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Critical Voices in the Future of News Debates

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For some time now, journalism’s major institutions have been facing two types of crises. The most obvious one is a financial crisis. The Pew Research Center estimated that the total revenue supporting newsgathering operations in the United States dropped from $94–95 billion in 2006 to $63–65 billion in 2014—a staggering decline of almost a third of total news revenue in less than a decade (Holcomb & Mitchell, 2014). This estimate takes into account newsgathering across print, digital, television, and radio and includes non-profit as well as commercial revenue streams. These losses not only affect corporate profits; they have led to tremendous cuts in the monetary resources devoted to newsgathering and reporting. With the U.S. news media system historically dependent on commercial forces, recent fiscal shifts have eliminated a larger portion of U.S. news resources than in countries with more state and political party support for news (Starr, 2012). Fears of great losses in the financial resources devoted to institutional newsgathering have been global, nonetheless.

At the same time, as much of the news industry has been facing financial uncertainty of existential proportions, journalism has also been facing a second crisis, one that might be called cultural in its character. The cultural crisis comes from a broad questioning—among the public, journalism researchers, and journalists themselves, for example—of the cultural authority, legitimacy, and norms of the model of professional journalism that rose to dominance in the age of print and broadcast news media (Carlson, 2012; Nerone, 2013; Williams & Carpini, 2011). Some critics suggest that 20th-century professional journalism no longer suits the needs or sensibilities of a digital-age, networked public (see, Bruns, 2003; Gillmor, 2006; Jarvis, 2009), although challenges to the legitimacy of professional journalism existed long before the rise of online news (Hallin, 1994; Schudson, 1978). Still, today’s threats to

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institutional journalism’s economic base, along with emerging online alternatives, have invigorated a new wave of such cultural challenges and prompted disparate calls for new paradigms to conceptualize how journalism can contribute to a healthy public sphere in the digital age (see Benkler, 2006; McChesney & Pickard, 2011; Peters & Broersma, 2013).

Undeniably, these journalistic crises have led to real hardships; thousands of news workers are experiencing unemployment and underemployment and many communities have lost critical journalistic resources. Yet, as the cliché says, every crisis also presents opportunity. In the wake of immense uncertainty surrounding familiar models of journalism, new public conversations about the future of journalism have erupted. As a result of these, it has become more possible to believe that journalism’s future, particularly in postindustrial economies, will not have to look much like its past. A process of de-reification is underway as the taken-for-grantedness of a once-dominant style of Western journalism fades (Nerone, 2013). Robert McChesney has figured this historic moment as a “critical juncture” for news media—a period of instability in which pivotal decisions made now will likely shape the course of media development for decades to come (McChesney, 2014, p. 93; McChesney & Nichols, 2010). Hence, historical conditions appear ripe for critical news scholars to enjoy a golden moment of public relevance and opportunity to engage in the public contests over what kinds of infrastructure and norms will set the course for the future of journalism.

Without a doubt, some media scholars have made important contributions, both directly and indirectly, to enriching public conversations about the future of news. Yet, we have brought together this special issue because we believe too few of the intellectual resources of critical media studies have been engaged in these efforts. Although the subfield of journalism studies appears to be growing and even thriving, one can look through the pages of major critical media studies journals and find little mention of debates over the future of news or analysis of the political and ethical questions posed by the current crises of journalism. The contributors to this issue all offer historically and theoretically informed perspectives to demonstrate how critical media scholarship can add to debates about the future of news; in so doing they enrich both the debate and news media’s future. Exploring questions about media policy, labor practices, journalistic education, and contests over race, gender, class, and sexual identity in newsrooms and news representations, these authors shed light on ideological assumptions and lacunae in public debates and point toward broad ethical questions for thinking about how to build a media infrastructure capable of serving the complex needs of contemporary democracies.

Each of the essays in this issue provides insights into different aspects of the problems journalism faces today, and each thus partakes in a tradition
of critical scholarship that draws on history to show that contemporaneous assumptions about news media and their institutional arrangements need not be seen as inevitable or immutable. James Carey’s “The Problem of Journalism History” (1997, originally published 1974) proved to be an inspiration for a generation—or two—of journalism and media scholars. Carey provided a vision for studying journalism history through a critical lens. He recognized that the subfield of journalism history had too often played a subordinate role in journalism schools, and was too frequently premised on producing historical accounts flattering to journalists’ professional self-understanding. He called for cultural historians to offer alternatives to what he called the reigning “Whig” narrative of journalism history. Borrowing the concept of Whig history from Herbert Butterfield, Carey argued that the Whig interpretation of journalism history represented “the marriage of the doctrine of progress with the idea of history” and “to put it all too briefly, views journalism history as the slow, steady expansion of knowledge and progress . . . ” (p. 88).

Carey’s essay was first published just months before an event whose reporting has often been depicted as the apotheosis of modern U.S. journalism: the resignation of Watergate-rattled President Richard Nixon. Carey was challenging not only the practices of journalism historians but also journalism’s institutional and ideological complacency that proliferates at such watershed moments, a notion that the professional norms then promulgated by journalism schools and major news institutions represented the most mature form of democratic journalism. The Whig narrative of journalism’s historical destiny served as a bulwark for what Daniel Hallin (1994) has described as U.S. journalism’s “high-modern period.” These were the postwar years when faith in journalistic objectivity, professionalism, and the social responsibility of major media companies hit its high watermark. This high-modern attitude would find expression throughout much of the Western media, but even by the time of Watergate, its peak had already crested as the cultural and political tumult of the late 1960s began to tear away the social foundation on which high modernism rested (Hallin, 2006, 2008; Perlstein, 2014).

By pointing out alternatives to the Whig history of the 1970s, Carey helped to offer a more expansive imagination for the possibilities of journalism. So, too, critical scholars today need to offer nuanced and informed critiques of the myths and narratives that dominate current discussions of news. To do so, they need to resist two popular (and opposing) frames for understanding the context of these crises—frames that have led to tempting, yet inadequate, responses to the crises.

One response represents nostalgia for high-modern journalism. The contextualizing narrative that supports it freezes high-modern journalism’s Whig history and allows a vantage point on changes in journalism that reveals only
what is being lost, as emerging trends move journalism further from its high-modern ideals. This response leads to a *traditionalist* approach to solving journalism’s crises. The emphasis of such an approach is above all placed on preserving whatever aspects of the high-modern systems the critic deems valuable. For traditionalists speaking on behalf of industry interests, finding the solution for preserving familiar models of news often means searching for the right kind of paywalls or micropayments (Pickard & Williams, 2013). It might entail a search for other financial schemes to protect legacy media, such as vigorous copyright enforcement or relaxing regulations on news media companies (Murdoch, 2009). For others, a traditionalist approach leads to a search for ways that nonprofit news services or philanthropic foundations might preserve cherished aspects of traditional journalism. Even critical scholars are not immune to this sort of longing for the promises of high-modern journalism, although their longings might be better characterized as a melancholic reaction to its passing. Such a reaction calls to mind Wendy Brown’s (2003) depiction of melancholia as a phenomenon that marks a mourning for a politically ambivalent object.

An opposing, and arguably even more pervasive, response has been to fully embrace the negation of high-modern journalism’s professional ideology and place one’s faith wholeheartedly in the emerging digital-media ecosystem. The hope guiding this *entrepreneurial* or *ecological* approach to journalism’s crises is that online and offline competition will sort out what forms of news and information will best serve the needs of digital-era democracy. Such a response evokes a context for understanding journalism’s problems that focuses its critical energy exclusively on the arrogance and gatekeeping power of professional journalism. Moreover, this response overextends the critique of high modernism’s Whig history by suggesting that the challenge of creating democratic news media boils down to a matter of toppling institutional gatekeepers. At the same time, the entrepreneurial/ ecological approach relies on its own Whiggish narrative predicated on the notion that technological innovation and vigorous competition ensure that news media will become increasingly democratic.

Proponents of this approach place their faith in new media entrepreneurs to generate novel forms of news and news services and let competition in the digital-media ecosystem select the best of these entrepreneurial projects. Hence, this view suggests that those forms of journalism that survive and thrive in competition for attention and resources will have proven themselves most fit to fulfill social needs in a digital age. Proponents of this approach do not believe any special efforts should be made for preserving existing institutions. Instead, they tend to see the web as a complex, self-optimizing ecosystem bound to produce a more robust news ecology better suited to contemporary social and cultural needs (for instance, see Benkler, 2006; Jarvis, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Winer, 2009). Mark Deuze (2006, para. 3) describes this basic philosophy when he says,
“Technological innovation and adoption processes can be seen as evolutionary in a Darwinian sense, in that whichever technology—as in: device, code or protocol—is dominant at any given point in time is not necessarily the ‘best,’ but rather the more ‘fitting’ with the prevailing culture.” If media environments have an inherent tendency toward cultural optimization, then there is little need for normative discussions about the future of news because the outcome is best left to entrepreneurial experimentation. Writing for *The Columbia Journalism Review*, Dean Starkman (2011, para. 14–15) has called this approach “the future of news [FON] consensus,” pointing to a group of public intellectuals who have been highly influential in public discussions of the future of news, especially Clay Shirky, Jeff Jarvis, and Jay Rosen. Starkman incisively describes this mode of thought:

> At its heart, the FON consensus is anti-institutional. It believes that old institutions must wither to make way for the networked future. . . . The establishment has no plan. The FON consensus says no plan is the plan. The establishment drones on about rules and standards; the FON thinkers talk about freedom and informality.

Advocates of this perspective argue that democracy does not need newspapers, legacy news organizations, or even journalism as we’ve known it. Rather, as Clay Shirky (2011) argues, “When we shift our attention from ‘save newspapers’ to ‘save society,’ the imperative changes from ‘preserve the current institutions’ to ‘do whatever works.’ And what works today isn’t the same as what used to work” (p. 43). The emphasis here is not on a normative vision of journalism for the public good but rather experimenting with entrepreneurial ventures. Those experiments that survive—meaning they find sustainable funding—are the ones believed to be most suited for the ecosystem.

The essays in this issue offer perspectives on the future of news debates that point to other possibilities for broader and more ethically informed conversations about how to appropriate aspects of contemporary news media to make them capable of promoting robust democracy. They critique journalism’s Whiggish narratives, past and present, and challenge the adequacy of both traditionalist and entrepreneurial/ecological responses to journalism’s crises. They provoke us with questions that raise concerns about media policy, news workers’ working conditions, the responsibilities of journalism’s educational institutions, and continuing struggles over representations of race, gender, sexuality, and class identity in news media. They analyze contemporary trends in news media as well as the discourses that seek to make sense of these trends. Importantly, they also work to carve out a new space in which to debate and, ultimately, influence news practices and institutions going forward. Rather than fall prey to the traps of waxing nostalgic for high-modern journalism or fetishizing entrepreneurial approaches to shaping
news’s future, the essays here thoughtfully and carefully illuminate the larger structural forces at work in bringing journalism to the point of crisis—one whose silver lining is that it has necessitated extensive examination of this vitally important practice and institution.

Situating their research in political economy and cultural studies scholarship, the contributors here analyze a variety of discourses generated by institutions ostensibly focused on enhancing news media’s role in a democracy. As a result of their work, we can see that dominant narratives about the future of news tend to obscure as much as they reveal, masking the myriad means through which such debates normalize a free-market model that treats news as a commodity, devalue journalists and their labor, and overlook the persistence of racism, sexism, and homophobia in both contemporary and future newsrooms. These historically rich analyses of 21st-century future-of-news debates thus illuminate the power relations that structure such debates while simultaneously opening spaces for potential intervention.

Comparing an earlier debate on the news media’s role in democratic society—the Commission on Freedom of the Press (aka the Hutchins Commission) of the postwar 1940s—with the post-recession 2009–11 debates, Victor Pickard’s lead essay draws out the similarities between both the deliberations around the topic and the agenda-setting reports that emerged from each set of debates: the Hutchins Report and the Waldman Report (2011), respectively. For Pickard, what is absent from the Hutchins Report is as telling as what ended up in it; his examination of the unpublished transcripts of the Commission’s meetings shows that “fairly radical nonprofit models were considered early in its discussions,” including “reclassifying the press as a common carrier or a public utility that guaranteed access to critical information,” and modeling a federal agency “after the FCC [to] regulate newspaper content, especially in one-newspaper towns.” But such solutions were removed from the Commission’s final report, being viewed as too leftist amidst the anti-Communist fervor of those postwar years.

The Hutchins Report set the tone and terms of debates about the future of news from the point of its publication onward; Pickard shows that some of its most central assumptions—about “market fundamentalism” and government regulation, for example—also structure the Waldman Report. Despite the latter report’s “comprehensive approach to the literature and exhaustive research, [ultimately] certain voices were privileged over others, and particular academic traditions were selected while others were deemphasized or entirely omitted.” Pickard argues that through a process of “discursive capture” invoked by “nervous liberals”—a constraint on thinking about the appropriate relationship between news media and government—both the Hutchins Commission and the Waldman Report privilege a “market libertarian paradigm” of news production that “ignores the public-good nature of news media and overlooks the market’s inability to produce this good.” To Pickard, both reports are disappointing for how they defer to the very logic
that led to the crises preceding each report and leave intact a system that is “too often beholden to powerful interests, more an attack dog for the status quo than an adversarial voice against the powerful, more a conservative than a revolutionary—or even democratic—force in society.”

Nicole Cohen’s article offers a case study of the technologies news organizations steeped in “market ontology” (Pickard, this issue) have turned to in order to make production more efficient and news more click-worthy. Various automated technologies have been dubbed pink slime journalism for the low-quality results and fast-food production style they use to, for example, produce “hyperlocal” news with fake bylines. As Cohen notes, “Stories about town council meetings, school cafeteria lunches, and local sports teams were written and edited by freelancers in the Philippines, various African countries, and throughout the United States in assembly-line fashion—broken into bits, parceled out, produced quickly—for payments ranging from 35 cents to 24 dollars per story.” Pink slime technologies, such as those produced by a corporation called Journatic, allow news organizations such as the Chicago Tribune to save money by laying off reporters and replacing them with poorly paid writers who produce journalistic piecework. Not only do such pieceworkers have no familiarity with or roots in the communities they report on, their very presence suggests that thoughtful, in-depth journalism is no longer necessary to help readers navigate the public realm. Further, such pink slime journalism recasts “editorial policies toward that which will be clicked on, which eliminates the need for skilled journalistic labor and devalues journalistic autonomy.”

Using labor process theory, Cohen reveals how various types of labor automation such as content farms and pink slime produce a deskilled, devalued, and downsized workforce. She writes, chillingly, that “if media companies have their way, soon we will not have to bother with journalists at all.” Although glorified in the business and trade media, automation technologies portend a disastrous future for news workers and, ultimately, for the public interest. Like the automation technologies introduced in so many other industries, those brought in to resolve the financial crisis of journalism pose serious problems for both the journalistic labor force and for the public at large: they “speed up production, degrade the work of writing and editing, and devalue media labor, not to mention undermine creativity, experimentation, and the ability of journalists to pursue critical, investigative journalism in the public interest.” Understanding these technologies and their consequences on the news media industry through labor process theory enables Cohen both to explicate the power relations that structure them and question “whether digital technologies do in fact enable ‘better’ forms of journalism, provide increased access, and meaningfully incorporate audience participation.” She concludes bluntly that, “[w]hile journalism has become a business through and through, its commodified status should
not belie its public service role: to hold those in power to account, to pro-
vide forward-looking investigation of social challenges, to provide a diversity
of representations and perspectives, and to produce information necessary
for meaningful participation in public life. The journalistic models I have
described . . . do not have the capacity to serve citizens in this way."

Although Cohen’s research points to the ways in which futuristic tech-
nologies devalue journalistic labor, Pamela Hill Nettleton’s essay points to
other problems in the journalistic workforce that tend to be absent from
prognostications about news’s future: specifically, racism, sexism, and homo-
phobia directed at newsporters. Analyzing the now-voluminous literature
on the future of news produced in the popular and trade press that trends
to focus on “new economic models, digital modes of distribution, and how
to attract young audiences,” Nettleton observes that, “among so many arti-
cles with the phrase ‘the future of journalism’ in the titles and texts, none of
them considers or includes issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality among
future journalists or in future news coverage . . . . What is conspicuous about
the future of journalism is how much it resembles the old journalism—and
how seldom its past conventions are challenged in envisioning the future.
Such visions are generally lacking in fresh conceptions of operational mod-
els that might correct inequities around race, gender, and sexuality in legacy
journalism structures. Such visions, in fact, rarely take identity, subordination,
dominance, and marginalization into consideration at all.”

Despite newsporters’ repeated reports about these oppressions’ per-
sistence in newsport even after the digital turn, what Nettleton sees in
future-of-news discourse in place of a challenge to these forms of oppres-
sion is an imagining of a future that has moved beyond the need for political
change—one that is post-feminist, post-racial, and post-queer. Treatments of
journalism’s future as post-political obscure the structural forces—ownership
and commodification, for example—that work to maintain oppressive con-
ditions for women and men of color, white women, and queer newsworkers
(much as they do in society at large). Instead of pointing to the role that
such discriminatory and even dangerous practices play in maintaining news’
organization hierarchies, Nettleton shows that future-of-news commentators
instead focus on such things as digital tech training and adding transparency
to news gathering to ameliorate crisis and bring the journalistic workforce
into the 21st century. Nettleton argues that these patterns of omission and
deflection are not benign: they reproduce and normalize highly problematic,
even dangerous practices rampant in legacy media workplaces and push
them into the future of news as well. Nettleton concludes by encour-
ging a different way of imagining news’s future: “[T]he question before the
crystal ball ought to be: How might media be differently imagined by dif-
ferent genders, races, sexualities, classes? If journalism is being reinvented,
minute-by-minute, could it not be cut entirely from new, whole cloth?”
Written by Brian Creech and Andrew Mendelson, the final essay in this issue identifies numerous problems with the digital technophilia pervasive in future-of-journalism discourses. Creech and Mendelson mine a variety of material predicting journalism's future—"articles, reports, blog posts, and general commentary"—and see emerging from it a construction of a new and idealized journalist, one who is technologically adept and able to adapt nimbly to the ever-changing demands of newwork. Examining how these discourses "forward notions of technologically proficient journalists as both saviors of newsroom budgets and models for current students" and, as such, subsequently influence journalism education programs, Creech and Mendelson argue that, "an idealized notion of the technologically adept journalist bridges concerns about the future of newwork and journalism education because, as a normative concept, it articulates what journalists should do and what they need to know to do it." Thus, rather than operating on the periphery of newworkers' lives, the discourses they examine play a constitutive role in journalistic practice as their conclusions about the need for technological skill go on to shape future generations of newworkers through journalism education programs.

Creech and Mendelson demonstrate further that such a discursive focus on training both professional and budding journalists to be technologically skilled deflects critical attention from where power lies in news organizations, masking material inequities in the news workforce and forcing journalists themselves to shoulder responsibility for remedying a structural crisis in the industry. As "news organizations' industrial demands place downward pressure on individual workers to comport their routines, desires, professional identities, and self-conceptions to the needs of the news production process, visions of journalism's future often have unarticulated consequences for the reality these individuals experience . . . [and for] the ways in which individual journalists are understood as valuable," they argue.

The idealized journalist Creech and Mendelson identify is a perfect foil for media owners and executives attempting to extract as much revenue as possible from emerging models of news production. If this journalist fails to make a living in the profession, it is no one's fault but her own: She hasn't become proficient with digital storytelling, social media platforms, or using content farms; she has not figured out how to cobble together enough work as a freelancer; she takes too much time to write a story, and so on. But perhaps most important, in grasping that her chosen profession has become unstable, she has likely internalized the message—repeated ad infinitum—that she and her co-workers are to blame for their profession's precarity. She is therefore unlikely to demand much from the news industry's Powers that Be, leaving them to devise more market-friendly strategies for salvaging the future of news as they cut their labor force down to a skeleton crew.

In the end, the alternative these essays together construct, while somewhat dystopic, is also partially optimistic—a cautionary tale about news's
future; that is, if concerned academics and others in the body politic step away from the arena where future-of-news debates are happening, the future of news is a grim one. If, however, we collectively advocate historically and theoretically rich recommendations that are simultaneously attentive to the humanity of newsworkers—including racial, gender, and class inequities—then there is hope for a better future for news. The authors of these essays are neither Pollyannas nor nihilists. They ask us to reflect on the difficult and inescapably political task of building a media infrastructure to enhance democratic journalism while neither reaching back to a nostalgic past nor accepting a Panglossian attitude that whatever types of news media evolve in this digital landscape will work out for the best. With the FCC’s recent vote to protect net neutrality, we have seen what can happen when supporters of a media-related cause organize and agitate on its behalf. This is the kind of positive outcome we encourage readers to focus on as they act to bring about a better future for news.

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