

Chapter Eleven

Open Source Fourth Estate

I. The Industrial Model

Yochai Benkler described the old broadcast media as a “hub-and-spoke architecture with unidirectional links to the end points... typified by high-cost hubs and cheap, ubiquitous, reception-only systems at the end. This led to a limited range of organizational models for production: those that could collect sufficient funds to set up a hub.”¹ The broadcast hub-and-spoke architecture, with expensive printing presses and expensive wire service infrastructures as the chokepoints for information and a class of “professionals” controlling those chokepoints, was a reflection of the Industrial Age model of organization: “in order to be able to publish one's opinions or views of reality one must have a capital equivalent to that required to set up a factory...”²

The result was the pattern of concentrated corporate media ownership described by such writers as Ben Bagdikian and Edward Herman. In cultural terms, it meant a journalistic ethos of “professional objectivity,” which meant in functional terms the “propaganda model” of Herman and Noam Chomsky.

The idea of journalism as an activity, as a specific ability requiring specific knowledge, was born with the information industry and is really nothing new. In 1904 Joseph Pulitzer predicted that before the 20th century was over journalism schools would be granted the status of higher education institutions, like law or medical schools....

Pulitzer was thinking within the framework of an industrial business model which required workers specialised in writing copy in the same way as engineers were needed to design stabilising systems. That's why he asked the education system to train them. The time for... journalists cum activists, like the unforgettable editor of the local paper in *The Man Who Killed Liberty Valance*—was over....

...Information was a product, exclusively traded by states and by Citizen Kanes....

This is the logic of journalism as a news factory, an irreplaceable and necessary informational mediation. This view generates its own myths: the journalist is no longer an activist but a technician, a necessary mediator upholding the freedom of expression and guaranteeing the collective right to information (“the public's right to know”).³

In reality, the “public's right to know” was qualified by the very serious constraints presented by the ideological filters of those who controlled the information checkpoints. These included not only the filter of the individual correspondent who actually reported on events to the wire service or the wire service itself, but the filters of those who owned the broadcast and print outlets. This is the model of corporate media control described by radical critics like Bagdikian, Herman and Chomsky.

The “professional” ethos of the traditional press was skewed toward the perspectives of those in power. In practice, the “countervailing power” of the press operated very much like that of government regulatory agencies. Just as government regulatory agencies formed constellations of mutually supporting institutions with the corporations they were supposedly charged with regulating, the Fourth Estate usually functioned as

1 Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 179, 188.

2 David de Ugarte, *The Power of Networks : An Illustrated Manual for People, Collectives, and Companies Driven to Cyberactivism*. Translated by Asunción Álvarez (n.d.) <<http://deugarte.com/gomi/the-power-of-networks.pdf>>, p. 45.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

part of a complex of related institutions with those over which they were supposed to be exercising a “watchdog” function.

First, the mainstream press relies overwhelmingly on information “provided by government, business, and ‘experts’ funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power.”⁴ Most stories rely on official sources and content generated by press secretaries or PR departments.

This has resulted to a large extent from institutional imperatives, in the days when the press was a capital-intensive industry mediated by a few large bureaucracies.

The mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest. The media need a steady, reliable flow of the raw material of news. They have daily news demands and imperative news schedules that they must meet. They cannot afford to have reporters and cameras at all places where important stories may break. Economics dictates that they concentrate their resources where significant news often occurs, where important rumors and leaks abound, and where regular press conferences are held. The White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department, in Washington, D.C., are central nodes of such news activity. On a local basis, city hall and the police department are the subject of regular news “beats” for reporters. Business corporations and trade groups are also regular and credible purveyors of stories deemed newsworthy. These bureaucracies turn out a large volume of material that meets the demands of news organizations for reliable, scheduled flows. Mark Fishman calls this “the principle of bureaucratic affinity: only other bureaucracies can satisfy the input needs of a news bureaucracy.”

Government and corporate sources also have the great merit of being recognizable and credible by their status and prestige.... Partly to maintain the image of objectivity, but also to protect themselves from criticisms of bias and the threat of libel suits, they need material that can be portrayed as presumptively accurate. This is also a matter of cost: taking information from sources that may be presumed credible reduces investigative expense, whereas material from sources that are not prima facie credible, or that will elicit criticism and threats, requires careful checking and costly research.

The Pentagon and other government agencies, large corporations, etc., have public information or media relations offices whose primary function is to supply news organizations' needs for large quantities of pre-digested “information.”⁵ “In effect, the large bureaucracies of the powerful *subsidize* the mass media, and gain special access by their contribution to reducing the media's cost of acquiring the raw materials of, and producing, news.”⁶

According to Scott Cutlip of the University of Georgia, some 40% of the “news” in newspapers consists of material generated by press agencies and PR departments, copied almost word for word by “objective” professional journalists.⁷ A classic example of this phenomenon is wire service reporters writing stories on foreign events from their hotel rooms, using handouts from the U.S. Embassy. Consider AP coverage of the anti-Chavez coup in Venezuela in the spring of 2002. After the removal of Chavez, the White House stuck to the talking point that he “resigned,” and their doggies at the Associated Press stuck to it faithfully. Indy-media and Narco News Bulletin, meanwhile, reported that Chavez had not resigned, and was being held incommunicado.

Second, the conventional model of “professional objectivity” discourages independent recourse to the factual realm by the journalist if the material presented by an official source isn't challenged by “the other side.” In practice that means the journalist pretends to be stupider than she really is. In order to project an air of “neutrality,” she deliberately refrains both from drawing obvious conclusions from factual evidence, and from going beyond quotes from representatives of “both sides” to report factual evidence as to who's telling

4 Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), p. 2.

5 Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, pp. 18-20.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

7 Cited by Christopher Lasch in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), p. 174.

the truth. Fake "objectivity" means not drawing obvious conclusions from the facts, and pretending not to notice facts that reflect on the truth what one side or the other claims. Appealing independently to an objective factual realm, to present information that doesn't come from "either side," would itself amount to "taking sides." But insofar as the "two sides" can't both be right at the same time, truth itself is "biased." There's no way to maintain a pose of neutrality except through willful obtuseness. As Justin Lewis describes it:

The norms of "objective reporting" thus involve presenting "both sides" of an issue with very little in the way of independent forms of verification... [A] journalist who systematically attempts to verify facts—to say which set of facts is more accurate—runs the risk of being accused of abandoning their objectivity by favoring one side over another....

...[J]ournalists who try to be faithful to an objective model of reporting are simultaneously distancing themselves from the notion of independently verifiable truth....

The "two sides" model of journalistic objectivity makes news reporting a great deal easier since it requires no recourse to a factual realm. There are no facts to check, no archives of unspoken information to sort through.... If Tweedledum fails to challenge a point made by Tweedledee, the point remains unchallenged.⁸

That approach was effectively parodied by this exchange on *The Daily Show* during the 2004 election campaign:

STEWART: Here's what puzzles me most, Rob. John Kerry's record in Vietnam is pretty much right there in the official records of the US military, and haven't been disputed for 35 years?

CORDDRY: That's right, Jon, and that's certainly the spin you'll be hearing coming from the Kerry campaign over the next few days.

STEWART: Th-that's not a spin thing, that's a fact. That's established.

CORDDRY: Exactly, Jon, and that established, incontrovertible fact is one side of the story.

STEWART: But that should be—isn't that the end of the story? I mean, you've seen the records, haven't you? What's your opinion?

CORDDRY: I'm sorry, my *opinion*? No, I don't have 'o-pin-i-ons'. I'm a reporter, Jon, and my job is to spend half the time repeating what one side says, and half the time repeating the other. Little thing called 'objectivity'—might wanna look it up some day.

STEWART: Doesn't objectivity mean objectively weighing the evidence, and calling out what's credible and what isn't?

CORDDRY: Whoa-ho! Well, well, well—sounds like someone wants the media to act as a filter! [high-pitched, effeminate] 'Ooh, this allegation is spurious! Upon investigation this claim lacks any basis in reality! Mmm, mmm, mmm.' Listen buddy: not my job to stand between the people talking to me and the people listening to me.⁹

But parody has a hard time keeping up with the truth, as indicated by this real-world official criticism of a reporter on the Pentagon beat for his inadequate credulity:

The Pentagon's letter of complaint to Post executive editor Leonard Downie had language charging that Ricks casts his net as widely as possible and e-mails many people. Details of the complaints were hard to come by. One Pentagon official said in private that Ricks did not give enough credence to official, on-the-record comments that ran counter to the angle of his stories.¹⁰

8 Justin Lewis, "Objectivity and the Limits of Press Freedom," in Peter Phillips & Project Censored, *Censored 2000: The Year's Top 25 Censored Stories* (New York, London, Sydney, and Toronto: Seven Stories Press, 2000), pp. 173-74.

9 Eschaton blog, August 22, 2004 <http://atrios.blogspot.com/2004_08_22_atrios_archive.html#109335851226026749>.

10 Harry Jaffe, "Pentagon to Washington Post Reporter Ricks: Get Lost," *The Washingtonian*, December 29, 2003 <<http://washingtonian.com/inwashington/buzz/tomricks.html>>.

Early in Reagan's first administration, according to Walter Pincus, reporters investigating the accuracy of his factual claims ran up against this standard of “objectivity”:

WALTER PINCUS: ...[I]t's up to the Democrats to catch people, not us.

BILL MOYERS: So if the democrats challenged a statement from the President, you could quote both sides.

WALTER PINCUS: We then quote both sides. Yeah.

BILL MOYERS: Now, that's called objectivity by many standards isn't it?

WALTER PINCUS: Well, that's objectivity if you think there are only two sides. And if you're not interested in the facts. And the facts are separate from, you know, what one side says about the other.¹¹

The journalistic establishment defended its collusion with the Bush regime's drive for war in 2003 in terms of the same ethos of “professional objectivity.” According to David Ignatius,

the media were victims of their own professionalism. Because there was little criticism of the war from prominent Democrats and foreign policy analysts, journalistic rules meant we shouldn't create a debate on our own.¹²

Of course it's nonsense from even a purely factual standpoint that the media would have had to create a debate where there wasn't one. As Glenn Greenwald pointed out, there was no shortage of skeptical voices from the Left and Right in the period leading up to the war, challenging the Administration's version of reality—including a speech from the Senate floor by Ted Kennedy.¹³

Perhaps the most amusing scene in the whole farce was Judith Miller's straight-faced condemnation of Assange as a “bad journalist,” because “he didn't care at all about attempting to verify the information that he was putting out, or determine whether or not it hurt anyone.” This is the same “journalist” who said: “[M]y job isn't to assess the government's information and be an independent intelligence analyst myself. My job is to tell readers of *The New York Times* what the government thought about Iraq's arsenal.”¹⁴

This “both sides” standard of objectivity, as Brent Cunningham said,

exacerbates our tendency to rely on official sources, which is the easiest, quickest way to get both the “he said” and the “she said,” and, thus, “balance.” According to numbers from the media analyst Andrew Tyndall, of the 414 stories on Iraq broadcast on NBC, ABC, and CBS from last September to February, all but thirty-four originated at the White House, Pentagon, and State Department. So we end up with too much of the “official” truth.

More important, objectivity makes us wary of seeming to argue with the president—or the governor, or the CEO—and risk losing our access....

...The Democratic leadership was saying little, so there was no “she said.” “Journalists are never going to fill the vacuum left by a weak political opposition,” says *The New York Times*'s Steven R. Weisman.¹⁵

In contrast, actual independent digging into the facts costs time and money. This is reflected in the reluctance of most establishment reporters, for example, to examine the written documents (like bills and gov-

11 April 25, 2007: “Buying the War,” *Bill Moyers Journal: Transcripts* <<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/btw/transcript1.html>>.

12 David Ignatius, “Red Flags and Regrets,” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2004 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A45001-2004Apr26.html>>.

13 Greenwald, “CNN/MSNBC reporter.”

14 Eric Lach, “Judith Miller Criticizes Assange... For Not Verifying His Sources (VIDEO),” *TPMMuckraker*, January 3, 2010 <http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com/2011/01/judith_miller_criticizes_assange_for_not_verifying.php>.

15 Brent Cunningham, “Rethinking Objective Journalism Columbia Journalism Review.” *Alternet*, July 9, 2003 <<http://www.alternet.org/mediaculture/16348/>>.

ernment reports) which are at the focus of political debate. How many op-ed pieces have you read in which a writer quotes extensively from “both sides” characterization of the import of some piece of legislation, but quotes no actual provisions of the bill or otherwise indicates she's read it herself? As Sam Smith writes:

...I find myself increasingly covering Washington's most ignored beat: the written word. The culture of deceit is primarily an oral one. The soundbite, the spin, and the political product placement depend on no one spending too much time on the matter under consideration.

Over and over again, however, I find that the real story still lies barely hidden and may be reached by nothing more complicated than turning the page, checking the small type in the appendix, charging into the typographical jungle beyond the executive summary, doing a Web search, and, for the bravest, actually looking at the figures on the charts.¹⁶

So if the mainstream press just regurgitates official statements, Avedon Carol wonders, why not just read the official statements at the source?

Hm, let's see... I can go to whitehouse.gov and read everything administration officials have to say on the record, or I can spend money to buy a newspaper and read a repetition of selected quotes from that said material. What should I do?

If that's all newspapers are good for, what are newspapers good for?¹⁷

Glenn Greenwald raises the question of how the state-run media in a dictatorship would do anything any different from what the folks at CNN typically do on “national security” stories. In the case of Wikileaks, for example:

That's CNN's journalism: uncritically passing on one government claim after the next—without any contradiction, challenge, or scrutiny. Other than Blitzer's anger over the Government's failure to more effectively keep secrets from everyone, what would an overtly state-run media do differently? Absolutely nothing. It's just so revealing that the sole criticism of the Government allowed to be heard is that they haven't done enough to keep us all in the dark.¹⁸

The reason is that “establishment journalists identify with, are merged into, ...the political class....¹⁹ To repeat, establishment journalism is just another illustration of the tendency of theoretically “countervailing” institutions to become in fact parts of the same complexes of clustered institutions as the institutions they supposedly check.

The same sort of collusion between the political and journalistic establishments prevails at the local level, where the newspaper in most communities tends to be a part of the very power structure over which it is expected to exercise its watchdog functions. In the colorful language of Michael Bates, of *Batesline Blog*, the *Tulsa World* is part of Tulsa's Cockroach Caucus:

The World is more than just an observer of the local scene. It is an integral part of the tight social network that has run local politics for as long as anyone can remember. This network... has pursued its own selfish interests under the name of civic progress, with disastrous results for the ordinary citizens of Tulsa and its metropolitan area....

16 Sam Smith, in *Censored 2000*, p. 60.

17 Avedon Carol, "Pilloried Post," August 12, 2004 <http://slacktivist.typepad.com/slacktivist/2004/08/pilloried_post.html>.

18 Greenwald, "WikiLeaks reveals more than just government secrets," *Salon*, November 30, 2010 <http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2010/11/30/wikileaks>.

19 Greenwald, "The merger of journalists and government officials," *Salon*, December 28, 2010 <http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2010/12/28/cnnn/index.html>.

The same small number of connected insiders circulates from one city authority, board, or commission to another, controlling city policy, but beyond the reach of the democratic process.²⁰

Bloggers and online journalists also differ from the old establishment in taking advantage of the new journalistic potential of network technology, where conventional journalists have largely failed to do so. Online journalists, bloggers and independent scholars use search engines to examine public figures' past behavior, and to aggregate each other's findings—something seemingly beyond the capacity of traditional reporters.²¹

Now bear in mind that, under the ethos of “professional journalistic objectivity,” independently searching for information that bears on the truthfulness of an individual's statement—as opposed to reporting that some prominent figure on “the other side” referred to such information—is a big no-no. If there's not a “he said” money quote from a spokesman for “the other side,” examining the record for yourself and reporting on what you find is “taking sides.” That's only for the op-ed page, you know.

One criticism of blogging and online journalism is the lack of a gatekeeping function, like that in the editorial offices of the major newspapers of record, to vet stories for accuracy before they appear in print. “As they surveyed the growing amount of self-published content on the internet, many media companies correctly understood that the trustworthiness of each outlet was lower than that of established outlets like *The New York Times*.” But they failed to grasp the significance of the lowered capital outlay costs and other entry barriers for Web publishing: the proliferation of many more outlets. In a networked blogosphere, in which any blogger can link to the material she criticizes and provide hyperlinks to corrective information, the corrective function is performed by the networked environment itself.²² (Not to mention that this “vetting function” didn't do jack shit to stop Judy Miller.)

The parallel to the battle between Wikipedia and the old-line dead tree encyclopedias, in which the gatekeepers at *Britannica* were dumbfounded by the comparable number of errors in the two venues—and Wikipedia's record of correcting errors in minutes rather than months—is obvious.

Arguably the gatekeeping function in “professional journalism,” as it existed in the 20th century, was itself a side-effect of the increased capital outlays required for publishing and the concentration of the corporate media. Just as the FCC Fairness Doctrine was the product of a time when TV news was controlled by the Big Three, professional gatekeepers were associated with a time when there were two wire services, half a dozen major newspapers of record, and one big newspaper in most towns.

With the collapse of entry barriers for Web publishing, the proliferation of sites engaged in the corrective function is an example of individual superempowerment replacing the corrective function of institutional gatekeepers.

In any case, it's often an exercise in inadvertent humor when the establishment press chides online journalists and bloggers for a lack of “fact-checking.” If anything, bloggers and other online journalists fact-check the establishment press.

Over the weekend, on “The Chris Matthews Show,” the host and his panel pondered the importance of journalistic fact-checking. It led to this exchange between Matthews, Gloria Borger, and Joe Klein.

Matthews: Who's going to fact check for you?

Borger: We fact check, our editors...

Matthews: Online who's going to fact check?

Borger: There are still, it depends.

Matthews: The bloggers don't fact check.

20 Michael Bates, “Whirled Threatens Batesline,” *Batesline*, February 15, 2005 <<http://www.batesline.com/archives/2005/02/whirled-threate-2.html>>.

21 Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (Penguin Books, 2008), p. 63.

22 Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, p. 65.

Klein: Nobody fact checks. We still do, the print magazine and Time Magazine still has elaborate fact checkers...

Borger: We fact check.

Klein: ...but Time.com, no.

Jamison Foser noted that Chris Matthews "is the poster child for the punditocracy's habit of endlessly repeating falsehoods that happen to mesh with their worldview.... Is a television reporter who is wrong so often he has to admit 'I keep saying it, and I keep being wrong on this' really in any position to complain about anyone else's fact-checking?"

It is an odd complaint for Matthews to raise. How often do either of Matthews' shows—"Hardball" or "The Chris Matthews Show"—run corrections? Or even clarifications? Is there anyone—outside the blogs, that is—who checks the accuracy of Matthews' work?

Indeed, as Matt Corley explained, "It's ironic that a cable news host such as Chris Matthews would attack bloggers for supposedly not checking their facts, **considering the amount of falsehoods and factually inaccurate statements he regularly utters on the air**—which have all been fact-checked by bloggers."²³

(By the way, in the original online version of the quote above, the bolded clause contained nine hyperlinked words, each going to a different example of Matthews' factual inaccuracies he never corrected.)

II. Open Source Journalism

But this increasingly concentrated corporate control of the information chokepoints is being completely circumvented by the Web.

The problem is not so much the percentage of the old broadcast-model media that's controlled by corporate gatekeepers, but that consensus reality is still so closely tied to the corporate legacy media:

The problem here is that we still wait for our cable shows and our newspapers to break stories. During that waiting period, we lose valuable time. (In reality, cable shows mostly run with whatever happens to be the most popular online.)

The solution? STOP WAITING for it to appear in The New York Times. The NDAA was as real as cancer weeks before they reported on it.

I first learned about it through my social media accounts, as did many others. We need to elevate people with a good track record of reporting news via social media.... We're the canary in the coal mine, and the last line of defense when our mainstream media is asleep at the helm....²⁴

According to David de Ugarte, the blogger is doing to professional journalism what the free and open-source software movement did to Microsoft and IBM.

As for bloggers, old fashioned media see them as "intruders" or dilettantes lacking in credibility, in the same way as the great proprietary software companies used to say that free software developers were mere amateurs (that was before most of them, led by old IBM, Sun and Novell, adapted their business models to the new copyleft property systems). For the blogger is nothing but an incarnation, in the domain of information, of the hacker, the bricoleur. He's the antiprofessional....²⁵

In contrast to traditional journalism, the strong suit of online journalism is

23 Steve Benen, "Chris Matthews Ponders Fact-Checking," *Political Animal*, August 24, 2009 <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2009_08/019613.php>.

24 David Seaman, "NDAA, SOPA, Presidential Debates, And Iran: Corrupt Media At Play," *Business Insiders*, December 26, 2011 <<http://www.businessinsider.com/ndaa-sopa-presidential-debates-and-iran-corrupt-media-at-play-2011-12#ixzz1ho0G24TN>>.

25 de Ugarte, *The Power of Networks*, p. 43

the selection of sources which are... immediately and directly available to the reader. This is what most blogs do, as do, by definition, pressclipping services. Their contribution consists in selecting sources from a certain point of view. In the same way as it makes no longer sense to understand newspapers as “newsmakers”, so opinion is no longer based on the best information attributed to an individual, as the network makes sources available to everyone. What is important now is interpretation and analysis—that is, the deliberative component which signals the appearance of a truly public, nonindustrially mediated, citizens' sphere.²⁶

In other words, networked journalism makes better use of information, in digesting it and putting it together, than industrial journalism.

Everything written above about the ability of networked organizations to exercise “countervailing power” functions over powerful institutions is also true of news, with ever-expanding networks of amateurs in venues like Indymedia, with alternative new operations like those of Robert Parry, Bob Giordano and Greg Palast, and with natives and American troops blogging news firsthand from Iraq—all at the very same time the traditional broadcasting networks are relegating themselves to the stenographic regurgitation of press releases and press conference statements by corporate and government spokespersons.

Six days before protesters shut down Seattle, Matthew Amison, an activist and programmer from the Catalyst Collective in Sydney, posted the inaugural message on a website he had helped build. Displaying the utopianism that would become characteristic of a generation of digital activists, he declared, “The web dramatically alters the balance between multinational and activist media. With just a bit of coding and some cheap equipment, we can set up a live automated website that rivals the corporates. Prepare to be swamped by the tide of activist media ...” With this digital call to arms, Indymedia was born.

Within days, Indymedia’s on-the-ground reports of the lockdown of Seattle had been accessed over a million times. Even mainstream, corporate media were relying on Indymedia for accurate accounts of the protests. Indymedia’s open-publishing model empowered citizen journalism with an ethos of antiauthoritarianism. For the first time, anyone could write the news, anyone could be an investigative journalist, anyone could challenge corporate control of information. Within two years, Indymedia sites bloomed in 125 cities and on every continent.²⁷

Even conceding that the vast majority of shoe-leather reporting of original news is still done by hired professionals from a traditional journalistic background, blogs and other news aggregators are increasingly becoming the “new newspapers,” making better use of reporter-generated content than the old, high-overhead news organizations.

But in fact most of the traditional media's “original content” consists of verbatim conveyance of official press releases, which could just as easily be achieved by bloggers and news aggregators linking directly to the press releases at the original institutional sites. Genuine investigative reporting consumes an ever shrinking portion of news organizations' budgets.

To the extent that the traditional media still do genuinely independent, investigative reporting, it's true that most journalistic content is still generated by conventional reporters writing for traditional newspapers. It's true that Internet journalism, to a large degree, lacks such resources as “dedicated full-time reporters” and “contacts with politicians who need media to survive....”²⁸ But Internet journalism makes far better use of the content generated by conventional reporters than do the traditional media.

In the new model of networked journalism, traditional reporters are increasingly relegated to the role of providing raw content. Their analytical function—which they were never very good at anyway, by and large—is being picked up by networked aggregators and commentators.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

27 Micah M. White, “To the Barricades,” *Adbusters*,

28 Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, p. 264.

And the use that networked journalism makes of the content generated by conventional journalism is entirely different from that of the mainstream press.

Common to all these Web-based tools—both static and dynamic, individual and cooperative—are linking, quotation, and presentation. It is at the very core of the hypertext markup language (HTML) to make referencing easy.... Around these easy capabilities, the cultural practice has emerged to reference through links for easy transition from your own page or post to the one you are referring to—whether as inspiration or in disagreement. This culture is fundamentally different from the mass-media culture, where sending a five-hundred-page report to millions of users is hard and expensive. In the mass media, therefore, instead of allowing readers to read the report alongside its review, all that is offered is the professional review in the context of a culture that trusts the reviewer. On the Web, linking to original materials and references is considered a core characteristic of communication. The culture is oriented toward "see for yourself." Confidence in an observation comes from a combination of the reputation of the speaker as it has emerged over time, reading underlying sources you believe you have some competence to evaluate for yourself, and knowing that for any given referenced claim or source, there is some group of people out there, unaffiliated with the reviewer or speaker, who will have access to the source and the means for making their disagreement with the speaker's views known. Linking and "see for yourself" represent a radically different and more participatory model of accreditation than typified the mass media.²⁹

To the extent that the power of the political hierarchy and the moral authority of "our representatives" was reinforced by a mutually supporting relationship between political and media hierarchies, the authority of the political system is undermined by network culture. The authority of the state and its policies depends, to the large extent, on a "consensus reality" common to the overwhelming majority of the population. And the old broadcast model described by Herman and Chomsky was central to the manufacture of consensus reality. Anything that undermines it also undermines the structure of authority. Yochai Benkler writes:

...at a minimum we can say that individuals are less susceptible to manipulation by a legally defined class of others—the owners of communications infrastructure and media. The networked information economy provides varied alternative platforms for communication, so that it moderates the power of the traditional mass-media model, where ownership of the means of communication enables an owner to select what others view, and thereby offer to affect their perceptions of what they can and cannot do. Moreover, the diversity of perspectives on the way the world is and the way it could be for any given individual is qualitatively increased.³⁰

The blogosphere, de Ugarte writes, "will not only threaten the media."

Every information structure is underpinned by a power structure. Changes in the structure of the information sphere threaten the system of political representation. If the blogosphere actually manages to erode media representation, how could the representation of professional political mediators remain intact?³¹

In place of the old public sphere dominated by one-way broadcast hubs, with communications controlled by gatekeeper institutions with the means to own such hubs, we see the emergence of what Benkler calls the "networked public sphere."³² The "public sphere," as opposed to the private one, is "the set of practices that members of a society use to communicate about matters they understand to be of public concern and that potentially require collective action or recognition."³³ The public is linked to itself, without mediation by

29 Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, pp. 218-219.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

31 De Ugarte, *The Power of Networks*, p. 48.

32 Benkler, p. 10.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

nodes controlled by the state and corporate media, and capable of concerted action *as* a public without the need to coordinate action through the state or other hierarchical organizations.

The Internet allows individuals to abandon the idea of the public sphere as primarily constructed of finished statements uttered by a small set of actors socially understood to be “the media”... and separated from society, and to move toward a set of social practices that see individuals as participating in a debate. Statements in the public sphere can now be seen as invitations for a conversation, not as finished goods.³⁴

Although some have noted a power law distribution of attention in the networked public sphere of the Worldwide Web, this does not—as many of them suggest—imply the reemergence of the old mass-media model. Since the power law distribution of readership reflects only interest, rather than—as with the old broadcast media—the high material cost of hubs, the material entry barriers for a low-volume node to become a high-volume one are nonexistent. And the Web is governed by an extremely long-tail pattern of distribution. To quote Benkler again:

Some sites are much more visible and widely read than others. This is true both when one looks at the Web as a whole, and when one looks at smaller clusters of similar sites or users who tend to cluster. Most commentators who have looked at this pattern have interpreted it as a reemergence of mass media—the dominance of the few visible sites. But a full consideration of the various elements of the network topology literature supports a very different interpretation, in which order emerges in the networked environment without re-creating the failures of the mass-media-dominated public sphere. Sites cluster around communities of interest: Australian fire brigades tend to link to other Australian fire brigades, conservative political blogs (Web logs or online journals) in the United States to other conservative political blogs in the United States, and to a lesser but still significant extent, to liberal political blogs. In each of these clusters, the pattern of some high visibility nodes continues, but as the clusters become small enough, many more of the sites are moderately linked to each other in the cluster. Through this pattern, the network seems to be forming into an attention backbone. “Local” clusters—communities of interest—can provide initial vetting and “peer-review-like” qualities to individual contributions made within an interest cluster. Observations that are seen as significant within a community of interest make their way to the relatively visible sites in that cluster, from where they become visible to people in larger (“regional”) clusters. This continues until an observation makes its way to the “superstar” sites that hundreds of thousands of people might read and use. This path is complemented by the practice of relatively easy commenting and posting directly to many of the superstar sites, which creates shortcuts to wide attention.... The result is that attention in the *networked* environment is more dependent on being interesting to an engaged group of people than it is in the mass-media environment, where moderate interest to large numbers of weakly engaged viewers is preferable. Because of the redundancy of clusters and links, and because many clusters are based on mutual interest, not on capital investment, it is more difficult to buy attention on the Internet than it is in mass media outlets, and harder still to use money to squelch an opposing view. These characteristics save the networked environment from the Babel objection without reintroducing excessive power in any single party or small cluster of them, and without causing a resurgence in the role of money as a precondition to the ability to speak publicly.³⁵

There is a fundamental difference in how the Internet organizes information, compared to the old hub-and-spoke architecture of the broadcast media. The majority of information which makes it through the filtering mechanisms of the gatekeeper press, as we saw above, tends to be content which is generated and shaped by powerful institutions. Newspapers tend to be filled with content generated by public spokespersons and PR departments. Compare this to the results of a Google search for “Barbie,” as described by Benkler, which produces listings for AdiosBarbie.com and the Barbie Liberation Organization on the first page

34 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

of results alongside Mattel's official sales-related site.³⁶ At the time I wrote the first draft of this passage, in February 2011, a highly critical and snarky old blog post of mine showed up on the first page of results for a Google search on “Fish! philosophy,” appearing directly under the official Charthouse site and the Wikipedia entry.³⁷

Network technology not only permits open source journalists to compete with conventional ones in doing what the latter should be doing, by putting a cheap printing press within easy reach. It also lowers the transaction costs of doing so, by permitting the near-effortless aggregation of information.

One of my favorite Jon Stewart bits was a long video collage of GOP spokespersons and “pollsters” and “strategists” on the network talking head shows, in late 2003, regurgitating critiques of Howard Dean in almost identical language: too angry, too extreme to represent average Americans, etc. After showing brief clips of the same exact words coming out of twenty different mouths, Stewart commented: “Talking points—they're true because they're said a lot!” That's something a “real” journalist should have done, if the rules of “professional objectivity” didn't outlaw real journalism. But even for someone like Stewart to do it carried enormous transaction costs. Stewart had to persuade some media company executive, representing the enormous aggregation of capital necessary to set up a cable network like The Comedy Channel, that there was a large enough audience for what he did to justify the cost—and then go through all the effort of putting together a staff and doing all the other stuff that goes into producing a TV show. But thanks to the Web, anyone who knows how to search Google for iterations of the talking points and publish them with a free Blogger or Wordpress blog can be Jon Stewart.

The low cost of aggregating information, along with the overlapping phenomenon of lowered cost of bringing together people in possession of disparate bits of information, makes the whole available to everyone for the first time.

The low cost of aggregating information also allowed the formalization of sharing among people tracking priestly abuse. BishopAccountability.org, launched a year after the Geoghan case, collated accusations of abuse, giving a permanent home to what in the past would have been evanescent coverage. David Clohessy, the director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), credits the ability to collect and share information with the change in public perception: “What technology did here was help expose the lie in the two greatest PR defenses of this kind of abuse: 'This is an aberration' and 'We didn't know.' When you can send a reporter twenty links to nearly identical stories, then that reporter obviously approaches his or her own bishop with greater skepticism and much more vigor.”³⁸

III. Criticism of Networked Journalism

Internet journalism is sometimes criticized for its allegedly derivative or parasitic nature. A good example is this quote from Rusty Turner, the previous editor of my local newspaper (local is a comparative term, considering it's the only player in a single-newspaper market covering two countries, after having swallowed up and amalgamated all the genuine local newspapers in the two county region):

A lot of people say they get their news exclusively online, that they no longer rely on the printed word, or even broadcast news, for information. But, when you consider where most original reporting develops (that would be the printed pages and Web sites of newspapers wire services, televisions and other traditional news-gathering operations, then, really, most people still depend on us dinosaurs. They're just consuming our work in a different form.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

³⁷ Kevin Carson, “More On (Moron?) Fish! Philosophy,” *Mutualist Blog: Free Market Anti-Capitalism*, April 26, 2006 <<http://mutualist.blogspot.com/2006/04/more-on-moron-fish-philosophy.html>>.

³⁸ Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, pp. 150-151.

As I already said, I don't think anyone will dispute that print journalism has an advantage over Internet journalism in the number of personnel engaged in shoe-leather reporting, or that the vast majority of content that appears in online journalistic venues comes from reporters working in traditional print media.

These facts are not in dispute. The problem is with the conclusions people like Mr. Turner draw from them, which manage to miss the fundamental significance of network organization.

The revolutionary significance of Internet journalism lies not in how it generates content, but in the use it makes of existing content. Bloggers make better use of the dead tree media's own content than the dead tree media itself does.

To repeat yet again, nobody disputes that print journalism has an enormous army of reporters on the ground, far beyond the resources online journalism has at its direct disposal. But as Lincoln once said to General McClellan, "If you're not going to use that army, may I borrow it?"

I don't think Mr. Turner and those of like mind fully understand the implications of their own argument. For example, most of what Mr. Turner himself does is not direct reporting, but filtering, selecting, editing and combining the content of reporters working for *The Morning News*. Aside from the fact that both he and the reporters are within the imaginary walls of the same corporate entity, how is what he does any different from what a blogger does in using content generated by other people, and using his own critical intelligence to decide what is useful and relevant and what is not, and exactly how to combine it? Even worse for Mr. Turner's position, a major part of the content he includes in his newspaper is not generated internally at all, but from reporters working for other organizations. A considerable portion of the state, national and international news that appears in *The Morning News* is generated by the Associated Press. As Matt Yglesias put it:

Convention dictates that if I sit at a desk and read a transcript of what the press secretary said and then write about the transcript, I'm a lowly cheeto-eater. But if I sit in the White House press room and transcribe what the press secretary said, and then write about the transcript then that's journalism.³⁹

The formal difference between what Mr. Turner does and what a blogger does consists primarily of Mr. Turner's limitation by the legal fiction of corporate boundaries. The blogger or other online journalist is every bit as much an editor as Mr. Turner, in the sense of editing and recombining content generated almost entirely by other people. But while Mr. Turner is limited to the stable of reporters available to him in-house, supplemented by syndicated material from the wire services, for the blogger the entire world of journalism is "in-house."

More importantly, while both traditional editors and bloggers make use of second-hand material they did not themselves write, bloggers make better use of it. They use what's out there in ways that most traditional newspapers refrain from doing. That is, they put it together. They quote a factual claim from one source, and then immediately provide a hyperlink to information that provides a factual context to the claim. They take bits and pieces of news from different sources, aggregate it, and draw conclusions as to its meaning. In other words, they analyze material from various sources in light of each other and in light of independent research into the factual realm, in exactly the ways which we've seen are prohibited by the establishment journalism's ethos of "professional objectivity."

39 Matthew Yglesias, "Journalists, Bloggers, and Status Anxiety," *Yglesias*, January 14, 2009 <http://yglesias.thinkprogress.org/2009/01/journalists_bloggers_and_status_anxiety/>.

IV. Watching the Watchdog

One example of how the Web can subject conventional, industrial-model journalism to critical analysis is Churnalism.com, a website that lets readers paste in articles and check to see how much of their content comes from press releases.

The website, churnalism.com, created by charity the Media Standards Trust, allows readers to paste press releases into a "churn engine". It then compares the text with a constantly updated database of more than 3m articles. The results, which give articles a "churn rating", show the percentage of any given article that has been reproduced from publicity material.⁴⁰

[Draft last modified December 4, 2015]

40 Paul Lewis, "Churnalism or news? How PRs have taken over the media," *The Guardian*, February 23, 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/feb/23/churnalism-pr-media-trust>>.