Crisis in American Journalism

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Colleagues: With your permission, I will present this afternoon a brief paper on the status of the press that I have prepared as background to our discussion. Given the controversies these days about the news media, I know you have many questions in mind.

The crisis in journalism is a phenomenon that affects not only the purveyors of the news. It is one that impacts on our society as a whole. Disorder in the news media disrupts the flow of information we require to make the political, social, and cultural choices that fix the quality of our lives.

The current problems of the news media stem from several developments. Foremost are the transitory effects of the technological evolution in the delivery or packaging of the news. Historically, this is a recurring phenomenon that has compelled the news media to make adjustments with the advent of each new technology. The introduction of radio required newspapers to take account of the reality that they would not be first with the news. Early on, there were predictions that the days of newspapers as the principal dispensers of news were numbered. However, newspapers, always conveniently available, continued to prosper by providing a detailed record of local, national, and international events. With the emergence of television news, radio was seen by some as on the way out as a major source of news. But the car radio has remained indispensable, and today satellite radio, particularly with the development of digital services, is winning new markets. Newspapers adjusted to the challenge of television by providing readers with an even more comprehensive approach to the news, giving greater emphasis to background information and analysis.

While the older media may survive when a new competitor enters the market, they inevitably suffer financially from the loss of some audience and advertising. This has an impact, often not for the better, on the quality of what is provided to the consumer.

What makes today’s technological transition markedly different than those before—and what has generated a crisis for the traditional or mainstream media, such as newspapers, magazines, and television—is the speed and magnitude of changes wrought by the digital revolution and the expansion of the Internet. The paying audiences are shifting in growing numbers, particularly among younger customers, to a wide range of services, such as AOL and Google on the Internet. This has introduced turbulence in the media markets, with corporate executives struggling to anticipate what the digital revolution will bring next and how it will affect their markets. It has also renewed assumptions, as with the introduction of
radio and television, that print newspapers are doomed to become dinosaurs, soon to be buried.

There is no doubt that print media is challenged as never before. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, as of May–June 2005, 68 percent of American adults, or about 137 million people, were using the Internet, up from 63 percent a year earlier. Fifty-three percent of them had high-speed connections at home. As a harbinger of the future, about 84 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 28 were going online. Only 32 percent, or about 65 million people, were not using the Internet, and not always by choice. The groups that lag in Internet use include Americans age 65 and older, African-Americans, and those with less education. One in five American adults say they have never used the Internet or e-mail and do not live in Internet-connected households. These dwell in what have been called the "disconnected world," or "on the wrong side of the digital divide," and many are said as a consequence to be vulnerable to economic, social, and cultural handicaps.

The mainstream media has responded in a variety of ways to the Internet challenge. With a decline in profit and stock valuation due to the loss of some audience or circulation and therefore advertising revenue, some media companies such as the Tribune and Knight Ridder chains have cut back on staffing and news coverage. The Tribune Company has slashed budgets heavily at such newspapers as the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, the Baltimore Sun, and Newsday on Long Island. For their salvation, the print media have paradoxically to go to the Internet. Newspapers and magazines have made their content available free or with modest subscription fees on the Web, and while advertising revenue is not as lucrative as before—at least not yet—total circulation has not declined precipitously. During the six months ending in September 2005, print newspaper circulation dropped 2.6 percent, but online readership rose 11 percent. About 40 percent of adults continue to look to print newspapers as their main source of news, while another 16 percent are reading newspapers online. The trend line, however, is worrisome for print. Overall, a third of Americans below the age of forty cite the Internet as their main source of news, and that number is increasing.

As for the New York Times, which remains the premier newspaper in the United States, this is how the newspaper is coping. Although there has been a decline in advertising revenue, presumably lost to the Internet, the circulation of the print edition has held up quite well, with an increase in national circulation that offsets declines in Metropolitan sales. Total circulation of the paper, print and online, is at a peak. Online, the New York Times offers a news digest, a 24-hour updated version of the print newspaper, and another service that videos the total print newspaper, including advertising. Illustrative of the determined search for a share of the digital market, a new service transmits a podcast, which allows the customer to hear an audio presentation of op-ed columnists on an IPod or the like if it is equipped with wireless software.
The consumers who have abandoned the mainstream news media are not without their own problems. They are sometimes caught up in the confusion that reigns on the Internet. While the American public now has more access to information than ever before, the Internet is crowded with information services and millions of blogs of individuals and institutions, which offer data often without sourcing and of dubious reliability. To sort out the deluge, never has there been more of a need for skilled editors—such as those working on quality newspapers—to help the consumer steer through the outpouring. There are online organizations at work attempting to index and fix other guidelines for the consumer, but standards for most of what is offered on the Internet have yet to become prevalent.

The mainstream news media suffers from its own growing credibility problems. Scandals, such as the Jayson Blair fabrications at the New York Times, or the CBS Sixty Minutes mix-up over President Bush's military service, have impaired public confidence. More fundamental are the public complaints that relate to a lack of fairness and balance in news presentation. There is a manifest increase in political polarization, particularly in television, as evident in the contrasting programs of Fox News and CNN or Channel Thirteen. Objectivity has become old-fashioned. On many television and radio programs, commentary, rather than factual reporting or balanced news analysis, has become the norm. As the world becomes more complex, newspaper editors have felt a need to supply their audiences with more explanatory reporting and news analysis. But in the process personal opinion has been seeping more often into the news columns. The press now must contend with new, highly controversial issues relating to patriotism and security since 9/11 and the commitment to the war in Iraq. For example, the public is split on the wisdom of the New York Times's revelation of the Bush administration's authorization of the wiretapping of American citizens without legal warrants by the National Security Agency. The public is also divided on whether the press should make use of anonymous sources and have the right to resist grand jury subpoenas aimed at providing prosecutors with access to those sources. There was a burst of applause for the Washington Post and support for the use of anonymous sources by investigative reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward during the Watergate scandal, which led to the Nixon resignation. However, recently only 44 percent of those polled by Pew approved of the use of anonymous sources, while 52 percent held that it was too risky.

There is also an underlying skepticism among many Americans about the motivation of the press in its approach to news coverage. The uneasiness stems from the competitive nature of the business, resulting in sensationalism at times in the reach for big audiences and the blurring of news and entertainment.

On the bottom line, however, despite reservations, the Pew survey still found the public generally at 80 percent favorably disposed to news organizations—more favorably than they are to President Bush, the Supreme Court, and Congress. As were the founding fathers with the enactment of the First Amendment, the press
still seems to be viewed by most Americans as a bulwark against exploitation and political impairment of their democratic society.