). A clear majority says news

organizations are politically biased, more than third see them as outright immoral (Project for

Excellence 2005a), and nearly three-quarters think they are influenced by those in power rather

than "pretty independent" (Pew Research Center 2005). Despite such major misgivings, in a

media environment packed full of options, Americans still turn to traditional news providers and

known "brands" for credible information on the Internet (Project for Excellence 2005b).

The profusion of information, the resulting search for trustworthy news and the two-way

nature of the Internet are just a few of the attributes supporting the central premise of this article:

that the current media environment -- one in which anyone can publish anything, instantly and to

a potentially global audience – demands a rethinking of who might be considered a journalist and

what expectations of such a person might be reasonable. Journalists no longer have special access to the mechanisms of widespread production or distribution of information. Nor do they have special access to information itself or to the sources of that information. These and other practical notions of what defined a journalist in the past no longer apply. Instead, the contemporary media environment demonstrates the need to emphasize normative constructs for journalists seeking to delineate themselves from other online information providers. Specifically, a revised consideration of just who is and is not a journalist must include the notion of taking personal responsibility for safeguarding the public trust as a distinguishing characteristic.

Blogs, Partisan Media and the Bottomless News Hole

This section offers a closer look at three changes that are hallmarks of the new media environment and that demonstrate the need for this normative definition of journalism as an enterprise engaged in by existentially responsible practitioners. The changes are the explosion in popularity of Weblogs or "blogs"; the partisan fragmentation among both information providers and audiences; and the dissolution of the traditional journalistic roles of gatekeeping and agenda setting in a media environment marked by unlimited information.

The "blogosphere"

Although it has been relatively simple to create a functional Web site for years, the blog may be the most foolproof format yet invented. With the start-up software and hosting service available online at no cost, it also is the cheapest. The appeal, in addition to the ego trip of seeing one's words glowing from a computer screen, may be the autonomy the format affords. "What I backed into, in doing this blog, was freedom. And not having to write things I didn't believe, and not having to write ways I didn't want to write," said Joshua Micah Marshall (Klam 2004: 49), a sometime magazine writer with a Ph.D. in history whose Talking Points Memo blog has made

him a "rock star" of political blogging. Indeed, many bloggers have publicly reveled in this sense of personal empowerment; in the words of Daily Kos blogger Markos Moulitsas, "I can write about whatever I want without somebody telling me I can't" (Smolkin 2004).

If there is one thing the blogger has, then, it is independence, particularly in the existential sense of being capable of defining oneself solely through one's actions – or words. The notion of accountability in relation to the blogger is more nuanced. Many bloggers claim it is precisely the openness and interactivity of their format that is its greatest attribute – and what separates what they call their "participatory journalism" from traditional forms. If contemporary American journalism is a lecture, blogging is a combination of conversation and seminar, says blogger and former newspaper columnist Dan Gillmor (2004). Bloggers see themselves as engaging in an ongoing dialogue to which readers contribute comments, corrections and critiques, "opening up boring, corporate-mindset punditry to a vast range of more interesting competition" (Reynolds 2003: 82). Over time, they say, bloggers gain a following, or not, based on how accurate and relevant they have been, a market-based process (usually minus any actual monetary exchange, though some blogs do attract advertisers) that helps "weed out the charlatans and the credibility-impaired" (Lasica 2003: 73).

Perhaps. Yet ultimately, a blogger need not be accountable precisely because ultimately, he or she serves the self, not the public. Although some argue that once any work is made public – is published – the public becomes a stakeholder in that work (Mitchell and Steele 2005), it seems clear that autonomy, rather than the sort of responsibility inherent in the notion of stakeholding, is the blogger's defining characteristic. The blog is, again, a purely existential form of self-expression: The blogger can choose either responsibility or irresponsibility, and neither choice need curtail or even influence subsequent decisions or actions. The core professional

concept of public service need not apply at all because the blogger is, proudly, engaging in "amateur journalism" (Lasica 2002).

An ironic side note: Although bloggers may be unaccountable themselves, many are pushing journalists toward more explicit social responsibility by, essentially, shaming them "into doing their jobs better" (Smolkin 2004). Bloggers are forcing accountability on journalists through close fact-checking and by decrying the journalistic tendency toward arrogance and aloofness (Mitchell and Steele 2005). Media "watchblogs" ideally serve as a corrective mechanism for sloppy, erroneous or lazy reporting (Andrews 2003). Examples abound. When former US Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott made a racist comment at a party for a prominent segregationist, bloggers kept the subject alive until professional journalists paid attention. When CBS News reported on Bush's disputed National Guard service without adequate verification of supporting documents, bloggers held journalists' feet to the fire until CBS apologized and launched its investigation. The *Newsweek* controversy cited above was ardently pursued in the blogosphere, as were statements by CNN news executive Eason Jordan in early 2005 about the actions of US forces in Iraq; Jordan subsequently resigned.

Partisan media and audience fragmentation

In addition to being plentiful and prolific, bloggers also tend to be partisan – often adamantly so, expressing their opinions loudly and fervently. While some journalists are beginning to question the primacy of objectivity as a norm, bloggers are untroubled by doubt; in the blogosphere, objectivity is plain verboten (Smolkin 2004). But the bloggers are only one visible component of the ongoing trend toward overtly partisan media. As the time and space available for news has gone from severely limited to virtually unlimited, media executives have realized that commenting on old or recycled information is much cheaper than gathering new

information (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999). The more conflict and drama that can be generated in the process, the better (Bennett 2005).

There certainly is no shortage of commentators. In the realm of political journalism, arguably the most directly relevant to the notion of the journalist as central to a functioning democracy, the amount of partisan spin has become overwhelming. Dueling e-mail, faxes, Web site gimmicks and more threaten to drown journalists unprepared to deal effectively with the speed, volume and deceptiveness of modern campaigning (Keefer 2004). In the United States, the "spin room" is now a presidential post-debate staple, creating an absurd spectacle of dozens of high-profile supporters for each side dashing madly about in search of someone to interview them, each bearing a giant sign "announcing their superstars like gladiators entering the Coliseum" (Marinucci 2004). More insidiously, public relations messages of all sorts are routinely offered as news; video news releases, in particular, are replacing more costly and time-consuming independent reports in cash-strapped television newsrooms (Bennett 2005).

Journalists are complicit in some of these changes and directly implicated in others that clearly serve their own self-interests and those of their employers, particularly in their participation on cable television talk shows that pit a "liberal" journalist against a "conservative" one. Talk shows cast journalists specifically to fill particular niches in an ideological spectrum, and journalists acknowledge that they often cross lines on such shows that they would never approach in their regular reporting (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999). The public can hardly be blamed for seeing the media as biased when the same people deliver both partisan "commentary" and non-partisan "news".

Nor can the public be blamed for gravitating toward outlets, and individual journalists, expressing views that jibe with their own. Although studies suggest that in an information-rich

environment, at least some people will seek out a range of views (Horrigan *et al*. 2004; Iyengar *et al* 2001), conservatives and liberals can and do choose sides in radio and television news preferences, especially cable news, and people who say they pay close attention to hard news seem particularly likely to express a preference for news that suits their point of view (Pew Research Center 2004).

If the explosion of the blogosphere calls for an increased emphasis on accountability as a defining characteristic of journalists, the rise of partisanship calls for a renewed commitment by individual journalists to their own existential independence. Journalism is ultimately an act of character that requires assuming personal responsibility for one's own actions. External pressures created by market forces show no signs of diminishing. Corporate strategies have resulted in ever-narrower targeting of niche audiences; the result has been a press less and less able to serve as a force of social cohesion, and the economic trend is not likely to change. Journalists find themselves in a difficult ethical position if media executives are not committed to putting citizens first – and many clearly are not (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999, 2001).

Sometimes a commitment to existential responsibility can even force journalists to put their jobs on the line, as witness the Sinclair Broadcasting bureau chief fired for criticizing his company's plans to air a blatantly partisan political documentary within two weeks of the US election (CNN.com 2004). Nonetheless, the best approach proposed to date to these difficult and economically driven challenges is an existentially grounded one calling on journalists to exhibit "a tough self-confidence" that involves deciding what they stand for, then articulating it and finally practicing it. "Whether serious journalism survives", observers warn, "is up to those who aspire to call themselves serious journalists" (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999: 98).

As described above, existentialism involves an individual commitment to, and subsequent responsibility for, a freely made choice. Leading existentialists have emphasized the humanistic, other-oriented nature of choices that are defensible on ethical grounds. For professional journalists, as we have seen, that orientation is connected with the idea of public service. Today, the notion of a "public" is splintering, as the audiences for what once were a relatively few national news outlets fragment into groups able to exist in completely separate media universes. Journalists who choose to appeal to particular niches make a choice that serves increasing fragmentation. Those who seek ways to appeal to a more broadly defined audience – one with a chance to work toward the compromise and resulting consensus on which democracy in enormous and enormously diverse societies depends -- can do so only by maintaining a relatively nonpartisan perspective and working to regain the public trust their colleagues are forfeiting. This is the essence of existential responsibility for the journalist, and it is vital if the journalist is to be able to serve the public as his or her professional role shifts from a gatekeeper of information to a trustworthy interpreter of it.

Gatekeeping and agenda-setting roles

Google cheerfully informs users that it will search more than 8 billion pages upon request – and much that exists somewhere in the online universe is invisible even to a powerful search engine. In such an environment, the notion of the journalist as gatekeeper seems quaint. In its original journalistic configuration, the term described a newspaper wire editor – "Mr. Gates" – who selected a relatively small number of stories for publication from the options provided by the Associated Press and other wire services (White 1950). The process was complex, involving a range of social, psychological and professional factors (Shoemaker 1997); however, it did give the selection and dissemination of information a central place in the definition of what a

journalist does. Indeed, this conceptualization of the journalist as the person who decides what others need to know has become deeply ingrained over the years, particularly in connection with the idea of serving the information needs of a democratic society (Janowitz 1975; Gans 2003).

Related to gatekeeping is the concept that through their choices about what stories should be allowed to pass through the metaphorical gate, journalists actively shape political reality. Citizens learn what issues and ideas are important to think about because of this agenda-setting function of the media (McCombs and Shaw 1972). Moreover, journalists generate consensus among an audience through the way they frame particular issues and the prominence those issues are given; thus their agenda-setting role is itself a significant ethical responsibility (McCombs 1997). Of course, a key question then becomes who or what shapes the journalists' agenda, and that has proven an extremely complex question to address. Influence comes from both inside and outside the journalists' environment, through everything from interpersonal communication, to work routines and norms, to the efforts of newsmakers to attract attention, and more (Shoemaker and Reese 1991). The latter, in particular, has become an enormous factor, as newsmakers have become increasingly proficient at manipulating images, increasingly proactive in using the Internet to focus attention on particular issues (Ku *et al*. 2003) and, as mentioned above, increasingly prolific in bombarding journalists with spin (Keefer 2004; Bennett 2005).

In fact, in an environment in which interactions among participants in the communication process are virtually non-stop and come in myriad forms, an exploration of agenda-setting quickly becomes a journey through a hall of mirrors in which the number of sources, audiences and information providers becomes infinite, and their roles and effects blend and merge together. The traditional idea of a gatekeeper vanishes. The journalist no longer has much if any control over what citizens will see, read or hear, nor what items they will decide are important to think

about. In such an open, frenetic and overcrowded media environment, the conceptualization of what a journalist does must turn from an emphasis on process – selecting and disseminating information, framing particular items in particular ways – to an emphasis on ethics.

Gatekeeping is not a matter of keeping an item out of circulation; it is a matter of vetting items for their veracity and of placing them within the broader context that is easily lost under the daily tidal wave of new "information". Agenda-setting is not a matter of identifying what information to think about; it is a matter of identifying what information to trust. Journalists in this anything-goes environment need an existential understanding of the importance of individual, autonomous choices among the virtually unlimited possibilities – and the consequences of those choices. And in making their decisions, they need a sense of their relationship to a public constituted of citizens in a democracy (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001) rather than consumers in a giant content-candy store. In short, journalists in such an environment become not gatekeepers but sense-makers, not agenda-setters but interpreters of what it is both credible and valuable – with the notion of independence keeping those interpretations from becoming compromised by partisan loyalties.

A decade ago, when the Web was on the verge of becoming a part of so many people's lives, media historian Michael Schudson invited us to imagine a world in which "governments, businesses, lobbyists, candidates, churches and social movements deliver information directly to citizens". As each person becomes his or her own gatekeeper and goes about setting his or her own information agenda, journalism is abolished. But not for long. People quite quickly realize that they need help in understanding events, in identifying what is most important, most relevant, most interesting. A professional press corps soon reappears (Schudson 1995: 1-2).

This article has suggested that although journalists have never disappeared, their traditional roles and functions – the traditional definitions that have identified what they do – have been profoundly challenged over the past decade by changes in the media environment, to the point where earlier concepts no longer hold much value. In their place, a new definition – or, more important, a new self-conceptualization by journalists themselves – is called for, one that emphasizes the notion of an existential journalist with a social responsibility to citizens.

The Socially Responsible Existentialist

If ever a medium cried for a combination of the notions of existentialism and social responsibility theory as applied to journalists and journalism, it is the Internet. The Internet affords every individual user complete autonomy over personal communication, along with the power to disseminate that communication globally with a single click. But no inherent social responsibility is connected to that action; an online user need have no obligations to any other user. That is precisely why the journalist must choose to accept those responsibilities. It is their explicit acknowledgement, as well as the ways in which such responsibilities are enacted, that sets him or her apart from those who decline to do so. The heart of the notion of a socially responsible existentialist lies in a combination of freely choosing to be responsible in order to fulfill a social role based on trust. The role has been previously identified (Merrill 1997) but is more necessary than ever in a media environment marked by an unprecedented range of options and number of communicators. Public service has always been the underpinning of professional journalism, but the nature of that service must adapt to an environment substantially different from the old print and broadcast media world. More information means a greater need for trustworthy sources of, and guides through, that information.

As discussed above, in today's media environment, virtually all the notions of journalism based on past practice are gone. Access to sources of information is open to anyone. Anyone can disseminate his or her views instantly and globally with a few keystrokes. That makes everyone a publisher, but it does not make every publisher a journalist. Professional journalists increasingly will be defined by the degree to which they choose to adhere to the normative goals of their professional culture. Particularly important will be a commitment to helping the public make sense of a world in which an abundance of "facts" creates a greater need for someone who can be trusted to provide the truth about those facts (Commission for Freedom of the Press 1947).

This article has suggested that a combination of existential freedom with a commitment to trust and responsibility – encompassed by philosophical as well as professional ways of thinking about who journalists are and what they do – provides the most useful conceptual framework for moving the profession forward. It has paired the notions of personal autonomy, action and responsibility, embodied in existentialism, with the explicit public-mindedness of social responsibility theory. The distinctiveness of the journalistic role thus lies in a normative definition that emphasizes responsibilities to the public as a whole but incorporates existential ideas of individual integrity and autonomy, particularly in the sense of freedom from faction.

Such a combination of freedom and responsibility has been articulated before. Kovach and Rosenstiel, who head the Committee of Concerned Journalists and the Project for Excellence in Journalism, respectively, repeatedly have stressed the need for journalists to combine independence from faction with an overarching allegiance to citizens (2001). Scholar John Merrill, in one of his pre-Internet books, put it this way: "Only when the journalist recognizes both self-directed responsibility and other-directed responsibility will journalism stand on a truly moral base" that combines existentialist and humanist strains, among others (1989: 243).

However, this article goes further. It suggests that ethical commitment to these normative goals

is quickly becoming the *only* thing that distinguishes the journalist from other information

providers who are independent but not responsible, such as bloggers, or responsible but not

independent, such as spin doctors of all stripes. A notion of journalism as an embodiment of

existential social responsibility becomes not merely descriptive but definitive.

It is not enough simply to draw up a conceptual definition, of course. The definition must

be enacted and, given many citizens' low regard for the media, it must be clearly, consistently

and credibly communicated outside the profession. Survey after survey shows that the public

feels ill-served by journalists and media outlets that are none of the things they profess to be –

neither ethical nor non-partisan nor even accurate. The majority of Americans no longer trust

journalists to tell the truth (Taylor, 2002), let alone to interpret competing versions of "truth."

Moreover, news organizations seem either unable, primarily because of their lost role as

gatekeepers and agenda-setters, or unwilling, primarily because of economic pressures, to serve

as the forces of social cohesion that they once were. While the splintering media environment is

only one factor among many, democratic systems that rest on the ability of both citizens and

elected representatives to compromise and reach consensus are in jeopardy as more and more

people are able to retreat into a world informed solely by their own perspectives and prejudices.

Political, social and economic problems are beyond the power of any individual journalist

to resolve. But not being entirely to blame is not the same as being blameless. One key value of

existentialism is its reminder that we all have choices to make, and those choices carry with them

an inherent responsibility both to ourselves and, ultimately, to others. Journalists as individuals

must renew their attention to a moral center in which personal integrity informs professional

decisions, difficult though those decisions may be. And journalists as members of a profession

with a broader responsibility to society at large must refocus on what will serve a public comprised of citizens in need of trustworthy information rather than consumers in need of yet another media product in a world full of other options (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001).

In the end, it is this notion of trust that resolves the question of why it even matters who is defined as a journalist. Aside from the journalist's self-serving need to maintain his or her means of livelihood and role in a changing society, why should anyone else care? The answer lies in the centrality of information as a public good in a democratic society and in the shifting nature of that civic resource. The free flow of information is fundamental to a functioning democracy, and in a traditional media environment, the primary concern of journalists has been to make information available. But today, information – along with misinformation and disinformation – is in overwhelmingly abundant supply. The public needs some means of differentiating between what is valuable to society as a whole and what is less so; otherwise, the notion of a coherent "public" falls apart as each individual seeks out whatever seems most personally appealing at the moment.

Journalism, in various forms over the years, has historically provided such a means of identifying what is socially relevant and important. The need has become even more urgent today. As the nature of the media environment changes, the definition and self-conceptualization of the journalist must shift from one rooted in procedure – the professional process of making information available – to one rooted in ethics – the professional norms guiding determinations about which information has true societal value. This article has suggested that what gains such value is information that people can trust, and that trust is best established and nurtured by those with an existential commitment to social responsibility.

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