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"Networked News Work"

Jane B. Singer

A little over a quarter of a century ago, on a cold January morning in 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded, sending its eerily beautiful, lethal plumes out into the upper reaches of the atmosphere.

For our generation, the challenger explosion has become something of an 'I remember where I was when' moment. Certainly, I remember where *I* was. January 28, 1986, was the date the small editorial team at what was soon to be named the Prodigy Interactive Service had chosen for the first test of how its newsroom would operate once the fledgling online service was launched for public use.

I was the newly named news manager, and this was my first time supervising a news operation of any kind, let alone an online one capable -- in theory, at least -- of continual updates. We had planned for an ordinary day, of course. We had a little television set up in one corner because it seemed to us that a proper newsroom should have such a thing. But mostly, we figured we would monitor the wires and do a few

dry runs of writing a couple of national stories, a couple of international ones, maybe a business item or two.

There was room on our fixed template for 14 lines of text plus a one-line headline. The service was not capable of handling photos or any sort of multimedia input. It was not connected to the Internet -- still used almost exclusively by researchers, scientists, and the military at that point, with graphical Web browsers still nearly a decade in the future -- or the very few other, equally proprietary, online services around.

Although our name highlighted the fact that we would be an interactive service, that meant mostly that people could -- and, we hoped, would -- shop through their computers, an activity that was at the core of our still-untested (and ultimately unsuccessful) business model.

I and the rest of the newsroom staff that I would hire over the next few months saw what we were building as an alternative way to deliver information -- and not much more. It would be accessible over phone lines through a computer, which was novel and pretty cool, and it would be updated more frequently than the print products where most of us had previously worked could manage.

But information delivery was undeniably what we believed we were all about.

So when the Challenger exploded, I and the other editors who were on hand for our dry run -- being at that point still a newsroom of all generals and no soldiers --

stood transfixed in front of the little TV for the first minute, then sprang for our computer terminals. I believe we managed to create two or three updated versions before the system crashed and the techies declared the test over.

Off to the bar we headed, feeling proud that we had handled, kind of, a big story and in the process had managed to boldly go where no journalist had gone before -- into the unknown land of breaking online news.

Comment [c1]: Changed to parallel the quote from Star Trek: "To boldly go where no man has gone before."

But really, of course, what we had done was Journalism As Usual, albeit it over a new delivery platform. We saw something -- OK, on television, but never mind -- we wrote about it, we published it. Not long afterwards, we were doing it for an audience. Like the audiences for radio or television or print media, those people had two options: read it or not.

But we soon began offering another option that ultimately proved far more significant. Although we did not realize it at the time, we took the first step toward a truly new form of journalism. We set up Prodigy Message Boards that gave people a way to talk to each other about the news and other topics of interest through our service.

And then almost immediately, we started censoring them, or trying to.

Because it was immediately apparent that relatively little of the discourse was going to be what we envisioned it would or at least could be. It was not PBS Newshour

only with more participants. It was a food fight, albeit it was in slow motion over a 1200-bit-per-second modem.

Just like today, only not nearly so fast.

Our focus in this volume is on evaluating evidence, and my point with this meander down my personal memory lane is that from the very beginning of the digital media age we remain in today, journalists have clung to a claim that has been, and continues to be, steadily undermined.

That claim is the ability -- or rather the right, professional and institutional -- to control information, to control the evidence that is put before the public under the label of "journalism."

I would like to discuss journalistic control over standards of evidence in three areas, each of them buffeted by those proverbial winds -- gales, hurricanes, typhoons -- of change in a networked news environment.

The first is control over decisions about newsworthiness, the evaluation of what is worth covering and worth including in the news product.

The second is control over decisions about news content, the evaluation of what aspects of that newsworthy topic belong in the constructed product, as well as how that product is presented and distributed.

And the third is control over decisions about news discourse, the evaluation of who gets to talk, what they get to say and, more broadly, what constitutes quality in this online conversation.

Newsworthiness:

Journalists quite literally make news. They evaluate information based primarily on their sense of "news judgment." As many of this volume's contributors have emphasized, they do that based on a set of deeply held, and largely unquestioned, criteria that they have been socialized -- by colleagues and sources, by education, by professional frames, by the overall culture of journalism -- to see as valuable.

An exploding space shuttle ticks all the boxes: unusual, timely, emotional, significant … and, not least, news that has strong visuals. The violent upheaval in Syria, a hurricane swamping lower Manhattan, the red, white and blue of an election campaign -- all indisputably news in 2012 by journalists' criteria.

Comment [c2]: Changed because examples previously in text were clearly not from 2012.

Journalists often look for elements of conflict to separate the mundane from the newsworthy, the fluffy from the substantive, in their eyes. The kind of "happy news" covered in press releases is derided. "Good" journalism,' including virtually all investigative journalism -- the paragon of the craft, the paradigmatic form of public service in practitioners' eyes -- nearly always involves conflict of some kind: with laws or with norms, between individuals or between groups, in response to adversity or inequality.

As something of a side note, in journalists' eyes, the biggest crisis in news today is the declining resources -- time, money, staff -- available to make this kind of news, particularly at the local level. They fear, not without justification, that the sorts of things they assess as newsworthy are not, in fact, making news because the resources that could be devoted to that task either have been reallocated or have vanished altogether.

Indeed, much investigative journalism at all levels -- national, regional, state, and municipal -- is being undertaken outside the mainstream media, notably by such non-profit, online-only startups as ProPublica or Texas Tribune or Voice of San Diego. There have been calls, such as from the Downie-Schudson report in late 2009[i], to institute mechanisms for extending their reach to an increasingly granular, community level.

These are, in my opinion, wonderful and even inspirational operations. I ardently hope they succeed. But while they have changed the financial underpinnings of news, they do not challenge its definitional or conceptual underpinnings. Their aim is to produce the kind of journalism that all journalists wish they could, if only.

In deciding what makes news, then, journalists apply particular and predictable -- and, they would say, professional -- rules of evidence. But those rules obviously -- and given the space limitations of traditional media, necessarily -- leave out the overwhelming majority of what actually shapes our days and, ultimately, our lives.

In the twenty-first century, people find themselves with the opportunity to essentially create their own news media. And it turns out that while they do generally

want to know about the things journalists feel it is important to tell them, they have a much broader view of what is newsworthy.

Newsworthiness, in fact, turns out to be rather a personal thing.

Three related transformations have followed.

One is that people can and increasingly do create their own individual definitions of news. News is what happens to them, their family and friends, their community. News is what matters in their personal lives. Journalists no longer control the definition of news, and as a result, they no longer are the only ones making news.

In a way, this has always been true. What has changed is not that we are each our own individual journalist; we have always reported this kind of news to those around us, one way or another. What has changed is that we now are each our own individual publisher.

We publish on our personal blogs. We publish on Facebook. We publish our every movement on Foursquare and our every thought on Twitter, or we can if we choose. Control over the determination of what is and is not newsworthy has shifted from the journalist in the newsroom to … everyone, everywhere.

The second, related thing that has happened is that as definitional control has broadened, the connection between conflict and newsworthiness has weakened. Personal news includes the positive as well as the negative, the events that bind us as well as those that rend us.

This is true not just at the individual level -- the things we choose to document on our blog or our Facebook page, for instance -- but more significantly to journalists, at the community level, as well.[ii]

Citizen journalism sites are largely about community building, something professional journalists tend to label as both Not News and Not My Job. Citizen journalists tend to have personal relationships with their sources, which journalists label as a Not My Role. Citizen journalists may be community activists or officeholders, which journalists label as Not My Profession.

I am not saying, nor do I think, that citizen journalism initiatives are, or should be, a replacement for more traditional forms of journalism. But these initiatives undeniably exist, and the people engaged in them just as undeniably define news -- both the product and the process of making it -- quite differently. Journalists no longer control the definition.

And the third related point to quickly make about newsworthiness is that it has a decreasing connection to facticity. Journalistic evidence has traditionally been rooted in the Enlightenment notion that reality was observable, verifiable, explicable, and knowable. Journalists around the world have identified truth-telling as their paramount norm, and they have used verifiable fact as an anchor for the nebulous and slippery notion of "truth." Facts, truth, and reality have been held up as the interconnected "God terms" of journalism.[iii]

Today's postmodern media environment challenges the notion of what constitutes journalistic evidence in all sorts of ways. The exponentially expanded number of "facts" available, from an exponentially expanded number of sources around the world, makes traditional methods of verification extremely difficult. Information is seamlessly mingled with opinion, assertion, and argumentation. It is mingled just as seamlessly with fiction in all its forms, created sometimes with an intent to entertain and sometimes with an intent to deceive.

And any of those combinations not only is newsworthy to a given individual but also can suddenly "go viral" and become newsworthy to a whole lot of individuals in an instant.

So journalists have lost control over their long-standing ability to make news, in all the connotations of that term. An exploding spaceship is still and forever going to be news for most of us, I suspect. But journalists are no longer the only ones telling everyone else either what happened or what it means, and they likely never will be again.

News Content:

We have arrived, then, at the second area of challenges to journalistic control over evidence. As control over definitions of newsworthiness have evaporated, so too has control over the actual content that is produced to match those evolving definitions.

One point I have already made is that people today can and increasingly do create a version of the Daily Me. It does not look quite like what futurists such as Nicholas Negroponte envisioned back in the 1990s, which essentially was a personalized newspaper.[iv] The Daily Me of 2012 looks instead like a blog or a Twitter feed or a Facebook profile. It looks like apps for tracking my stocks, checking my weather, following my sports team. At a more collective or collaborative level, it looks like an aggregator such as Google News or Newsvine.

But in all those permutations, news is what I say it is. A journalist may or may not have had a role in making that information available to me, but that journalist's control over whether availability rises to the level of personal awareness has diminished to nearly the vanishing point, search engine optimization strategies and frenetic Facebook updates notwithstanding.

Journalists no longer even control the content of their own stories. Not too long ago, you appeared in a news story only if the journalist put you there, as source or subject or both. Today, you may appear as a co-author, as well -- or as the sole author.

One form of co-authorship, for instance, is crowdsourcing. Jeff Howe of *Wired* magazine, who coined the term,[v] defines crowdsourcing as the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated employee -- a journalist, let's say -- and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call … as in, what's happening where you are in Tahrir Square?

In a sense, news has always been co-authored. Sources shape a story. Other journalists, from editors to competitors, shape a story; indeed, there is evidence that their influence is growing, not shrinking, in a medium where news workers constantly monitor competitive websites and constantly update their own in response.[vi] Audiences shape stories by their interests -- interests as perceived by journalists and as filtered through their multi-layered news nets. The difference now is that this last form of shaping is direct, overt, and immediate.

The hand of the news market, in other words, is no longer invisible. Quite the contrary.

The story of the Egyptian uprising in early 2011 that virtually every media organization told was a co-authored one. The evidence presented to the public came from a thousand sources. Some of that evidence was biased, some of it was contradictory, some of it was wrong. Virtually all of it, as an individual bit of information, was unverified. As an aggregation of content, however, it was a compelling first draft of history by those not simply observing it but living it -- and recording their versions of it.

Control over more mundane forms of evidence also is shared. Think about photos of severe weather that run on local media websites, for instance. I would venture to say that far more of those photos come from outside the newsroom than from staff photographers.

At the other end of the spectrum are the myriad below-the-media-radar stories that are now actively solicited by news organizations. Attend a community event? Tell us about it. See a traffic accident? Send us the photo from your mobile phone. Have some oddball area of expertise? We will host your blog on our website.

Users are providing much of the evidence that constitutes news websites in part because shrinking newsroom resources make it harder and harder for journalists to do so. But I would argue that a bigger factor is a fundamental change in the understanding -- both inside and outside the newsroom -- of what news is and who can legitimately produce it.

One noticeable difference, and you can identify it in my examples, is that news is increasingly being produced by those participating in it, whether it is the people digging their car out from two feet of snow or the people demanding the resignation of a nation's leader.

This participatory aspect of the news, facilitated by the explosion in sophisticated mobile technology, has a number of implications for, again, traditional journalistic views of what constitutes evidence and the norms that guide its newsroom production.

Clearly, the traditional notion of journalistic objectivity is in the line of fire here, as recent studies bear out. A 2009 McCormick Foundation study, for instance, reported that community journalism is evolving as an exercise in participation as much or more than observation; the people behind community news start-up websites feel their role is

to actively engage in local affairs in order to bring more meaning and commitment to what they write.[vii] Objectivity, at least as journalists generally define it, is not seen as particularly valuable -- in fact, it is not uncommonly viewed as potentially detrimental.

Similarly, other research indicates that the ability to participate in news creation and distribution is an important criterion for people faced with an unlimited choice of news providers.[viii] That is, people evaluate a news site based in part on the extent of options it offers for tailoring content to enhance personal relevance. Such options include not only the ability to customize content provided by the journalists but also the ability for users to add their own contributions.

Before leaving the subject of changes in journalistic control over the content of news, let me say a bit about control over the distribution of that news. In a traditional media environment, both the legal right and the practical ability to distribute news content were reserved to the copyright holder, aka the owner of the printing press or broadcast transmitter.

In an open network, the whole concept of control over distribution is laughable. News organizations not only have stopped trying, they have done a 180 and begun actively encouraging anyone and everyone to redistribute their content as widely as possible. Among their methods are providing the ability for website users to:

* Override the journalists' news judgment by affecting the prominence given to an item on the site. Common implementations include "most read" or "most popular"

boxes on a home page or section front, along with recommendation tools through which users can signal their approval (or disapproval) of a given story, enabling website visitors to see at a glance what others think of a piece.

* Highlight a story for consumption by those who have not visited the news organization's website at all by "sharing" it with a "social news" site such as Digg or StumbleUpon. Such sites compile lists of headlines and links based on how many times a story is suggested as deserving more widespread attention.

* Pass along a particular story to others in a user's individual social network, most notably through the now ubiquitous use of such tools as Facebook and Twitter.

Some media organizations have gone even further. Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, for example, introduced a "zeitgeist" option that combines a range of indicators into a composite snapshot of "what people are currently finding interesting on guardian.co.uk at the moment."[ix] A dynamic display offers an assortment of items that change throughout the day, sometimes by the minute, as stories get read, linked to, or talked about.

Early indications, by the way, are that what users see as valuable may not be the same things that journalists identify. A 2010 Pew study of U.S.-based media suggests quite different agendas for social media websites and mainstream media.[x] Moreover, the top stories varied widely on different social media platforms. Bloggers gravitated toward stories that elicited emotion, Twitter users focused on technology, and popular

YouTube videos highlighted the curious and the visually compelling.

In summary, users are becoming active participants in, creators of, and redistributors of the content of news. They are gaining increased control over the process of determining not only what is valuable to them as individuals but what they believe will be of value -- important, interesting, relevant, useful -- to others.

Through the implementation of increasingly sophisticated automated tools, journalists thus have relinquished control over what formerly was an exclusive right to identify which stories were the day's "best." Those judgments rested on journalists' socially and culturally informed guesses about what would be of greatest importance or interest to their audiences.

Digital technologies, and the rapidly evolving rules of evidence engendered by these tools, mean they no longer have to guess -- and those audiences no longer have to accept either the product as presented or the "play" it has been given by those in the newsroom.

News Discourse:

So journalists in a networked environment are wrestling with greatly diminished control over definitions of what constitutes newsworthiness and determinations of what constitutes news content. My final point involves control over what qualifies as acceptable speech within media spaces -- and who gets to decide what such speech might look or sound like.

As mentioned already, the issue of who is able to speak through the media -- who gets the right to present their evidence, and in so doing, to accrue at least some measure of credence for it -- used to be up to journalists to decide. Sources and subjects had, indirectly, a voice; those left out of the story, or those whose stories journalists deemed unworthy of telling, had none.

Those pioneering Prodigy users whom I mentioned at the start of this chapter were in the vanguard in saying -- shouting -- that they found journalistic control over their ability to speak every bit as unacceptable as the government control prohibited in the Bill of Rights. We actually were startled at how angry they were, though of course, we shouldn't have been. Journalists, of all people, should have anticipated how people would feel about anything that even hinted at censorship.

Twenty-five years on, most journalists would agree with the Prodigy users -- in theory. But twenty-five years on, the reality of free speech continues to pose challenges to the value that we all recognize in principle.

On discussion boards and in comment threads everywhere, the rhetorical food fight rages on and on and on, fueled not only by the endless supply of things to be outraged about but also by the anonymity and lack of real-life accountability with which that outrage can be expressed.

Media organizations have finally realized what some of us suspected way back in the 1980s: that attempts at unilateral control over online discourse are both futile and

infuriating. How, then, to balance the desire for civility (perhaps even cogency, if that's not too much to hope for) with the desire to encourage free expression?

Only recently have we begun to see a tentative answer emerge, and here too, it involves an acknowledgement of control lost -- or, more generously, shared. As with aspects of newsworthiness and news content, this shift has taken a variety of forms, and they have evolved over time.

One of the earliest moves stemmed from the realization that once the volume of user comments reached a not-very-large critical mass, pre-screening them to determine which were and were not acceptable was not only inadvisable on both legal and ethical grounds but also impossible on practical ones.

The response: Users were given the ability to flag any comments that they considered problematic. In other words, the responsibility for determining an appropriate level of discourse on a website was passed on to audiences of that site.

But that decision only addressed one problem, and it addressed it imperfectly at that. Tossing the hecklers out of the hall may make those who remain more comfortable about speaking, but it does not by itself either enable or encourage anyone else to listen.

In online discussion spaces, the ability to speak freely turns out to be necessary but not sufficient to having one's voice heard. Just as important is amplification of those voices that the rest of us might want to hear above the din.

This amplification, of course, is precisely what journalists once provided through, again, the process of selecting subjects to cover and sources to quote. As we have seen, though, that journalistic function has been significantly diluted.

Anyone can publish. Anyone can speak. And they do.

So over the past few years, journalists have begun enlisting users in the third aspect of evaluating evidence that I want to highlight: the evaluation of which speakers, as well as which elements of speech, deserve attention from the rest of us.

Here, too, this shift in control is taking a variety of technologically enabled forms. There are new permutations every time I look, facilitated by the development of increasingly flexible "community management" software applications such as Pluck or Disqus, but they include:

* Ratings of user comments. The websites of most major news outlets, and a growing number of smaller ones, too, give users an ability to click on an icon to vote -- thumbs up or thumbs down, like or dislike -- on a particular comment. Most then allow comments to be displayed by the number of votes they get rather than by the chronological default.

* Ratings of individuals who post comments. On a growing number of news websites, you can now click on the name of a person who has left a comment, see an overall score produced by the aggregate ratings of other users, and add your own rating. The score typically is displayed alongside the user's name in his or her post, as

well. Some sites also provide additional credibility criteria, such as the total number of comments posted or the amount of time the user has been an active participant in the cumulative website discourse.

* Sharing and other social media options, enabling you to forward or recommend a comment much as you might a news story, as described above.

Another recent innovation has been the integration of comments with social networking sites, notably the 500-million-member Facebook. Some media websites now enable users to comment only by first logging in to Facebook; when they post a comment there, it also displays on the news outlet's site.

This is, if I may say, a brilliant move. Not only does it publicize the news story to the individual's personal network, as a link to the item typically is included along with the comment. But even better, it goes a long way to removing the anonymity that has shielded those posting their rants and raves under fabricated screen names for the past quarter century. When all 892 of your very closest friends will know it is you foaming at the mouth, you are far more likely to put a sock in it.

So to summarize: Journalists are increasingly sharing control over news discourse in a networked environment, drawing audience members into the task of overseeing what can be said, who can say it and, most recently, the particularly thorny issue of just what constitutes quality conversation. Shifting control over this discourse

joins similarly dramatic changes in control over newsworthiness and the content of news.

In short, journalists have in at least these three fundamental respects stepped away from trying to control the uncontrollable -- from guarding open gates.[xi] In doing so, they are giving up an old form of power in order to try to safeguard their relevance in a media environment in which that power has been dramatically curtailed.

I started with my experience on that chilly and chilling January day 25 years ago, at the very dawn of online news, to try to underscore the point that from the very beginning of the digital media age we remain in today, we as journalists have been tangled up in at least three interconnected traps.

First, we have envisioned the medium as a way to tell the same stories we have always deemed to be worth telling, only faster and, as time has gone on, with more bells and whistles. Only recently have we been forced to acknowledge that there are other criteria of newsworthiness, other news worth knowing and ways of knowing it.

Second, we have envisioned audiences primarily as passive consumers and secondarily as a means of improving the stories produced by the journalists, either through informed commentary or, as mobile technology has blossomed, on-the-scene reporting. Only belatedly have we begun, though still somewhat tentatively and far from universally, to see audiences as credible producers of their own news content.

Third, we have sought to control and curtail audience activities that do not fit the socially constructed definitions we have created, even in ostensibly open discursive spaces. Only recently have we moved toward enabling those definitions to expand organically rather than organizationally.

The rules of evidence have changed. Journalists, more slowly, are changing, too.

They have no choice.

NOTES:

[i] Leonard Downie Jr. and Michael Schudson, "The Reconstruction of American Journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review* (19 October 2009), <http://www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_reconstruction_of_american.php>.

[ii] Maria Ivancin and Jan Schaffer, *New Entrepreneurs: New Perspectives on News* (Washington, D.C.: J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism, November 2009).

[iii] Barbie Zelizer, "When Facts, Truth and Reality Are God-Terms: On Journalism's Uneasy Place in Cultural Studies," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1 (March 2004): 100-119.

[iv] Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

[v] Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired* (June 2006), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.06/crowds.html>.

[vi] Pablo J. Boczkowski, *News at Work: Imitation in an Age of Information Abundance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[vii] Ivancin and Schaffer, *New Entrepreneurs*.

[viii] Kristen Purcell, Lee Rainie, Amy Mitchell, Tom Rosenstiel, and Kenny Olmstead, "Understanding the Participatory News Consumer: How Internet and Cell Phone Users Have Turned News into a Social Experience (Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project and Project for Excellence in Journalism, March 2010). <http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP_Understanding_the_Participatory_News_Consumer.pdf>.

[ix] Dan Catt and Meg Pickard, "What's Hot? Introducing Zeitgeist," *Guardian* (3 February 2010), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/help/insideguardian/2010/feb/03/zeitgeist>.

[x] Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, "New Media, Old Media: How Blogs and Social Media Agendas Relate and Differ from the Traditional Press," journalism.org (23 May 2010), <http:www.journalism.org/analysis_report/new_media_old_media>.

[xi] Jane B. Singer, Alfred Hermida, David Domingo, Ari Heinonen, Steve Paulussen, Thorsten Quandt, Zvi Reich, and Marina Vujnovic, *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).