

The Effect of the Net on the Professional News Media: The Usenet News Collective - The Man-Computer News Symbiosis

by Michael Hauben

“The archdeacon contemplated the gigantic cathedral for a time in silence, then he sighed and stretched out his right hand towards the printed book lying open on his table and his left hand towards Notre-Dame, and he looked sadly from the book to the church: ‘Alas,’ he said, ‘this will kill that’.... This was the presentiment that as human ideas changed their form they would change their mode of expression, that the crucial idea of each generation would no longer be written in the same material or in the same way, that the book of stone, so solid and durable, would give way to the book of paper, which was more solid and durable still.”

(Victor Hugo, Notre Dame de Paris)

I. Media-criticism

Will this kill that? Will the new on-line forms of discourse dethrone the professional news media?

The French writer Victor Hugo observed that the printed book rose to replace the cathedral and the church as the conveyor of important ideas in the fifteenth century. Will Usenet and other young on-line discussion forums develop to replace the current news media? Various people throughout society are currently discussing this question.

The role of modern journalism is being reconsidered in a variety of ways. There are journalists and media critics like the late Professor Christopher Lasch, who have challenged the fundamental premises of professional journalism. There are other journalists like *Wall Street Journal* reporter Jared Sandberg, who cover an on-line beat, and are learning quickly about the growing on-line public forums. These two approaches are beginning to converge to make it possible to understand the changes in the role of the media in our society brought about by the development of the Internet and Usenet.

Media critics like Christopher Lasch have established a theoretical foundation which makes it possible to critique the news media and challenge the current practice of this media. In “Journalism, Publicity, and the Lost Art of Argument”, Lasch argued: “What democracy requires is public debate, and not information. Of course, it needs information, too, but the kind of information it needs can be generated only by vigorous popular debate.”¹ Applying his critique to the press, Lasch wrote: “From these considerations it follows the job of the press is to encourage debate, not to supply the public with information. But as things now stand the press generates information in abundance, and nobody pays any attention.”² Lasch explained that more and more people are getting less and less

interested in the press because, “Much of the press...now delivers an abundance of useless, indigestible information that nobody wants, most of which ends up as unread waste.”³

Reporters like Jared Sandberg of the *Wall Street Journal*, on the other hand, recognize that more and more of the information which the public is interested in, is starting to come from people other than professional journalists. In an article about the April 1995 Oklahoma Federal building explosion, Sandberg writes: “In times of crisis, the Internet has become the medium of choice for users to learn more about breaking news, often faster than many news organizations can deliver it.”⁴

People curious and concerned about relatives and others present on the scene turned to the Net to find out timely information about survivors and to discuss the questions raised by the event. Soon after the explosion, it was reported and discussed live on IRC and in newsgroups on Usenet such as alt.current-events.amfb-explosion and elsewhere on-line. Sandberg noted that many logged onto the Internet to get news from first-hand observers rather than turning on the TV to CNN or comparable news sources.

Along with the broader strata of the population which has begun to report and discuss the news via the Internet and Usenet, a broader definition of who is a media critic is developing. Journalists and media critics like Martha Fitzsimon and Lawrence T. McGill present such a broader definition of media critics when they write, “Everyone who watches television, listens to a radio or reads...passes judgment on what they see, hear or read.”⁵ Acknowledging the public’s discontent with the traditional forms of the media, they note that, “the evaluations of the media put forward by the public are grim and getting worse.”⁶

Other journalists have written about public criticism of the news media. In his article, “Encounters On-Line”, Thomas Valovic recognizes some of the advantages inherent in the new on-line form of criticism. Unlike old criticism, the new type “fosters dialogue between reporters and readers.”⁷ He observes how this dialogue “can subject reporters to interrogations by experts that undermine journalists’ claim to speak with authority.”⁸

Changes are taking place in the field of journalism, and these changes are apparent to some, but not all journalists and media critics. Tom Goldstein, Dean of University of California Berkeley Journalism School observes that change is occurring, but the results are not fully understood.⁹

II. Examining the role of Internet/Usenet and the Press

There are discussions on-line about the role of the press and the role of on-line discussion forums. The debate is active, and there are those who believe the print press is here to stay, while others contend that interactive discussion forums are likely to replace the authority of the print news media. Those who argue for the dominance of the on-line media present impassioned arguments. Their comments are much more persuasive than those who defend the traditional role of the print media as something that is handy to read over breakfast or on the train. In a newsgroup thread discussing the future of print journalism, Gloria Stern stated: “My experience is that I have garnered more information from the internet than I ever could from any newspaper. Topical or not, it has

given me community that I never had before. I touch base with more informed kindred souls than any tonnage of paper could ever bring me.”¹⁰

Regularly, people are commenting on how they have stopped reading newspapers. Even those who continue to read printed newspapers, note that Usenet has become one of the important sources for their news. For example, a user wrote: “I _do_ get the *NYT* every day, and the *Post* and the *Washington Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* (along with about 100 other hardcopy publications), and I _still_ find Usenet a valuable source of in-depth news reporting.”¹¹

More and more people on Usenet have announced their discontent with the traditional one-way media, often leading to their refusal to seriously read newspapers again. In a discussion about a *Time* magazine article about the Internet and Usenet, Elizabeth Fischer wrote: “The point of the whole exercise is that for us, most of us, paper media is a dead issue (so to speak).”¹² In the same thread, Jim Zoes stated the challenge posed by the on-line media for reporters: “This writer believes that you (the traditional press) face the same challenge that the monks in the monastery faced when Gutenberg started printing Bibles.”¹³ Describing why the new media represents such a formidable foe Zoes continued: “Your top-down model of journalism allows traditional media to control the debate, and even if you provide opportunity for opposing views, the editor *always* had the last word. In the new paradigm, not only do you not necessarily have the last word, you no longer even control the flow of the debate.”¹⁴ He concludes with his understanding of the value of Usenet to society: “The growth and acceptance of e-mail, coupled with discussion groups (Usenet) and mail lists provide for a ‘market place of ideas’ hitherto not possible since perhaps the days of the classic Athenians.”¹⁵

Others present their views on a more personal level. One poster writes: “I will not purchase another issue of *Newsweek*. I won’t even glance through their magazine if it’s lying around now given what a shoddy job they did on that article.”¹⁶ Another explains: “My husband brought [the article] home... for me to read and [I] said, ‘Where is that damn followup key? ARGH!’ I’ve pretty much quit reading mainstream media except when someone puts something in front of me or I’m riding the bus to work....”¹⁷

These responses are just some of the recent examples of people voicing their discontent with the professional news media. The on-line forum provides a public way of sharing this discontent with others. It is in sharing ideas and understandings with others with similar views that grassroots efforts begin to attempt to change society.

While some netusers have stopped reading the professional news media, others are interested in influencing the media to more accurately portray the Net. Many are critical of the news media’s reporting of the Internet, and other events. Users of the Internet are interested in protecting the Internet. They do this by watchdogging politicians and journalists. Concern with the coverage of the Internet in the press comes from first-hand experience with the Internet. One netuser expressing such dissatisfaction writes: “The net is a special problem for reporters, because bad reporting in other areas is protected by distance. If someone reports to the *Times* from Croatia, you’re not going to have

a better source unless you've been there (imagine how many people in that part of the world could correct the reports we read). All points of Usenet are equidistant from the user and the reporter – we can check their accuracy at every move. And what do we notice? Not the parts that the reporter gets right, just the errors. And Usenet is such a complete culture that no reporter, absent some form of formal training or total immersion in the net, is going to get it all right.”¹⁸ Another on-line critic writes: “It’s scary when you actually are familiar with what a journalist is writing about. Kinda punches a whole bunch of holes in the ‘facts’. Unfortunately it’s been going on for a loooooong time...we, the general viewing public, just aren’t up to speed on the majority of issues. That whole ‘faith in media’ thing. Yick. I can’t even trust the damn AP wire anymore after reading an enormous amount of total crap on it during the first few hours of the Oklahoma bombing.”¹⁹

In Usenet’s formation of a community, that community has developed the self-awareness to respond to and reject an outside description of the Net. If the Net was just the telephone line and computer infrastructure making up a machine, that very machine couldn’t object and scold journalists for describing it as a pornography press or a bomb-production press. Wesley Howard believes that the critical on-line commentary is having a healthy effect on the press: “The coverage has become more accurate and less sloppy in its coverage of the Net because it (the Net) has become more defined itself from a cultural point of view. Partly because of growth and partly because of what the media was saying fed debates and caused a firmer definition within itself... This does not mean the print media was in any way responsible for the Net’s self definition, but was one influence of many.”²⁰

Another person, writing from Japan, believed that journalists should be more responsible, urging that “all journalists should be forced to have an e-mail address.” He explained: “Journalists usually have a much bigger audience than their critics. I often feel a sense of helplessness in trying to counter the damage they cause when they abuse their privilege. Often it is impossible even to get the attention of the persons responsible for the lies and distortions.”²¹

Usenet newsgroups and mailing lists provide a media where people are in control. People who are on-line understand the value of this control and are trying to articulate their understandings. Some of this discussion is being carried on on Usenet. Having the ability to control a mass media, also encourages people to try and affect other media. The proposal to require print journalists to make available an e-mail address is an example of how on-line users are trying to apply the lessons learned from the on-line media to change the print media.

III. People as Critics: The Role the Net is Playing and Will Play in the Future:

People on-line are excited, and this is not an exaggeration. The various discussion forums connected to the global computer communications network (or the Net) are the prototype for a new public form of communication. This new form of human communication will either supplement the current forms of News or replace them. One person on a newsgroup succinctly stated: “The real news is right here. And it can’t get any newer because I watch it as it happens.”²² The very concept of news is being reinvented as people come to realize that they can provide the news about the environment

they live in; that people can contribute their real-life conditions and this information proves worthwhile for others. The post continued: “As other segments of society come on-line, we will have less and less need for some commercially driven entity that gathers the news for me, filters it, and then delivers it to me, hoping fervently that I’ll find enough of interest to keep paying for it.”²³ Such sentiment represents a fundamental challenge to the professional creation and dissemination of news. The on-line discussion forums allow open and free discourse. Individuals outside of the traditional power structures are finding a forum in which to contribute, where those contributions are welcomed. Describing the importance of the open forum available on the Net, Dolores Dege wrote: “The most important and eventually most powerful aspect of the net will be the effect(s) of having access to alternative viewpoints to the published and usually (although not always either intentionally or consciously) biased local news media. This access to differing ‘truths’ is similar to the communication revolution which occurred when the first printing presses made knowledge available to the common populace, instead of held in the tight fists of the clergy and ruling classes.”²⁴ This change in who makes the news is also apparent to Keith Cowing: “How one becomes a ‘provider’ and ‘receiver’ of information is being totally revamped. The status quo hasn’t quite noticed – yet – THIS is what is so interesting.”²⁵

While this openness also encourages different conspiracy theorists and crack-pots to write messages, their contributions are scrutinized as much as any other posting. This uncensored environment leads to a sorting out of mis-truths from thoughtful convictions. Many people on-line keep their wits about them, and seek to refute half-truths and lies. A post from Australia notes that it is common to post refutations of inaccurate posts: “One of the good things about Usenet is the propensity of people to post refutations of false information that others have posted.”²⁶

As the on-line media is in the control of many people, no one person can come on-line and drastically alter the flow or quality of discussion. The multiplicity of ideas and opinions make Usenet and mailing lists the opposite of a free-for-all.

IV. Qualities of this new medium

A common assumption of the ethic of individualism is that the individual is in control and is the prime mover of society. Others believe that it’s not the individual who is in control, but that society is being controlled by people organized around the various large corporations that own so much of our society – whether those corporations are the media, manufacturers, etc. The global computer communications networks currently allow uncensored expression from the individual at a bottom rung of society. The grass-roots connection of people around the world and in local communities based on common interests is an important step in bringing people more control over their lives. Lisa Pease wrote in alt.journalism: “There is nothing like finding a group of people who share your same interests and background knowledge. Some of my interests I didn’t know one person in a hundred that shared – and now I’ve met many. What makes it a community is ultimately in-person meetings.”²⁷

She continued on in her message to state why such connections and discussions are important: “The net...requires no permissions, no groveling to authority, no editors to deal with –

no one basically to say ‘no don’t say that.’ As a result – far more has been said here publicly than has probably been said in a hundred years about issues that really matter – political prisoners, democratic uprisings, exposure of disinformation – THIS is what makes the net more valuable than any other news source.”²⁸

Similar views are expressed by others about the power of the Internet to work in favor of people rather than commercial conglomerates: “The internet is our last hope for a medium that will enable individuals to combat the overpowering influence of the commercial media to shape public opinion, voter attitudes, select candidates, influence legislation, etc....”²⁹

People are beginning to be empowered by the open communications the on-line media provides. This empowerment is beginning to lead towards more active involvement by people in the societal issues they care about.

V. The Pentium Story

In discussions about the future of the on-line media, people have observed how Usenet makes it possible to challenge the privileges inherent in the traditional news media. John Pike started a thread describing the challenge the Net presents to the former content providers: “To me this is the really exciting opportunity for Usenet, namely that the professional content providers will be directly confronted with and by their audience. The prevailing info-structure privileges certain individuals by virtue of institutional affiliation. But cyberspace is a far more meritocratic environment – the free exchange of ideas can take place regardless of institutional affiliation.”³⁰

Pike continues by arguing that on-line forums are becoming a place where “news” is both made and reported, and thus traditional sources are often scooped. He writes: “This has tremendously exciting possibilities for democratizing the info-structure, as the ‘official’ hardcopy implementations are increasingly lagging cyberspace in breaking news.”³¹

An example of news being made on-line occurred when Intel, the computer chip manufacturer, was forced to recall faulty Pentium chips because of the on-line pressure and the effect of that pressure on computer manufacturers such as IBM and Gateway. These companies put pressure on Intel because people using Usenet discovered problems with the Pentium. The on-line discussion led to people becoming active and getting the manufacturers of their computers, and Intel to fix the problems.

In the article “On-Line Snits Fomenting Public Storms,” *Wall Street Journal* reporters Bart Ziegler and Jared Sandberg, commented: “Some industry insiders say that had the Pentium flub occurred five years ago, before the Internet got hot and the media caught on, Intel might have escaped a public flogging and avoided a costly recall.”³²

Buried in the report is the acknowledgment that the traditional press would not have caught the defect in the pentium chip, but that the on-line media forced the traditional media to respond. The original reporting about the problem was done in the Usenet newsgroup comp.sys.intel and further

on-line discussion took place in that newsgroup and other newsgroups and on Internet mailing-lists. The *Wall Street Journal* reporters recognized their debt to news that people were posting on-line to come up with a story which dealt with a major computer company and with the real world role that Usenet played.

In another article in the *Wall Street Journal*, reporter Fara Warner focused on the impact of the on-line news on Intel. “[Intel] offered consumers a promise of reliability and quality, and now that promise has been called into question,” she writes quoting the CEO of a consulting firm.³³ The people who did this questioning were the users of the computers with the faulty chips. Communicating about the problem on-line, these users were able to have an impact not otherwise possible. Ziegler and Sandberg noted that the discussions were on-line rather than in “traditional public forums like trade journals, newspapers or the electronic media.”³⁴ On-line users were able to work together to deal with a problem, instead of depending on other forums traditionally associated with reporting dissatisfaction with consumer goods. After all of the criticisms, Intel had to replace faulty chips in order to keep their reputation viable. The *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and other newspapers and magazines played second fiddle to what was happening on-line. In their article, Ziegler and Sandberg quote Dean Tom Goldstein: “It’s absolutely changing how journalism is practiced in ways that aren’t fully developed.”³⁵ These journalists acknowledge that the field of journalism is changing as a result of the existence of the on-line complaints. The on-line connection of people is forming a large and important social force.

As a community where news is made, reported and discussed, Usenet has been a hotbed of more than just technical developments. Other late breaking stories have included the Church of Scientology and the suppression of speech. An Australian reporter, John Hilvert, commented on the value of being on-line: “It [Usenet] can be a great source of leads about the mood of the Net. The recent GIF-Unisys-Compuserve row and the Intel Pentium bug are examples of USENET taking an activist and educative role.”³⁶

Nevertheless, Hilvert, warned about the authenticity of information available on-line: “However the risk is you can easily be spooked by stuff on the Net. Things have to be shaped, confirmed and tested off-line as well. One of the interesting side-effects of Usenet is that we have to work even harder to get a good story because, there is not much value-added in just summarizing a Usenet discussion.”³⁷

Though, it is hard to rely on any single piece of information, Usenet is not about ideas in a vacuum. Usenet is about discussion and discourse. Tom Kimball, in a Usenet post, writes about the value of a public Usenet discussion, “I have great respect for the usenet ideal of everyone having the chance to respond to the ideas of others and the resulting exchanges of information and clashes of ideas I think is of some value (despite the flame-war garbage that gets in the way).”³⁸

The great number and range of the unedited posts on Usenet brings up the question of whether editors are needed to deal with the amount of information. Discussing the need to take time to deal with the growing amount of information, a post on alt.internet.media-coverage explained,

“The difference being that for the first time in human history, the general populace has the ability to determine what it finds important, rather than relying on the whims of those who knew how to write, or controlled the printing presses. It means that we as individuals are going to have to deal with sifting through a lot of information on our own, but in the end I believe that we will all benefit from it.”³⁹

Such posts lead to the question of what is meant by the notion of the general populace and a popular press. The point is important as those who are on the Net make up but a small percentage of the total population of either the USA or the world. However, that on-line population of an estimated 27.5 million people⁴⁰ make up a significant body of people connecting to each other on-line. The fast rate of growth also makes one take note of the trends and developments. Defining what is meant by ‘general populace and a popular press’ the post continues: “By general populace, I mean those who can actually afford a computer, and a connection to the net, or have access to a public terminal. As computer prices go down, the amount of people who fit this description will increase. At any rate, comparing the 5-10 million people with Usenet access, to the handful who control the mass media shows that even in a nascent stage, Usenet is far more the ‘people’s voice’ than any media conglomerate could ever be.”⁴¹

The comments from the last two people lead to asking whether or not the new technologies are helping the human species to evolve or to deal with the ever increasing amount of information. Computer pioneers like Norbert Wiener, J. C. R. Licklider and John Kemeny discussed the need for man-computer symbiosis to help humans deal with the growing problems of our times.⁴² The on-line discussion forums provide a new form of man-computer symbiosis. They are helpful intellectual exercises. It is healthy for society if all members think and make active use of their brains – and Usenet is conducive to thinking. It is not the answer to ask journalists to provide us with the answers, the objective truth of life. Even if someone’s life is busy, what happens when they come to depend on the opinions and summaries of others as their own? Usenet is helping to create a mass community which works communally to aid the individual. Usenet works via the active involvement and thoughtful contributions of each user. The Usenet software facilitates the creation of a community whose thought processes can accumulate and benefit the entire community. The creation of the book, and the printed book helped to increase the speed of the accumulation of ideas. Usenet now speeds up that process to help accumulate the thoughts of the moment. The resulting discussion seen on Usenet could not have been produced beforehand as the work of one individual. The bias or point of the view of any one individual is no longer presented as the whole truth.

Karl Krueger describes some of the value of Usenet in a posting to Usenet, “Over time, Usenettters get better at being parts of the Usenet matrix – because their *own* condensations support Usenet’s, and this helps other users. In a way, Usenet is a ‘meta-symbiont’ with each user – the user is a part of Usenet and benefits Usenet (with a few exceptions...), and Usenet includes the user and benefits him/her.”⁴³ Krueger points out how experienced Usenet users contribute to the Usenet community. He writes, “As time increases normally, the experienced Usenet user uses Usenet to make himself more knowledgeable and successful. Experienced users also contribute back to Usenet, primarily in the forms of conveying knowledge (answering questions, compiling FAQs),

conveying experience (being part of the environment a newbie interacts with), and protecting Usenet (upholding responsible and non-destructive use, canceling potentially damaging spam, fighting ‘newsgroup invasions’, etc.).”⁴⁴

As new users connect to Usenet, and learn from others, the Usenet Collective grows and becomes one person richer. Krueger continues: “Provided that all users are willing to spend the minimal amount of effort to gain some basic Usenet experience then they can be added to this loop. In Usenet, old users gain their benefits from other old users, while simultaneously bringing new users into the old-users group to gain benefits.”⁴⁵ The collective body of people, assisted by the Usenet software, has grown larger than any individual newspaper. As people continue to connect to Usenet and other discussion forums, the collective global population will contribute back to the human community in this new form of news.

VI. Journalists and the Internet

Professional journalists are beginning to understand that the on-line discussion forums will change their field, though they may not fully understand what the changes will be. In posing the question: “What, if any, effect do Usenet News and mailing lists have on reporters and editors you are in contact with?”, several journalists responded. Some stated that Usenet and mailing lists are valuable information and opinion gathering tools which also help them to get in touch with experts, while others are either timid about the new technology or did not want to bother with yet another reporting tool. Several of the reporters stated that they do not participate in any discussion forums per se, but rather lurk in these areas and contact posters by e-mail who they feel will have valuable information for a story. Their main concern was that they might waste time on-line trying to get information when there would only be a small amount of worthwhile material in a lot of waste. Lastly, one or two did not see any value in on-line discussion forums, and have stayed away from them after initial negative impressions.

These reporters were asked if they sensed any pressure to get Internet accounts or to connect to Usenet and mailing lists. Josh Quittner of *Time* Magazine said the pressure came from the publishing side, where publishers are looking for the development of new markets. John Verity of *Business Week* and Lorraine Goods of Time Interactive said editors are responding to interest about the Internet and want stories about it. Brock Meeks, an independent journalist, stated that the pressure comes from reporters such as himself who have been on-line for some time and have beaten other reporters to stories because of the power of on-line communications. Some reported that they understood that it was important to get on-line without knowing why. A few said there is no push to go on-line.

Asked whether it is important to be on-line, some did not see it as necessary, given that they are already connected to those they consider to be experts in their respective field without being on-line. Others felt the speed of e-mail helped to gather timely information for the stories they were working on. Farhon Memon of the *New York Post* compared today’s on-line forums to conferences because they make contacting experts much easier both in terms of time and place.

When asked about the best forms of reader feedback, a number of the journalists stated that letters to the editor and op-ed pages were helpful. One reporter noted that letters to the editor were not particularly heeded. E-mail was named as the next most important means for readers to send in commentary. Whether this commentary is listened to or not is another story. One reporter did suggest that the on-line criticism, correct or not, encourages journalists to do the best possible job.

When it came to the question of whether on-line discussion forums would ever replace newspapers, the journalists almost universally stated that each form has its own role to play. Quittner didn't think traditional journalists would evolve into on-line discussion leaders. Such a job might emerge, but not as an additional responsibility of the regular journalist. Maia Szalavitz responded: "The print media can't beat online stuff for interactivity; online stuff can't beat print journalism for organization, ease of portability and use at this point."⁴⁶ Goods offered a similar analysis: "An online news outfit can obviously do things that print cannot. However, there are certain things you can do with a newspaper that you can't do on a computer (like read it on the subway on the way to work, or in the bathroom). Just as TV did not replace radio, computers will not replace newspapers. I do think, however, that the introduction of new media will have an effect on traditional media. What those effects will be, however, I don't know."⁴⁷

There is a growing trend of journalists coming on-line for various reasons. Coming on-line could mean one of several things. Some use the Net as a new information source, and some look for people to interview. Lastly, there are those who are actually joining the community or responding to their reading audience. A growing number of journalists are participating in such newsgroups as alt.internet.media-coverage, alt.journalism.criticism, alt.news-media, also in forums on some of the commercial on-line services and in on-line communities such as the Well, among other places.⁴⁸ Reporters are entering the discussion and both asking for people's suggestions on how to improve their coverage of the Internet and for remarks on their stories.

Newspapers and magazines are developing on-line counterparts of their print editions (e.g., *San Jose Mercury News*, *Business Week*) on commercial on-line services such as Prodigy and America On-Line, and are experimenting with new content differing from their print editions on the World Wide Web (WWW) (e.g., HotWired, Time On-Line, NandoNet). These on-line offerings sometimes provide another interface between journalists and readers. Message areas or public discussion boards are offered along with publicized e-mail addresses for e-mailing letters to the editor or particular journalists.⁴⁹

VII. Conclusion

Newspapers and magazines are a convenient form for dealing with information transfer. People have grown accustomed to reading newspapers and magazines wherever and whenever they please. The growing dissatisfaction with the print media is more with the content than with the form. There is a significant criticism that the current print media does not allow for a dynamic response or follow-up to the articles in hand. One possible direction would be towards on-line distribution and home or on-site printing. This would allow for the convenience of the traditional newspaper and magazine form to be connected to the dynamic conversation that on-line Netnews allows. The reader

could choose at what point in the conversation or how much of the discussion to make a part of the printed form. But this leaves out the element of interactivity. Still, it could be a temporary solution until the time when ubiquitous slate computers with mobile networks would allow the combination of a light, easy to handle screen, with a continuous connection into the Internet from anyplace.

Newspapers could continue to provide entertainment in the form of cross-word puzzles, comics, classified ads, and entertainment sections (e.g., entertainment, lifestyles, sports, fashion, gossip, reviews, coupons, and so on). However, the real challenge comes in what is traditionally known as news, or information and newly breaking events from around the world. Citizen, or now Netizen reporters are challenging the premise that authoritative professional reporters are the only possible reporters of the news. The news of the day is biased and opinionated no matter how many claims for objectivity exist in the world of the reporter. In addition, the choice of what becomes news is clearly subjective. Now that more people are gaining a voice on the open public electronic discussion forums, previously unheard “news” is being made available. The current professional news reporting is not really reporting the news, rather it is reporting the news as decided by a certain set of economic or political interests. Todd Masco contrasts the two contending forms of the news media, “Free communication is essential to the proper functioning of an open, free society such as ours. In recent years, the functioning of this society has been impaired by the monolithic control of our means of communication and news gathering (through television and conglomerate-owned newspapers). This monolithic control allows issues to be talked about only really in terms that only the people who control the media and access to same can frame...Usenet, and News in general, changes this: it allows real debate on issues, allowing perspectives from all sides to be seen.”⁵⁰

Journalists may survive, but they will be secondary to the symbiosis that the combination of the Usenet software and computers with the Usenet community produces. Karl Krueger observes how the Usenet Collective is evolving to join man and machine into a news gathering, sorting and disseminating body. He writes: “There is no need for Official Summarizers (aka journalists) on Usenet, because everyone does it – by cross-posting, following-up, forwarding relevant articles to other places, maintaining FTP archives and WWW indexes of Usenet articles (yes, FTP and WWW are Internet things, not Usenet things – but if Usenet articles are stored in them, the metaphor extends).”⁵¹ He continues: “Journalists will never replace software. The purpose of journalists is similar to scribes in medieval times: to provide an information service when there is insufficient technology or insufficient general skill at using it. I’m not insulting journalism; it is a respectable profession and useful. But you won’t *need* a journalist when you have a good enough news-reader/browser and know how to use it.”⁵²

These on-line commentators echo Victor Hugo’s description of how the printed book grew up to replace the authority that architecture had held in earlier times. Hugo writes, “This was the presentiment that as human ideas changed their form they would change their mode of expression, that the crucial idea of each generation would no longer be written in the same material or in the same way, that the book of stone, so solid and durable, would give way to the book of paper, which was more solid and durable still.”⁵³ Today, similarly, the need for a broader, and more cooperative gathering and reporting of the news has helped to create the new on-line media that is gradually

supplanting the traditional forms of journalism. Professional media critics writing in the Freedom Forum Media Studies Journal acknowledge that on-line critics and news gatherers are presenting a challenge to the professional news media that can lead to their overthrow when they write: “News organizations can weather the blasts of professional media critics, but their credibility cannot survive if they lose the trust of the multitude of citizens critics throughout the United States.”⁵⁴

As more and more people come on-line, and realize the grassroots power of becoming a Netizen reporter, the professional news media must evolve a new role or will be increasingly marginalized.

Notes for Chapter 13

1. Christopher Lasch, “Journalism, Publicity, and the Lost Art of Argument”, *Media Studies Journal*, Vol. 9 no. 1, Winter 1995, p. 81.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
4. Jared Sandberg, “Oklahoma City Blast Turns Users Onto Internet for Facts, Some Fiction,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 1995, p. A6.
5. Martha Fitzsimon and Lawrence T. McGill, “The Citizen as Media Critic,” *Media Studies Journal*, Vol. 9 no. 2, Spring 1995, p. 91.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Thomas S. Volovic, “Encounters On-Line,” *Media Studies Journal*, Vol. 9 no. 2, Spring 1995, p. 115.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Bart Ziegler and Jared Sandberg, “On-Line Snits Fomenting Public Storms,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 1994.
10. From: Gloria Stern <af385@lafn.org>
Date: 7 April, 1995
Subject: Re: Future of print journalism
Newsgroups: alt.journalism
Message-ID: <1995Apr7.214157.11293@lafn.org>
11. From: John Pike <johnpike@clark.net>
Date: 24 April, 1995
Subject: Re: Usenet’s political power (was Re: Content Providers – Professionals versus Amateurs on Usenet)
Newsgroups: alt.culture.usenet
Message-ID: <3ngnr\$giu@clarknet.clark.net>
12. From: Elizabeth Fischer <efischer@wimsey.com>
Date: 20 July, 1994
Subject: Re: TIME Cover Story: pipeline to editors
Newsgroups: Alt.internet.media-coverage

Message-ID: <efischer-200794133211@pme16.pomo.wis.net>

13. From: Jim Zoes <mustang@mcs.com>
Date: 22 July, 1994
Subject: Re: TIME Cover Story: pipeline to editors
Newsgroups: alt.internet.media-coverage
Message-ID: <30nmf4\$bgg@News1.mcs.com>
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. From: Catherine Stanton <cat@uunet.uu.net>
Date: 21 July, 1994
Subject: Re: TIME Cover Story: pipeline to editors
Newsgroups: alt.internet.media-coverage
Message-ID: <30ltmc\$huu@rodan.UU.NET>
17. From: Abby Franquemont-Guillory <abbyfg@tezcat.com>
Newsgroups: alt.internet.media-coverage
Subject: Re: TIME Cover Story: pipeline to editors
Date: 22 Jul 1994 13:45:19 -0500
Message-ID: <30p43v\$5o6@xochi.tezcat.com>
18. From: The Nutty Professor <flixman@news.dorsai.org>
Subject: Re: Reporter Seeking Net-Abuse Comments
Message-ID: <D2I33A.MtC@dorsai.org>
Date: Mon, 16 Jan 1995 13:35:34 GMT
Newsgroups: alt.internet.media-coverage
19. From: Mikez <mikez@cris.com>
Newsgroups: alt.journalism.criticism
Subject: Re: Mass media exploiting 'cyberspace' for ratings ...
Date: Tue, 25 Apr 95 03:58:55 GMT
Message-ID: <3nhs1v\$cds_002@news.cris.com>
20. From: Wesley Howard <caspian@digital.net>
Subject: Re: Does Usenet have an effect on the print news media?
Date: 8 Apr 1995 05:39:43 GMT
Newsgroups: alt.internet.media-coverage
Message-ID: <3m57iv\$m90@ddi2.digital.net>
21. From: John DeHoog <dehoog@st.rim.or.jp>
Newsgroups: alt.journalism
Subject: Make journalists get an email address!
Date: Fri, 21 Apr 1995 20:01:24 +0900
Message-ID: <ABBDBF94966820B78D@ppp017.st.rim.or.jp>
22. Message-Id: <elknox.35.00091823@bsu.idbsu.edu>
23. Ibid.

24. Delores Dege, "Re: Impact of the Net on Society," e-mail message, February 21, 1995.
25. From: Keith L. Cowing <kcowing@aibs.org>
Subject: Re: Content Providers – Professionals versus Amateurs on Usenet
Date: Mon, 17 Apr 1995 12:33:23 -0500
Newsgroups: alt.culture.internet
Message-ID: <kcowing-1704951233230001@168.143.0.239>
26. From: William Logan Lee <bill@extro.ucc.su.OZ.AU>
Newsgroups: alt.folklore.computers
Subject: Re: Is hobby computing dead? (was Creative
Message-ID: <1993Apr6.121613.16236@ucc.su.OZ.AU>
27. From: Lisa Pease <lpease@netcom.com>
Subject: Re: Future of print journalism
Newsgroups: alt.journalism
Message-ID: <lpeaseD6L4p0.2K0@netcom.com>
Date: Wed, 5 Apr 1995 23:17:24 GMT
28. Ibid.
29. From: Norman <normane814@aol.com>
Subject: Re: Impact of the Net on Society
Date: 20 Mar 1995 21:05:54 -0500
Newsgroups: alt.culture.internet
Message-ID: <3klca2\$mal@newsbf02.news.aol.com>
30. From: John Pike <johnpike@clark.net>
Subject: Content Providers -- Professionals versus Amateurs on Usenet
Date: 17 Apr 1995 12:21:49 GMT
Message-ID: <3mtmgt\$56a@clarknet.clark.net>
31. Ibid.
32. Bart Ziegler and Jared Sandberg.
33. Fara Warner, "Experts Surprised Intel Isn't Reaching Out To Consumers More", *Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 1994.
34. Bart Ziegler and Jared Sandberg.
35. Ibid.
36. From: John Hilvert <hilvertj@ozemail.com.au>
Subject: Re: Does Usenet have an effect on the print news media?
Date: Wed, 5 Apr 1995 03:40:57 GMT
Newsgroups: alt.culture.usenet
Message-ID: <hilvertj.107.2F821149@ozemail.com.au>
37. Ibid.
38. From: Tom Kimball <tom@europa.lonestar.org>

Subject: Usenet impact upon reading habits and skills
Date: Thu, 26 Aug 1993 02:25:28 GMT
Message-ID: <1993Aug26.022528.6376@europa.lonestar.org>

39. From: Miskatonic Gryn <miskat@iii1.iii.net>
Subject: Re: Cliff Stoll
Date: 17 Apr 1995 15:31:22 -0400
Newsgroups: alt.internet.media-coverage
Message-ID: <3mufmt\$47n@iii1.iii.net>

40. The number of people accessible via e-mail was placed at 27.5 million as of October 1994 according to John Quarterman and MIDS at <http://www.tic.com/mids/howbig.html>

41. Miskatonic Gryn

42. See John Kemeny, Man and the Computer, J. C. R. Licklider, "Man Computer Symbiosis," Norbert Wiener, God & Golem, Inc.

43. From: Karl A. Krueger <karl@plato.simons-rock.edu>
Subject: Re: Special Issue of TIME: Welcome to Cyberspace
Message-ID: <D63CxL.DJv@plato.simons-rock.edu>
Date: Mon, 27 Mar 1995 08:58:33 GMT
Newsgroups: alt.internet.media-coverage

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Maia Szalavitz, "Re: Questions about the effect of Usenet on journalism," e-mail message, April 18, 1995.

47. Goods, Lorraine. (1995, April 23) "Questions about the effect of Usenet on journalism" [e-mail to M. Hauben], [Online]. Available e-mail: lg105@columbia.edu

48. While I was writing this paper, there was a debate on-line over moving discussion from alt.internet.media-coverage into a new newsgroup tentatively called talk.media.net-coverage.

49. Jennifer Wolff wrote an interesting article entitled "Opening Up, OnLine: What Happens When the Public Comes At You From Cyberspace" in the Columbia Journalism Review, Nov/Dec 1994, pp. 62-65.

50. From: L. Todd Masco <cactus@clinton.com>
Newsgroups: news.future,comp.society.futures,ny.general
(No Subject Line)

51. Karl A. Krueger.

52. Ibid.

53. Victor Hugo, Notre Dame de Paris, translated by John Sturrock, Penguin Books, London, 1978, p. 189.

54. Fitzsimon and McGill, p. 201.