



**Journalistic Change in an Online Age:  
Disaggregating Visibility, Legitimacy,  
and Revenue**

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## Abstract

Understanding the complexity of journalistic change in the emerging media environment requires attention to economic, technological, and cultural aspects without privileging one to the exclusion of the others. To engage each of these aspects both individually and simultaneously, this essay introduces an analytical approach to journalistic change that disaggregates journalism into three distinct yet overlapping characteristics pertaining to journalism as a public activity: visibility, legitimacy, and revenue. These characteristics, once tightly interlinked in the mass media era, now necessitate careful attention as distinct attributes whose correspondence cannot be assured. Evolving media production and distribution technologies increasingly alter the conditions of visibility, legitimacy, and revenue for news. This essay argues that furthering an understanding of the emerging news ecology requires sustained attention to such differences through a conceptual lens capable of assessing change diachronically and variety synchronically. Ultimately, this perspective helps make sense of the heterogeneous journalistic environment.

## Contributor Note

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## Introduction

A great difficulty in studying journalistic change lies in attempting to grasp complex economic, technological, and cultural transformations while in the midst of rapid and unpredictable change. Digital media have undoubtedly ushered in an era of transition, but limitations become apparent when attempting to pinpoint their significance. Neither scholars nor practitioners can remove themselves from the context in which they are embedded, leading to a problem Jenkins (2006: 12) identifies as a lack of a clear 'vantage point' from which to appraise media change. Given the absence of hindsight, journalism studies must develop analytical frameworks to conceptualize journalistic change as it unfolds around us.

The central claim of this essay is that fundamental and pervasive shifts occurring between past and emerging news ecologies can be usefully analyzed through a characteristic model of journalism that considers visibility, legitimacy and revenue as distinct, semi-independent characteristics of journalism as a public activity. Journalism, at its core, exists to be public, which leads to complex interactions with its audiences surrounding visibility (the distribution of news content), legitimacy (understandings of journalism's social role), and revenue (funding subsidiaries supporting news). These dimensions arise in the interplay between journalists and the public – that is, journalists do not wholly control their visibility, legitimacy, or revenue but adopt structures, practices, and norms with the aim of bolstering these three areas.

In the past, the interconnectedness of these three characteristics obscured their distinctness. Broadly speaking, a

news entity,<sup>1</sup> whatever the medium, gained legitimacy as doing authoritative journalism, visibility as a mass medium, and revenue from its ability to convert visibility into profit. This essay argues that changes in media technology, news economics, and public assessments of journalistic credibility have weakened linkages between visibility, legitimacy, and revenue. None of these aspects alone can adequately explain the evolving media environment; each deserves individualized attention without being treated as primary and determinant of the others.

The characteristic approach enhances analyses of journalism by contextualizing journalistic change within a complex array of technological, economic, and cultural aspects. Generating a general framework to examine this environment necessitates surrendering specificity to build broader analytical usefulness. With this goal, the sections below sketch out the distinct characteristics of visibility, legitimacy, and revenue pertaining to journalism as a public activity before considering recent shifts for each characteristic. The majority of the examples involve the US media market, although the dynamics are not unique to a single nation. Rather, the characteristic approach presented here helps scholars and practitioners working in a range of national and transnational media contexts unravel increasingly complex heterogeneous journalistic environments. A central question arises as to how visibility, legitimacy, and revenue are related, and how this relationship is changing.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'entity' is intentionally broad to encompass a wide array of news producers ranging from a larger newspaper to an individual

## Explaining the Characteristical Model of Journalism

The characteristical model departs from the close scrutiny of news practices, content, and norms popular within journalism studies to instead emphasize a conception of journalism as a public activity. From a trade magazine for specialists to a mass-market tabloid, journalists produce news content for public consumption. An analytical framework adopting this perspective of journalism as a public activity must encompass the complex relations between journalism and the public. To do so requires examining journalistic norms and practices within the economic, cultural, and technological context in which the news operates. This is not to quibble over degrees of journalistic autonomy, but to recognize that all journalism is culturally embedded. Accounting for journalistic change amidst cultural change proves difficult, which necessitates disaggregating the functioning of journalism as a public activity into three constituent characteristics: visibility, legitimacy, and revenue. Each characteristic deserves its own attention.

*Visibility* refers to the interplay between public-seeking news organizations and news-seeking publics. Visibility works in three senses. First, it refers to distribution systems for news in terms of its material availability in different media, whether it is a photocopied zine in a coffee shop or an international satellite-based news network. Second, visibility denotes the strategy a news entity undertakes to structure its visibility using what resources it has available. Decisions on medium, pricing, content, and marketing strategies all relate to visibility. Third, visibility is measurable through to quantifiable markers of visibility, i.e.,

circulation, ratings, visits. In all three senses, a news entity seeks to be visible – a constant goal particularly for commercial news organizations.

*Legitimacy*, by contrast, connects to assessments of social value. Legitimacy arises in the interplay between a news entity's acceptance-seeking and the public's acceptance of this entity – and its form. News entities seek legitimacy both through practices and rhetoric about these practices. That is, it is a matter not only of news performance but also of arguing that news practices benefit the public in substantive ways (Carlson 2011). This is most often expressed in terms of providing information citizens need for meaningful democratic participation and for understanding their communities (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). As such, legitimacy involves the acceptance of key norms – e.g., objectivity, balance, etc. – situating journalism's role within society in particular ways that give rise to particular practices. Notions of legitimacy lack the tangibility of the much more measurable characteristics of visibility and revenue. Nonetheless, legitimacy remains a goal for any news entity.

Finally, *revenue* denotes the economic capital that makes journalism possible as a public activity. To become and remain a public activity, journalism requires continuing funding. Revenue arises in the interplay between revenue-seeking news entities and economic subsidies – which may come in the form of direct payments from consumers, indirect funding through advertising, or support from foundations or the government. Like visibility, the characteristic of revenue includes three aspects: the ability of a news entity to extract revenue, its strategies for doing so, and its quantitatively measurable

success in these efforts. Importantly, this characteristic is not reserved for commercial media where profit is imperative, but can be used broadly to indicate the material resources necessary to cover costs pertaining to any mediated news form.

Visibility, legitimacy, and revenue are certainly not the only way to conceptualize journalism. However, the analytical value of this tripartite model lies in the insights it provides for understanding journalism as a public activity taking place within a particular social context. By foregrounding the relationship between journalists and their audiences, the characteristic model better attunes us to the strategies by which the former seeks recognition from the latter. This model takes apart three aspects of journalism habitually fused together to better understand their complex relations within the emerging news ecology.

### **Visibility, Legitimacy, and Revenue in the Mass Communication Era**

Visibility, legitimacy, and revenue are distinct yet related characteristics of journalism whose individual conditions and correspondence to one another deserve greater inquiry. The tendency to cluster these characteristics owes to a mass communication environment in which high barriers to entry limited the number of available media voices. Using broad strokes, this section sketches the prevalent trends within US newspapers and network television news during the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to provide a contrast with the emerging media landscape.

Following intense competition during the nineteenth century, the number of

newspapers declined throughout the twentieth century until only one or two newspapers existed in any local area (Carlson 2012a). While in 1910, 60 percent of US cities had intracity newspaper competition, by 1971 only 2 percent of cities supported two or more daily newspapers (Kirchhoff 2010). This lack of intracity competition granted existing newspapers a dominant position in their ability to aggregate the attention of local audiences. Coupled with their popularity – in 1996, 61 percent of adults reported getting most of their news from newspapers (Pew Research Center 2008) – newspapers generated healthy profits primarily from advertisers with little alternative for reaching an entire community. For newspapers, visibility corresponded to revenue. Gannett, which operates the largest chain of daily newspapers in the US, experienced profit margins of 25 percent between 1992 and 2001 (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2004). Advertising revenue continued to increase even as circulation dropped; between 1990 and 2000, total daily US newspaper circulation dropped by 7.5 percent while advertising revenues increased by over 50 percent.<sup>2</sup> The maturation of the US newspaper industry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century also involved a newfound professional identity by which journalists articulated claims to authority based on objectivity (Deuze 2005; Schudson 1978). Increasingly, newspapers were held to be important civic institutions creating common linkages among the disparate denizens of a community.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1990, daily US newspaper circulation was 63.3 million with advertising revenue of \$32.2 billion. By 2000, circulation declined to 55.8 million with advertising revenues climbing to \$48.7 billion (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011).

Compared to the long history of newspapers in Europe and the US, the ascension of television news occurred much more rapidly. After initial struggles in the nascent entertainment-minded medium of television, the network news eventually prospered from its national reach and lack of non-news competition during the early evening (Barnouw 1990; Prior 2007). By the 1960s, nightly news viewing became a ritual event in many American households (Selberg 1993) – a pleasing trait to advertisers as high-profile anchors like CBS’s Walter Cronkite attracted nightly audiences of nearly 20 million viewers. Yet despite attracting both viewers and advertising revenue, television news struggled for legitimacy while newspapers remained the dominant medium for journalism (Meltzer 2009). The power of television came to a head following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, a moment in which television journalists extended their cultural authority (Zelizer 1992). As television news developed, the respect for television news was borne out in surveys. By 1985, 84 percent of survey respondents deemed CBS News either very or somewhat believable (Pew Research Center 2008).<sup>3</sup> At its height, television news seemed to draw together visibility, legitimacy, and revenue in powerful ways (Carlson and Berkowitz 2012).

Taken together, newspapers and television news indicate commonalities about mass communication during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In both media, news outlets overwhelmingly took the form of profit-seeking organizations transforming their enhanced visibility and legitimacy to generate the bulk of their revenue from advertisers. Some

exceptions did exist; some smaller niche publications have flourished with smaller audiences while other entities failed by drawing the wrong kind of audience. However, alternative news forms were largely hampered from reaching mass audiences. In this media environment, it becomes easy to conjoin the three characteristics of visibility, legitimacy, and revenue without much attention to their internal conditions or the contingencies of their connections to one another. The sections below argue for the need to disaggregate our understanding of visibility, legitimacy, and revenue based on a rapidly changing media environment.

### **Shifts in Visibility**

The mass communication era was marked by a particular media structure in which a small number of media entities attracted large amounts of visibility. With limited media choice, audiences flocked to what was available – such as the evening network news broadcast (Prior 2007) or the single local daily newspaper. Visibility, when defined as the ability for a news entity to be visible to the public, remained restricted due to high barriers to entry. Over many decades, changes in the media landscape – such as the rise of cable television, niche publications, and radio talk shows – expanded the ranks of the visible. More recently, online media have radically lowered barriers to entry, extending the possibility of visibility to an exponentially larger group of people (Gillmor 2004). At the same time, enhanced competition creates greater demands on attention, lowering the visibility of any one news entity (Webster 2011). However, news audiences continue to multiply their means for accessing news, with 92 percent of

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<sup>3</sup> This percentage would decline to 56 percent in 2008.

Americans turning daily to multiple media platforms with 59 percent using both online and offline news (Purcell et al 2010).

Visibility, conceived in measureable and quantifiable terms (Webster 2011), remains a basic goal for mediated communication. Yet visibility should be separated from legitimacy and revenue. A news entity may be visible but not widely considered legitimate. For example, tabloids have drawn high circulations while remaining the target of scorn for their practices (Berkowitz 2000). More recently, bloggers have experienced moments of increased visibility while being attacked for lacking legitimacy (Carlson 2007a). The rise of niche media have also altered the fundamentals of visibility as some news entities target only specific audiences. Likewise, an outlet can be visible, but not leveraged to produce profits. This is particularly the case with online news given how the diffuse market for online advertising substantially reduces advertising revenues (Anderson, Bell, and Shirky 2012); a newspaper that draws 50,000 subscribers and a blog that draws 50,000 daily viewers will not earn anywhere near the same revenues (a discrepancy reviewed in more detail below in the section on revenue).

The changing terrain of media visibility can be grasped through a number of different measures. Legacy media have sustained significant losses in the past decades. Between 1990 and 2009, paid newspaper circulation in the US dropped from 62.3 million in 1990 to 45.6 million in 2009 while the aggregate network television news audience dropped from 41 million average nightly viewers to 23 million, and *Time* magazine lost a million subscribers (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011). Concurrent with the

decline in staple media outlets of the mass communication era has been the rise of niche media (Turow 2006), including a rise in partisan-based news that eschews objectivity norms (Stroud 2011).

It is clear that the new digital media environment radically alters the ability of non-legacy media entities to attain visibility. This is most apparent in the rise of online grassroots entities as media consumers increasingly become media producers (Gillmor 2004; Jenkins 2006) – a new mode of production that Bruns (2008) labels ‘produsage’. This shift is not without its tensions, which will be more fully explored in the section on legitimacy below. Often traditional news media practitioners constrain participation when such constraints remain in their control (Carlson 2012b; Williams, Wahl-Jorgensen, and Wardle 2011). In such partnerships, visibility is often closely controlled by the more powerful entity.

The micro-blogging service Twitter demonstrates how visibility has become more complex in the new digital media environment. Twitter boasted over 280 million active users at the end of 2012 (Media Bistro 2013). Although any Twitter user may produce messages for anyone else, the ‘twitterverse’ remains stratified with celebrities or institutions attracting the most followers. CNN’s breaking news account was the most followed news-based account (and 33rd overall) with 9.9 million followers as of January 2013 (Twitaholic 2013). However, Twitter’s architecture makes possible a vast array of users with far fewer followers while enabling an echo effect through retweeting. Any user’s tweet may then be propelled forward to gain wider visibility. Granted, news is not the sole focus of Twitter, but breaking stories do quickly

circulate through Twitter. For example, in the aftermath of the bombing attack at the Boston Marathon in April 2013, Twitter allowed a mixture of established journalists and amateurs on the scene to swiftly disseminate images and video of the bombing and updates on the search for the perpetrators. Rapid retweeting makes it possible for the messages of any Twitter user to be read by the larger public.

The Boston example points to the need to consider how the architecture of Twitter – and other social media sites – transforms news visibility. Its network structure alters the structural barriers that previously restricted visibility (Benkler 2006). This development can be noticed in how Twitter has proven to be an important tool for making visible voices in places where Western news coverage is restrained or impossible. For example, National Public Radio's Andy Carvin aided Middle Eastern Twitter users by retweeting and circulating their indigenous reports (Farhi 2011). Twitter use demonstrates the stratification of visibility accompanying the rise of online news. Similar to Anderson's notion of 'the long tail' in marketing (Anderson 2005), Twitter makes possible a long tail for news distribution. Closer to home, the place of social media in local news ecologies demonstrates the expansion of visibility. Anderson's (2010) study of news flows in Philadelphia and the Project for Excellence in Journalism's (2010) examination of the 'news ecosystem' of Baltimore demonstrate the breadth of news sources beyond legacy media outlets within a city. The complexity of local news ecologies could be gleaned from the backlash the Project for Excellence in Journalism received for omitting certain community voices (Buttry 2010). As visibility becomes more scalable, it becomes more difficult to

demarcate the boundaries of a local news ecology. This underscores the importance of considering visibility as complex, variable, and contingent on surrounding news entities.

In sum, for journalism to be a public activity, it must be visible to audiences. This core characteristic of visibility has become more complicated within a saturated news ecology that ranges from large traditional media outlets to hyperlocal blogs. The increase in visibility in terms of the ability to be visible creates new problems. As Webster (2011) notes, 'The widening gap between limitless media and limited attention means it is harder for any offering to attract significant public attention' (44). Moreover, visibility does not share a simple relationship to the other two characteristics discussed below: legitimacy and revenue.

### **Shifts in Legitimacy**

Legitimacy differs from visibility because it is an evaluative characteristic rather than a quality that can be correlated with popularity. To infer legitimacy only from the size of an audience ignores the qualities that produce legitimacy. Instead, legitimacy must be recognized as an independent characteristic linking journalistic institutions and news forms with public approval and recognition. The social construction of journalistic legitimacy requires attention to the interplay between legitimacy-seeking entities and legitimacy-granting publics. For the press to be considered a legitimate social institution, it must be recognized as both possessing the right to exercise a particular function – the construction and distribution of factual stories – along with a belief that this function is being carried out satisfactorily. While few in

Western democracies would question the institutional validity of journalism, negative evaluations of press performance are rampant (Carlson 2009).

The present condition of journalistic legitimacy, in Gitlin's view (2011), is a crisis of authority. Journalists facing the material crises of a weak economy, a changing advertising market, and increased competition just as importantly confront a vocal public wary of their performance and social role. This condition underscores a conceptualization of authority not as power through force, but as a quality socially ascribed to legitimacy-seeking institutions (Weber 1947). Starr (1982) dubbed this dynamic 'cultural authority' or 'the probability that particular definitions of reality and judgments of meaning and value will prevail as valid and true' (13). For journalism, cultural authority entails the social role to speak accurately and meaningfully about events in the world on behalf of the public (Zelizer 1992). This authority is not assumed or natural, but rather the product of centuries worth of journalists' public justification in the UK and North America (Ward 2004).

Concern over journalistic legitimacy is made visible in steadily declining assessments of journalists revealed through public opinion polls. In the US, the Pew Research Center (2011) found ratings of journalistic performance to be at their lowest since it began surveying the public about journalism in 1985.<sup>4</sup> Journalists received poor marks for performance: only 25 percent of survey respondents believed journalists 'get the facts straight' – down from 55 percent in 1985. Meanwhile, only 16 percent thought journalists 'deal fairly with both

sides'. As for independence, 80 percent thought journalists were 'often influenced by powerful people and organizations'. These assessments of performance were echoed in assessments of journalism's social role. Despite journalism's normative democratic self-descriptions, an equal percentage thought the press 'hurt' and 'protect' democracy. More thought the press to be 'immoral' (42 percent) than 'moral' (38 percent). Such dour assessments indicate a core challenge to journalistic legitimacy. In a 2010 study, the Pew Research Center (2010) found that only 21 percent of respondents said they 'believe all or most' of what they read in their daily newspaper; local television news fared better at 29 percent. In the UK, 58 percent of adults reported having lost confidence in newspapers following revelations of widespread phone hacking at the *News of the World* in 2011 (Robinson 2011). Although these questions are predicated on the press as a legitimate social institution, the survey results signal the public's widespread dissatisfaction with news performance. How such attitudes translate into legitimacy is less well understood, but the prevailing trend has been an articulated skepticism toward journalistic practice.

Rather than regard journalism as monolithic, as normative arguments often do, understanding the changing nature of journalistic legitimacy in the emerging new media environment begins with an acknowledgement of different strategies toward legitimacy pursued by different entities. Just as news practices differ, so do articulations of norms. For example, bloggers differ from traditional journalism in promoting their authority based on qualities such as voice and conversationality (Park 2009; Robinson 2006). Shifts in the normative arguments journalistic entities

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<sup>4</sup> Although journalism still fared better than government and business. This points to a larger cultural distrust of institutions.

make to promote their legitimacy require new understandings of how the public perceives these arguments. Johnson et al. (2007) found that 'Politically-interested blog users judged blogs as considerably more credible overall than traditional media or other online sources'. Such findings suggest that the fragmentation of legitimation strategies among a diverse array of journalistic entities entails an equally diverse array of audiences' legitimacy-granting practices. Or, put differently, legitimacy further slips from a quality to describe journalism as a collective practice to a quality individualized to either forms (e.g., political blogs) or specific entities (e.g., the *Talking Points Memo* blog).

The growing variety of legitimation strategies demonstrated by a range of news entities has attracted public contestation over what forms should be deemed appropriate. Such debates involve, on one level, a tension between reconsolidating legitimation strategies into a coherent structure regardless of medium and a multiplying of strategies so that contradictory models coexist within a news ecology. However, this complexity is more commonly dichotomized as a struggle between traditional journalistic norms and practices and emerging media forms – particularly online (Carlson 2007a; O'Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Robinson 2007, 2010; Singer 2003; Usher 2010). Such a position ignores the far more blurry distinction between the old and new guard and instead sets them off as opposing forces pitched in a struggle to define journalism. Much of this struggle involves questions of journalistic boundaries (Lewis 2012), or the ability to demarcate appropriate from inappropriate norms and practices. These definitional struggles, conducted publicly in a variety of mediated settings (Carlson

2009), reveal the ever-shifting ground of journalistic legitimacy.

In sum, it is not only that online media have lowered barriers to attaining public visibility (reviewed above) or altered revenue models (reviewed below). The transformations taking place in journalism also involves the segmentation of legitimacy according to a growing variety of journalistic entities. Contests over legitimacy strike at the core of imagining what journalism should do. The present tensions among forms further indicates that cultural authority is never set, but is instead the object of continuous disagreement in response to new developments (Carlson 2012b).

### **Shifts in Revenue**

Discussions of journalism norms and practices regularly present revenue generation as an exogenous factor from the work of news production – if not a taboo subject altogether. As the previous section noted, journalists have long based arguments for their legitimacy on independence from their revenue-generating sides. Such norms preclude the topic of revenue from journalists' understandings of their work and the journalistic community is quick to cast examples of advertising-editorial collusion as deviant. This stance belies how economic pressures experienced by many media outlets create continual pressure to please their advertisers (An and Bergen 2007). Despite such efforts to divorce editorial functions from business functions, revenue – here indicating strategies for generating economic subsidies and success at doing so – remains an indispensable characteristic of journalism as a public activity. Revenue is necessary to sustain

journalistic labor and make possible its visibility.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, much of mainstream journalism was supported through advertising revenues with varying levels of subscription fees. As journalists crafted arguments for legitimacy within public service framework, the reliance on advertising gave rise to a conception of audiences as a commodity whose attention is sold to advertisers to generate profits for the owners of media companies (Bagdikian 2000; Baker 1994; Smythe 1977). During the mass media era with its scarcity of media outlets, revenues connected closely to the accumulation of attention. However, the connection between attention and revenue requires renewed attention in the emerging media landscape.

In recent years, traditional news media have struggled with declining revenues. The reasons for such declines are complex as changes in journalism cannot be divorced from the larger economic context. Whereas journalistic entities once benefitted from the scarcity of media sources able to attract attention from a wide swath of the public, the rise of new entities – both journalistic and non-journalistic – have led to an abundance of sites in which to advertise. A striking example of this transformation is Google. The popular search engine drew more advertising revenue in 2010 (\$28.2 billion) than all US daily newspapers (print and online) combined (\$25.8 billion). Google accomplished this feat not through content creation, but through aggregating huge numbers of small payments from advertising and paid searches.

Meanwhile, traditional media have seen particular revenue streams dry up. This can be understood most clearly with the US newspaper industry. Even while some

proportionality holds between visibility and advertising revenue – albeit, at greatly reduced rates (Turow 2011: 78) – some revenue sources have suffered greatly. For example, free online classifieds services such as craigslist.org have eradicated paid newspaper classifieds; in five years, newspaper classified revenue dropped by two-thirds, from \$17 billion in 2006 to \$5 billion in 2011. At the same time, notable victims of the recession, from national US retail outlets Circuit City and Linens N Things to local businesses, reduced the advertiser base. In this environment, the total print advertising revenue for US newspapers declined by over half from \$46.6 billion in 2006 to \$20.7 billion in 2011. Newspapers' experience with online advertising has been mixed. Newspapers have seen steady increases in online advertising revenues, which accounted for 13.6 percent of total advertising revenue in 2011. However, while print advertising dropped by nearly \$26 billion between 2006 and 2011, online advertising grew by only \$585 million (NAA 2013). A Project for Excellence in Journalism (2012) study found that each dollar earned digitally corresponded to a loss of seven dollars of print revenue. On the whole, newspapers provide a grim case study of revenue declines for legacy media. Readership has certainly declined, but not nearly in step with the sharp declines in advertising. Thus, even if visibility and advertising revenue remain proportionally linked, the reliance on advertising revenue is not sustainable for large newsgathering entities – a situation requiring these organizations to rethink their business plans (Jurkowitz and Mitchell 2013). Newspapers previously benefitting from unparalleled local reach now confront a media environment in which online advertising has opened up many new sites for advertising enhanced

with the ability to target particular customers.

Understanding revenue requires further attention to changing consumption habits. News audiences increasingly scatter their news intake across a range of outlets and media at both home and work (Boczkowski 2010; Purcell et al. 2010). News search engines make a wider range of news stories available and easily locatable (Carlson 2007b). Thus, amidst declining revenue, overall news consumption has continued to increase (Waldman 2011: 226). The expansion of online news sites encourages a broader diet of news – that is, it increases visibility – for news audiences while also limiting engagement with the content (and advertisements) of any one news entity.

Questions surrounding revenue suggest an evolving news ecology defined by an enduring variety of journalistic forms. In the US, the dominant model has been an advertising-based for-profit system sometimes supplemented by subscription fees (particularly for print media). However, the emerging media environment supports a greater variety of organizational structures. At the extreme, volunteerism marks a turning away from profits as users provide uncompensated labor (Bruns 2008). Being a citizen journalist denotes not being paid for journalistic work, but instead doing work out of a sense of community engagement (or perhaps to participate publicly). At the organizational level, fiscally struggling newspapers have pondered switching to non-profit status, perhaps even supported with tax money (Downie and Schudson 2009). Online-only news entities have explored a variety of revenue approaches, including raising revenues through donations and foundation funding. When Blogger

Andrew Sullivan departed *The Daily Beast* to support himself independently through a subscription model, he raised over \$333,000 in the first few days (Byers 2013). Even legacy media have changed; the *New York Times* now earns more from subscriptions than it does from advertising (Lee 2013).

In sum, the revenue models undergirding the production and distribution of news content have been rapidly unsettled by a changing media environment. Diffuse attention, an expansion of advertising sites, and an emphasis on niche advertising (Turow 2006) have all altered the economics of news in ways that deserve to be separated out from changes in visibility and legitimacy. Revenue cannot be understood as a simple corollary of visibility. Many news outlets have been able to increase the means by which they are visible (e.g., online, mobile, tablets, etc.) while struggling to monetize this expansion in meaningful ways. The plurality of media revenue models, like the plurality of legitimation strategies, is a marker of the current media environment (see Anderson, Bell, and Shirky 2012). It is possible this heterogeneity will remain as the homogeneity of the mass media environment slips into the past. One ramification would be a shift from journalists placing revenue concerns outside acceptable norms to including revenue as an acknowledged part of the news production process. For example, the prevalence of online news metrics increasingly allows reporters (and their editors) access to real-time readership data (Anderson 2011). Increasingly, journalists are unable to escape the relationship between their own work and the overall revenue of their employer.

## Implications of the Characteristical Model

The above sections focused on visibility, legitimacy, and revenue as distinct characteristics of journalism as a public activity. Holding these three characteristics up to analysis separately provides a framework for comprehending the complexity of the emerging news ecology. However, a few caveats are in order. First, this is intended to be a general model to be used in analyzing specific cases. The sections above do not seek to develop rules, and as such err on the side of generality at the cost of specificity. Second, although broken out above, the independence of visibility, legitimacy, and revenue should not be overstated. They remain mutually influencing, interdependent characteristics, although in increasingly unpredictable ways. Because no rules govern the strength or direction of their correspondence, greater analytical attention should be paid to the relationships that are developing. Third, it is important to refrain from overarching judgments. This essay is not intended to be a nostalgic call for an era in which visibility, legitimacy, and revenue maintained closer linkages. It is tempting to turn to the past in the midst of change and uncertainty, but the past is always reconfigured to serve the purposes of the present (Carlson and Berkowitz 2012). Nor should disaggregation be lauded as unambiguously superior. Moments of transition are complex and contradictory and important questions should be asked about future support for and dissemination of quality journalism (Anderson, Bell, and Shirky 2012; Waldman 2011). Similarly, the lack of collective attention arising with increased choice raises questions about democratic governance (Prior 2007) or how to amplify a diverse array of voices (Jenkins

2006). Finally, the problem of extracting revenues, even with visibility and legitimacy, remains unsolved (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2012).

These caveats aside, there is much to be gained from considering journalism from the viewpoint of visibility, legitimacy, and revenue proposed here. First, this model presents a framework for breaking down journalism into components to assess how these characteristics, with their different aims and criteria, work together without privileging one over the others. In addition, it treats changes in technology, authority, and news economics as related in complex ways that need to be explored from now on without assumptions about their linkages. In this way, the model helps make sense of a bundle of indicators about news. It also involves news consumers within the model, since visibility, legitimacy, and revenue all stem from the interaction between audiences and journalists (as well as the greater blurriness surrounding the boundaries between these two parties). Another gain is that this model can be used to better make sense of change over time to assess how new and unforeseen developments will affect journalism. Changes in media technology coupled with larger social shifts suggest the need to reevaluate previous scholarship that has attained a level of orthodoxy (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). The approach here aids in this process of reevaluating scholarship. Finally, holding visibility, legitimacy, and revenue separate but related aids in theorizing about news ecologies in the future in a way that is detached from specific technologies or news forms that may quickly disappear. Rather than focus on the surface of journalistic change, this model aims at illuminating deeper structures.

## Conclusion

In their survey of the 'postindustrial journalism' landscape, Anderson, Bell, and Shirky (2012) comment on the seemingly permanent plurality of news models as journalism shifts 'from a set of roles whose description and daily patterns were coherent enough to merit one label to one where the gap between what makes [blogger] Nate Silver a journalist and what makes [independent war correspondent] Kevin Sites a journalist continues to widen' (110). The residual mass communication model, while still very much a part of the news ecology, appears frayed or broken. Amidst these struggles, a heterogeneous array of emergent new media models have embraced practices and norms falling outside of what had been expected journalistic practice. In many places, a new wave of experimentalism can be found in efforts to invigorate journalism (Ryfe 2012). Scholars seeking to understand this journalistic terrain

face the challenge of moving beyond a single development or technology to contextualize change broadly.

As journalism becomes increasingly complex, so too should our analytical tools for making sense of journalism. The value of the characteristic model in providing a conceptual framework to assess journalistic change lies in its emphasis on journalism as a public activity involving journalists and audiences. Disaggregating journalism by treating visibility, legitimacy, and revenue as semi-independent attributes renders an analysis that is inherently attentive to the larger social, cultural, and economic context in which journalism takes place. It also untangles some of the complexity befalling the developing news ecology to assess the trajectory of journalism. There is no shortage of research needed on the present state of journalism, and it is hoped the characteristic model will provide scholars of news an improved analytical lens for their task.

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