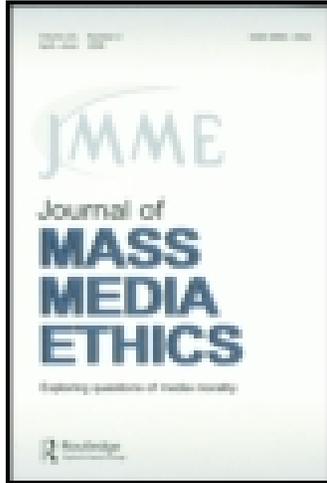


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Shifting Roles, Enduring Values: The Credible Journalist in a Digital Age

Arthur S. Hayes ^a, Jane B. Singer ^b & Jerry Ceppos ^c

^a Fordham University

^b University of Central Lancashire/University of Iowa

^c Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, Santa Clara University

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Shifting Roles, Enduring Values: The Credible Journalist in a Digital Age

Arthur S. Hayes

Fordham University

Jane B. Singer

University of Central Lancashire/University of Iowa

Jerry Ceppos

*Markkula Center for Applied Ethics
Santa Clara University*

□ *When everyone can be a publisher, what distinguishes the journalist? This article considers contemporary challenges to institutional roles in a digital media environment and then turns to three broad journalistic normative values—authenticity, accountability, and autonomy—that affect the credibility of journalists and the content they provide. A set of questions that can help citizens determine the trustworthiness of information available to them emerges from the discussion.*

Each semester, on their first day in the Online Journalism class at the University of Iowa, students are asked to do two things: define a “journalist” and access a “journalism site.”

Over the years, the students’ responses have remained strikingly consistent.

Almost all of them go to the sites produced by major “brand name” news organizations: CNN.com, NYTimes.com, USATODAY.com, and the like. And the students’ definitions of a journalist boil down to “someone who gives me information I can trust.”

The distinction they have drawn between “journalists” and “everyone else” seems to be based partly on cultural habit and partly on what seems to be a widely shared belief about the nature and value of journalism’s role in our society. The students’ choices suggest that information in and of itself is not necessarily valuable. Instead, the value of information derives from the values of those who create it.

Trust is inherently a foundation of ethical social interaction (Bok, 1989), enabling people to feel confident that they are not being lied to. When it is shattered or worn away, institutions and relationships collapse. For journalists, trust is earned through the regular provision of information that is credible, an inextricable interconnection of roles, values, and content.

This article begins by considering the recent information explosion and its implications, offering examples of current challenges to institutional roles and the difficulty of defining the journalist. Based on Ward's (2004) account of the public philosophy of journalism and some recent legal rulings, we argue that journalism and its core values stem from an implicit or explicit compact that an individual journalist or news outlet develops with its public. We focus on three broad values—authenticity, accountability, and autonomy—that influence credibility in the rapidly shifting media environment where journalists work alongside other information providers such as bloggers, who are used here as exemplars of “digital native” communicators.

Because this is an era in which the roles of information producer and consumer are interchangeable—and in which multiple voices can and do claim to be journalistic—each individual must determine what he or she values in a news source and how to assess whether a particular source has fulfilled those desires. To that end, the article also incorporates a series of questions to help readers determine who merits trust.

Information Explosion

During the past 25 years, new mass media technologies have evolved to challenge the print and broadcast industries' control over gatekeeping, framing, agenda setting, and other traditional media roles. In doing so, they have redefined conventional notions of news and the types of individuals who gather, edit, and report it.

Cable television news offers an example. CNN was the first round-the-clock news network in the United States; within two decades, MSNBC and Fox News Channel became rivals. Filling 24 hours of television programming with news 7 days a week is neither easy nor cheap; consequently, the cable news networks quickly began meeting their programming needs by relying on less-expensive talk shows and the journalism of argument and assertion, blurring the line between traditional objective news reporting and opinion (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 1999) and routinely offering something closer to theater than civic debate.

That's not journalism, media traditionalists argue. Yet by 2005, the public considered cable news about as credible as broadcast network news divisions (Project for Excellence, 2005). “Fake news” programs such

as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* satisfy what *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich (2006) called a lust for escapism, even (perhaps especially) when the topic is politics; in 2004, Americans under 30 years old mentioned comedy shows almost as frequently as newspapers and evening network news programs as regular sources of election news (Pew Research Center, 2004).

But both genres still operate on a gatekeeping model. Blogging, with its low start-up cost and easy-to-master technology, does not. For example, blogger Matt Drudge has regularly scooped the mainstream media. The *Drudge Report* site reportedly generates a seven-figure income, and Drudge himself was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2006 by *Time* magazine (Cox, 2006). On Election Day 2006, more than 2.3 million people turned to the *Drudge Report* for information (Intermarkets, 2006).

Drudge, of course, is just one example among millions, albeit an influential one. As of late 2006, the Web hosted an estimated 57 million blogs, with roughly 100,000 new ones being created every day (Sifry, 2006). Bloggers in general set out to influence, although many seek to inform as well, and they compete for attention not only with cable networks but also with everything from the entertainment content of satellite radio and popular user-generated content such as YouTube videos and Flickr photos.

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The problem with an all-inclusive approach is that persuasion and diversion are too easily confused with enlightenment and fact, potentially weakening democracy unless citizens are paying close attention. The ubiquity and variety of readily available information sources, as well as the propensity of many communicators to put a personal spin on what they disseminate, raise initial questions that media consumers might ask themselves in deciding what content to trust and from whom:

1. *Do I want news and opinion that exclusively agree with my views?*
2. *Do I want news mixed with opinion?*
3. *Do I care whether news and opinion are clearly distinguished from one another?*

Obviously, if the answers are “yes” to the first two questions and “no” to the third, it is easy to satisfy those desires with countless Web sites, television offerings, and print publications that have axes to grind. If consumers have something more traditional in mind for their news, they should seek other options.

Definitional Problems

Many traditional journalists watching audiences migrate to newer sources of information have complained that those sources do not adhere to established ethical practices and values such as verification of information, objectivity, and disclosure of political and personal biases (Welch, 1998). Some of these concerns stem from a fear of losing both audience and advertising revenues and, more broadly, authority over the ability to set the agenda of public discourse. Before returning to that notion of authority as a journalistic value, we need to wrestle briefly with the difficulty, both contemporary and historical, of defining just who is a journalist and who is not.

Some attempts to define journalists have begun with professional ethics. However, considering recent professional behavior, that approach seems tenuous. Egregious breaches of widely accepted norms challenge attempts to differentiate between journalists and everyone else by claiming the former are people who are “professionally dedicated to truth seeking” (Wasserman cited in Thomas, 2005, p. 16). This approach excludes bloggers and freelancers while including professionals such as the clergy and physicians, who also have some commitment to truthful information dissemination.

Other experts point to professional training as a way to differentiate journalists who are “trained to report nonfiction events to an audience” (Turow, 2003, p. 45) from nonjournalists with no training. Yet the First Amendment protects “untrained” individuals’ right to publish as firmly as it does the rights of a journalism school graduate or news organization employee (Marshall & McCown, 1979). In fact, all such attempts at definition lead in circles. Instead, one can argue that the proper starting point for any inquiry into roles and values is with the content itself: Is the content based on verifiable information? Does it add to a public discourse that allows citizens to protect and promote their liberties in realms including the political, artistic, cultural, sexual, religious, and economic? A philosophy of moral values is shaped by the journalist’s or news organization’s need to be perceived by its audience as contributing to public discourse by providing factual, reliable, timely, and meaningful information.

Historical and Legal Perspectives

Stephen Ward (2005) has arrived at a similar view—his self-described public philosophy of journalism, a contractualist view of journalism ethics—largely through historical analysis. “In critiquing journalism ethics, contractualists ask what journalists implicitly or explicitly promise the public through their social contract” (Ward, p. 7). In Europe, this contract was first forged in the 1700s, sometimes explicitly in newspapers’ mission statements (Ward, 2004, p. 129).

Ward’s historically supported theory outlines the variety of actors whom the public has trusted to provide them with news and journalism. When this compact between the public and journalists was first reached in England, journalism included partisan and reformist advocacy; gossip; advertisements; and essays on politics, fashion, science, and polite society, all of which may sound quite familiar. Who was a journalist during this period? Ward identified three journalistic roles: the essayist, the spectator, and the register. *Robinson Crusoe*’s Daniel Defoe and *Gulliver’s Travels*’ Jonathan Swift wrote partisan essays for weekly newspapers. Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s *Spectator*, a model for early papers in colonial America, offered commentary without incitement. Samuel Johnson also practiced “spectator” journalism. Samuel Buckley’s *Daily Courant*, the first daily paper, spawned the vocation of register, or news-gathering, journalism (Ward, 2004).

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If these 18th century Anglo-American standards were applied to contemporary journalism, there would be no categorical distinctions between partisan blogger and so-called objective print reporter. Many bloggers, with their mix of commentary and reporting, are present-day partisans and spectators, contemporary versions of earlier pamphleteers (Gillmor, 2004; Kochan, 2006). If essayists Defoe, Swift, Addison, and Steele played vital roles in creating the practice of journalism and its public ethic, their modern-day counterparts must surely be “journalists,” too. Similarly, from the early 1700s to today, journalism in Western democracies has included not only objective reporting but also partisan, ideological, advocacy, and investigative journalism; political parody; and

satire. Such diverse content performs a host of public functions but shares a single role: It furthers meaningful civic discourse.

This historical perspective suggests another question consumers may ask themselves in determining whose work merits their trust:

4. *Does my information source facilitate public discourse?*

Legal rulings also support the argument that journalism is a verb (Jarvis, 2005); that is, one “does” journalism, and the process involves individual decision making. Again, the importance of identifying journalism by the democratic role that its content serves in facilitating public discourse is underscored in several Federal Communication Commission (FCC) rulings. For example, in determining what constitutes a bona fide newscast, news interview, or news documentary for purposes of exemption from equal opportunities requirements in the Communications Act of 1934, the FCC ruled that Howard Stern’s radio program, satirist Bill Maher’s *Politically Incorrect* television program, and TV talk shows *Donahue*, the *Sally Jessy Raphael Show*, and *Jerry Springer* qualify for exemption. The FCC reasoned that Congress created the exemptions to increase news coverage of the political process on television. Subsequently, the FCC has focused on whether the content in question serves the interest of public political discussion and participation. Congress, the FCC noted, recognized that interview formats less formal than *Meet the Press* or *Face the Nation* also contribute to engaging voters (*In re Request of Infinity Broadcasting Operations Inc.*, 2003). Using the same rationale, some have concluded that “there should be no doubt that the *Daily Show* interviews would qualify for an exemption . . . even though it is an entertainment show” (Blitz & Corn-Revere, 2004, p. 16).

Judicial rulings on a reporter’s privilege also stress the activity of journalism and its public nature as touchstones, including who can invoke the privilege of reporter-source confidentiality (Schmidt & Goldberg, 1999, p. 1). Courts have ruled that individuals working as documentary filmmakers, authors of technical publications and professional investigative books, and unpublished writers may qualify as journalists if they start their projects with the intent to publish or broadcast to the public, an outlook that favors the broader public service value implicit in the communications activity.

In 2006, bloggers won recognition as journalists for the purposes of invoking the reporter’s privilege under a state shield law (*O’Grady v. Superior Court of Santa Clara County*, 2006, p. 1457). A court-drawn distinction between legitimate and illegitimate journalism, the appellate body ruled,

would imperil a fundamental purpose of the First Amendment, which is to identify the best, most important, and most valuable ideas not by any

sociological or economic formula, rule of law, or process of government, but through the rough and tumble competition of the memetic marketplace (p. 1457).¹

History and recent jurisprudence thus support the thesis that, at its core, journalism concerns itself with public affairs for the public's consumption, and it must seek public validation as being factual, reliable, and original. The effort to forge and maintain trust between journalist and audience member drives practitioners toward identifying and adhering to core ethical values.

Authenticity: Institutions and Individuals

In a traditional media environment, journalism, by and large, is contained within the products of entities that employ journalists: newspapers, magazines, broadcast news stations, and the like. In legal terms, most journalism is "work for hire," something prepared by employees within the scope of their employment (U.S. Copyright Office, 2004). In practice, this means that outside of their own professional community, journalists derive much of their credibility from that of their employer. The individual journalists' dealings are primarily with sources and with other journalists; to members of the public at large, they are part of the media company and their work is seen as what the organization—not the individual—reported today.

Although it raises ethical concerns, this sort of institutional authenticity is what students draw on when they equate "a journalism site" with a site produced by a mainstream media outlet. That they consider Christiane Amanpour's reporting from the Middle East for CNN to be credible or that they have come to trust what Adam Nagourney tells them about political campaigns in the pages of *The New York Times* may or may not be a part of that mental equation, but at best it is only a part. The overall association, and the degree of trust that goes with it, attaches primarily to the organization, not the individual journalist. In effect, CNN and the *Times* each represent the aggregated credibility of hundreds of journalists who, as individuals, may come to public attention only, or at least primarily, when they screw up. They become part of a "brand" that has, over time, succeeded in gaining public trust as a source of credible information. The actions and ethical decisions of individual practitioners can strengthen that trust or undermine it, but in terms of public perception, it is the institution that generally takes the credit—or the hit.

Using authenticity as a framework for assigning credibility has its advantages for the public, the news organization, and the journalist. The

journalist gains a ready-made reputation rather than one that has to be built up word by word, story by story. The news organization has a mechanism for both addressing and surviving the ethical lapses of individual employees. And members of the public do not have to expend the cognitive energy to assess the work of each individual reporter or photographer; the effort needed to pay such close attention to what each journalist does over time would be considerable, and Americans simply are not all that tuned in (Mindich, 2004).

(I)nstitutional authenticity as a basis for credibility works a lot better in yesterday's media environment than it does in today's.

However, institutional authenticity as a basis for credibility works a lot better in yesterday's media environment than it does in today's. Students may still associate the Web sites of traditional media with "journalism," but that doesn't necessarily mean they are going there for news themselves. By the end of 2005, Yahoo! News had overtaken both CNN and MSNBC as the most heavily used online news site, averaging 27 million unique visitors a month (Project for Excellence, 2006a). Nearly half of Americans who often get news online regularly visit such aggregator sites as Google News, AOL News, or Yahoo! News (Pew Research Center, 2006a). And nearly 10% of Americans get news from blogs, 6% from "alternative" news sources, and 5% from list serves (Horrigan, 2006).

The nature and function of aggregators and re-packagers should raise caution flags for consumers, who might ask themselves two more questions about their information providers:

5. *Does this source break news itself or merely aggregate?*
6. *Are some articles based on first-hand observation rather than secondary sourcing?*

Commentary on what others have said is, of course, valuable, and early forms of journalism often revolved around such secondary evaluations, as described above. However, a diet of nothing but commentary increases the volume of discourse without necessarily adding to its quality. Similarly, aggregation can be helpful, and the ability to personalize information is a key benefit of the Internet. But aggregation relies on algorithms rather than the individual judgment. Aggregators are potentially as likely to highlight material from sources that do not care about credibility as from those that do.

Moreover, aggregation is a double-edged sword: It excludes as well as includes, and much of what is excluded may be valuable to civic knowledge. Of course, the same is true for journalists; aggregation is, in essence, a gatekeeping role. Relegating that responsibility to a computer program removes it from the ethical realm, which rests on human choice. The role, in other words, is stripped of the values that, within an actual newsroom, inform it.

That said, those values are not universally or uniformly upheld. Most major news organizations have suffered a steady decline in public assessment of their credibility. In one recent survey asking opinions of various local and national media, not a single outlet was seen as credible enough for even 30% of the respondents to say they believed “all or most” of what it reported. Outright distrust was correspondingly high. For example, while 20% said they believed all or most of what they saw in *The New York Times*, nearly as many, 18%, said they believed almost nothing (Pew Research Center, 2006b). A Gallup poll taken during the 2004 fall election campaign found that just 44% of Americans were confident in the media’s ability to report news accurately and fairly, the lowest level of confidence in the media since Gallup first asked the question in 1972 (Gillespie, 2004). Nearly three-quarters of Americans see the press as slanted; almost two-thirds see it as politically biased (Project for Excellence, 2006b). In short, relying on the authenticity provided by institutional reputation as a hallmark of journalistic credibility is risky business.

It is also dubious from an ethical perspective. For thousands of years, from the time of Aristotle to that of Jean-Paul Sartre and beyond, philosophers have emphasized the role of the individual in choosing among alternatives to enact an ethical decision. The existentialists, in particular, remind us that authenticity is an individual attribute; ethics must be personal, a matter of free choice rather than conformity to institutional or other group norms (Merrill, 1996). In other words, from an ethical perspective, authenticity is a matter of individual moral responsibility (Stoker, 1995), not something conferred by or derived from an employer.

For both practical and philosophical reasons, then, as well as the legal ones explored earlier, being seen as an authentic provider of news based on employment by a news organization will only take the journalist so far.

Accountability: Open Medium, Open Windows

Information providers not associated with traditional media are establishing authenticity in other ways. One is through a greater emphasis on accountability for their information. Accountability and the associated notion of “transparency” offer an avenue to credibility and the creation

of mutual trust that is more in line with the demands, not to mention the zeitgeist, of today's media environment. This journalistic value takes two general forms: One involves personal disclosure, and the other involves evidentiary support.

Unlike the finite space and time of the print or broadcast news product, the online medium offers limitless opportunities for expansion. The structure of the Internet not only facilitates but also demands connections (Fredin, 1997). A news story no longer need be a discrete entity; instead, it becomes part of a multi-sourced network of information about a given topic.

In a traditional environment, journalists simply ask readers or viewers to trust them—to trust that they are being truthful, that they have been both diligent and open-minded in their information gathering, that they have captured the most important part of a story in the 10 inches or 2 minutes allocated to it in their employer's news product. It is a lot to ask. Perhaps, as the steadily declining reputation of the news media described above suggests, it is too much. In an online environment, on the other hand, journalists have a technically enabled capability to show where their information comes from, provide background about their sources, expand the depth and breadth of any given story, and solicit additional input and feedback from readers.

The unbounded and interconnected nature of the medium gives journalists an unprecedented opportunity to build credibility through a form of information transparency that has never before been feasible. Too few have taken advantage of this opportunity (Paul, 2005). More should—not only for ethical reasons but because other information providers online do. And linkages matter. Google's page ranking algorithm, for example, uses hyperlinks-as-votes as a method of determining relevance and thus prominence of display for search results (Bowman & Willis, 2003).

In this open environment, consumers should be able to easily ascertain who provided the information and what sorts of standards a provider believes are important. They also should be able to clearly identify sources and, ideally, check out those sources for themselves. These capabilities suggest additional sets of questions news consumers might ask about their information providers:

7. *Is my source of news transparent?*

Can I easily find out about the news organization and its staff members? Does my news provider publicize its principles and adhere to them?

8. *Are the sources used in articles clearly identified?*

Are unnamed sources used sparingly if at all? If unnamed sources are used, is it clear why?

Bloggers, meanwhile, have made the link part of their craft and their creed. As blogging pioneer Rebecca Blood (2002, p. 12) put it in her *Weblog Handbook's* ethical guidelines: If it exists online, you should link to it, enabling readers to “judge for themselves the accuracy and insightfulness of your statements.” In other words, linking creates credibility.

Bloggers also have taken to heart the other aspect of accountability or transparency facilitated by the online medium: personal disclosure. Perhaps because of the intimate nature of the participatory blog format (Bowman & Willis, 2003), bloggers tend to be more upfront about their biases; moreover, they have greater autonomy to speak from the heart than journalists, who are constrained by institutional norms of objectivity and distance from any given subject (Lasica, 2004). The “golden rule of blogging” includes disclosure to readers about the blogger’s actions, motives, and financial considerations (Lasica, 2005). Prominent bloggers seem especially likely to offer substantial “self-presentation” or information about themselves online (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005).

This sort of transparency is harder for journalists, both because their individuality is subsumed within larger media organizations and because long-standing norms of objectivity rest on the premise that the journalistic method involves a suppression of individual biases. But many journalists are finding ways to enhance credibility through transparency—their own blogs, for instance (Singer, 2005). By 2006, blogs had become commonplace among the online offerings of major media outlets, with as many as 80% of the top 100 U.S. newspapers providing at least one reporter blog (Teeling, 2006). Although no comprehensive study of these blogs has been conducted as of this writing, anecdotal evidence suggests their content is contributing to journalistic accountability in at least two ways:

- *Explaining the rationale behind the news, particularly of editorial decisions.* Editors are now blogging at a number of news outlets large and small. At the *Dallas Morning News*, the editorial board discusses its decisions on its group blog, *DallasMorningViews.com*. At the *Greensboro (NC) News and Record*, editor John Robinson posts religiously to The Editor’s Log blog. *The New York Times’* public editor, or ombudsman, has a blog; at CBS News, a Public Eye blog has the “fundamental mission” of bringing transparency to the news operation, enabling the organization “to be more open about how and why it makes editorial decisions” (Meyer, 2005, pp. 1, 4). True, the impetus behind such moves, particularly at organizations with very public ethical lapses in recent years, is at least partly defensive. But they clearly are using the genre to explain themselves to audiences, meeting the ethical guideline of clarifying and explaining news coverage and inviting dialogue about journalistic conduct (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996).

- *Humanizing the reporting behind the news.* Growing numbers of reporters, not just editors or columnists, have joined the ranks of bloggers. Many of these, particularly among television reporters, actually are group blogs; the reporter's name is on the blog, and he or she sometimes contributes to it, but people who play behind-the-scenes roles in traditional media do much of the posting. For example, as of 2006, Anderson Cooper's "360" blog and Brian Williams' "Daily Nightly" blog typically contained posts from producers and editors, as well as other CNN or NBC News correspondents. Many, though not all, of these often offered "how we got the story" information. Others seemed to serve primarily to give the journalist a human voice, allowing him or her to talk about the experience of covering a particular story or about personal reactions to news events.

Some observers have suggested that these sorts of new media forms inherently foster trust among users—that they are "credible by nature" thanks to their egalitarian access to publishing platforms, their encouragement of an open marketplace of ideas, and even the speed with which feedback can be provided (Bowman & Willis, 2003). We're not convinced by the technological determinism implicit in that idea. The people using these media forms can choose to use them in a way that enhances the transparency of communication and thus builds trust in the communicators, journalists included, over time. The medium provides the capability; it's up to humans to provide the credibility. And then it's up to the community to say it's so.

Autonomy: Internal and External Oversight

A third area in which long-standing values underlying journalistic credibility are being challenged is autonomy. In this country, journalists' independence has been interwoven with their social obligation to be loyal first and foremost to the citizens who rely on them for the information needed to be free and self-governing (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Indeed, all professions share a claim to autonomy, and all frame that claim in terms of their members' desire and ability to determine for themselves how best to serve the public (Larson, 1977). Journalists have positioned their fiercely protected freedom from external oversight as a fundamental perquisite to the credibility of a "Fourth Estate" able to report impartial truth.

In a traditional media world, one in which news organizations controlled access to the means of distributing information to large numbers of people, such claims to autonomy were relatively difficult to challenge. The First Amendment prohibited direct government oversight;

journalists' ethical guidelines highlighted independence (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996). Calls for greater social responsibility—from the academy, from the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press in the 1940s, and by advocates of news councils, among others—have been largely ignored (Ugland & Breslin, 2000).² In short, journalists have staked a claim to autonomy on legal, ethical, and professional grounds, and have called it good.

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In today's world of open and ubiquitous publication, that claim has come in for new challenge. Oversight of professional behavior has become a team sport, and journalists no longer control who gets to play. In this environment, a virtually infinite number of participants simultaneously serve as sources, audiences, and information providers. And a considerable number of those people are challenging the journalist's exclusive right to deem a particular piece of information credible. Indeed, journalists today find their autonomy challenged not so much by government—the threat they have guarded against for centuries—but by the very citizens to whom they owe their primary loyalty (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Singer, 2007).

The new level of multi-source news suggests another question consumers should ask themselves when considering the trustworthiness of their information providers:

9. *Are all sides asked to comment within an article?*

And can I comment myself about the article—can I exercise my own “social response-ability”?

Bloggers, in particular, seem to have taken on the self-appointed role as watchdogs of the watchdogs, making an editorial stance of arrogance or aloofness very difficult to sustain (Mitchell & Steele, 2005). Bloggers embody the idea that democratic power is essentially distributed rather than concentrated (Nordenstreng, 1998) and that the pursuit of truth works best as a collective enterprise. The journalist no longer has a lock on the role of declaring what information is and is not credible; some blogger, somewhere, will be waiting to “fact-check your ass” (Latica, 2004, p. 34). How the journalist responds is important. In fact, the

increased attention to errors is another sign of trustworthiness that consumers may find useful in evaluating a news provider, suggesting a final question:

10. *Are errors corrected promptly and prominently?*

Of course, it's not just bloggers, who are merely among the first waves of digital natives likely to be developing participatory media forms and formats. It's the medium itself that opens to challenge the previous journalistic claims of autonomy:

The Internet is a network—an environment in which no single message is discrete and in which message producers and consumers are not only interchangeable but also inextricably linked. All communicators and all communication in this environment are connected. The notion of autonomy therefore becomes unavoidably contested. Professional communicators lose control over their messages as those messages become freely copied, exchanged, extended and challenged by anyone with a mind (and a modem) to do so. . . . As this happens, the professionals also lose control over their ability to be the sole determiners of whether their own norms have been adequately met (Singer, 2007, p. 90).

However, journalistic autonomy should not be prized for its own sake. Rather, it is prized as a means of safeguarding the credibility of what journalists produce, ostensibly free from outside pressures that might shape information toward ends that serve vested interests rather than those of the general public. As such, autonomy continues to have a purpose. As a boundary between the professional journalist and the public, however, it ceases to have either value or much meaning. The shift in media form is perhaps merely a reminder that autonomy is neither a guarantee of truth nor a surrogate for it; rather, it is an avenue that can take journalists in a desirable direction.

The same goes for accountability and authenticity. The overall goal remains what it has always been: to provide credible information that citizens in a democracy need to be free and self-governing. These traditional routes to journalistic credibility are challenged in today's media environment. That does not mean they are no longer useful. It does mean they are different and that old assumptions about journalistic roles and values can no longer be accepted uncritically nor old approaches to them continued indefinitely. The roles are changing along with the content; for the values to endure, journalists must figure out how best to adapt their articulation to the new media environment.

The students with whom we started this article are not necessarily giving a lot of thought to their responses to questions concerning the nature of journalists and journalism. However, their gut reactions suggest

that traditional forms and functions are associated in people's minds with a valuable commodity: not mere information, but information that is credible. It is up to journalists and the organizations they work for to figure out how to preserve what's left of that credibility and then to expand on it in a media environment that demands both more and better from them.

Notes

1. A meme refers to a replicator, the emotions, the intellectual struggles, the subjective experiences that lead to some behaviors being imitated and others not, thus providing a mechanism for the evolution of ideas. Blackmore, S. (1999).
2. Two additional news councils in Southern California and New England are being formed with help from seed money provided by the Knight Foundation.

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Appendix: Questions for News Consumers

In today's world of multiple voices, many claiming to be journalistic, consumers must determine what they want and how to assess whether news sources fulfill those desires. Here are questions consumers can ask to help them determine who is a journalist and, as a result, who deserves to be believed. They are discussed in context within the article.

1. Do I want news and opinion that exclusively agree with my views?
2. Do I want news mixed with opinion?
3. Do I care whether news and opinion are clearly distinguished from one another?
4. Does my source of information facilitate public discourse?
5. Does this source break news itself or merely aggregate?
6. Are some articles based on first-hand observation rather than secondary sourcing?
7. Is my source of news transparent?
Can I easily find out about the news organization and its staff members? Does my source publicize its own principles-and adhere to them?
8. Are the sources used in articles clearly identified?
Are unnamed sources used sparingly if at all? If unnamed sources are used, is it clear why?
9. Are all sides asked to comment within an article?
And can I comment myself about the article—can I exercise my own “social response-ability”?
10. Are errors corrected promptly and prominently?